

Grace Presbyterian Church Bible Studies

Hosea

Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2017

The Book of Hosea: God's Scandalous Grace

"Israel and Judah have not been forsaken by their God, the Lord of hosts, though their land is full of guilt before the Holy One of Israel." _ Jer. 51:5

Chapter 1 – "God's Impossible Command"

Hosea is both a challenging and rewarding book. Jesus and Paul both quote it in the New Testament (Matt. 9:13; 12:7; Rom. 9:25-26). Hosea gives us a picture of God's love that is both shocking and exhilarating. Hosea is central to our understanding of the gospel in its fullest form. To attempt to understand the book we need to look at its historical context. If we think we know God Hosea challenges us. There is much more to the reality of God than our minds can truly comprehend. This is not a simple book but it is a book which will transform us.

I. The Context of Hosea

Hosea was an eighth century B.C. prophet in Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. Jeroboam ruled Israel for forty-one years (786-746 BC). We don't have many details of his lengthy reign. However, suffice it to say that he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord (II Kings 14:23-24). We know that in this period Jeroboam's namesake, Jeroboam I, had broken off from the rest of Israel following the death of Solomon. Jeroboam had rebelled against Solomon (I Kings 11:26). God gives Jeroboam ten tribes of Israel to rule (I Kings 11:29-35). The two tribes that separate from him are those of Judah and Benjamin. Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, rules over them. They settle in the southern part of Israel which includes Jerusalem. The reason why so much of the former kingdom is taken away from Solomon and his descendants is because of the widespread idolatry which Solomon introduced into Israel later in his life (II Kings 11:1-8).

Jeroboam didn't want his followers to go and worship God in Jerusalem because he was afraid that under the influence of Rehoboam they might turn against him. To prevent this from happening Jeroboam established not one, but two golden calves for his followers to worship. This set Israel on a path of idolatry that would include the crimes of Ahab and Jezebel (I Kings 18-19). Yet in spite of Israel's faithfulness God will not give them up (II Kings 13:23; 14:26-27). By the same token, God will not ignore the idolatry of Israel or Judah.

During the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel there are several kings in Judah, some faithful, some not. The first king was Uzziah (II Kings 15:1-7; II Chronicles 26).

Uzziah's reign was a lengthy one, lasting fifty-two years. He was essentially faithful to the Lord. Yet because of his success he became proud (II Chron. 26:16). He also allowed idolatry to continue (II Kings 15:4). In punishment God struck him with leprosy (II Chron. 26:19-23). He was succeeded by his son Jotham who reigned sixteen years. He followed the Lord. Still, the idolatrous shrines continued. He was followed by his son Ahaz who fell deeper into the idolatry begun by Solomon even to the point of sacrificing children ((II Kings 16:1-4). This trend was reversed by his son Hezekiah. Hezekiah initiated a number of major reforms (II Kings 18:1-8). This included breaking the bronze serpent that Moses had held up in the wilderness which at this time had become an idol! (II Kings 18:4; John 3:14-15). Yet Hezekiah, like Uzziah, succumbed to pride and foolishly showed all the wealth of Israel to envoys from Babylon. Babylon would later invade Judah and destroy Jerusalem and the temple (II Kings 20:12-19). Hearing of this prophecy from Isaiah, Hezekiah's response was a callous, "Who cares? It won't happen in my lifetime (II Kings 20:19).

II. Hosea's marriage (1:1-11)

God tells Hosea to go and marry a whore (1:2) (Go back and read that sentence again). Incredibly we do not read of Hosea's protesting against such a command. He obeys God and marries a prostitute, Gomer, daughter of Diblaim. He then proceeds to have three children by her, all with symbolic names. They are

1. Jezreel which means "God sows" (1:4-5). This is a punishment on the house of Jehu who was an appointed king. Jehu led a brutal massacre of the people of Jezreel (II Kings 10:1-11). After wiping out much of the idolatry in Israel Jehu tragically turned away from the Lord (II Kings 10:31).
2. Lo-ruhamah which means "not pitied." While God is still supporting Judah (at this time) he is preparing to judge Israel (1:6-7).
3. Lo-ammi which means "I am not yours." (1:9)

However, there is God's "yet." The chapter ends with God's promise to restore both the people of Israel and Judah. Paul quotes this passage later (Rom. 9:25-26).

God is using the example of Hosea to show what he has had to endure by his love for Israel which is continually unfaithful, going after other gods. Yet in the midst of judgment God continues to announce his mercy (1:10-11). This is God's scandalous grace.

It is important to note that God frequently works through so-called "fallen women." These include Tamar (Gen. 38:1-30; Matt. 1:3), Rahab (Joshua 2:1-24; Matt. 1:5), Bathsheba (II Sam. 11:1-27; Matt. 1:6), the woman at the well (John 4:1-42), the prostitute in Luke 7:36-50 and Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:1-2).

Through Hosea God is making the dramatic statement that Israel is essentially a spiritual prostitute. This however is only the first scene of the scandal that unfolds in the Book of Hosea.

Questions for Us –

1. What does God's command to Hosea tell us about his mercy and love?
2. In what ways are we spiritual prostitutes?
3. What hope can we take from this story?

Chapters 2-3 – “The Scope of God's Love”

The book of Hosea confronts us not only with the mysterious nature of God but even more so with his loving and saving purpose. Hosea has married Gomer and had three children by her. However, she continues to play the role of a whore even after they are married. She returns to her “lovers.” Gomer represents the continuing faithlessness of Israel. Yet God's “therefore” (2:14) reveals the fact that God continues to love her and will be her husband. God is even willing to pay her prostitute's fee. God shatters our conceptions of faith and goodness.

I. The Return of the Whore – 2:1-13

The fact that Hosea has married Gomer doesn't change her basic nature. One of the biggest mistakes a person can make is to marry someone with the expectation that they will change them once they become their spouse. The scene opens with Hosea speaking with his three children. He pleads with them to speak to their mother to “put away her whoring.” What has happened here? We need to read a bit between the lines.

It appears that Gomer is unhappy. Hosea is not providing her with her wants and desires. It's doubtful that being a prophet in Israel was a well-paying job. Gomer apparently wants to enhance her economic status by going back to her former “lovers” (read “clients”). Gomer is therefore simultaneously playing the role of wife, mother and prostitute.

God then, speaking through Hosea, confronts Gomer with her unfaithfulness. He will block her return to her former lovers. She will be judged. However, Gomer will not be deterred. She then says that she will return to her first husband because it was better for her then than now (2:7). This clearly implies that Gomer had a previous husband. Her situation seems then to have been that she was married earlier but either left her husband or was divorced and turned to prostitution to support herself. She is rescued by Hosea from this degrading life. Hosea, as we have seen, marries her and has three children by her. However, she becomes impatient with Hosea. She longs for the bread, wool and drink that her lovers had given her. She attempts to return to them but Hosea is able to block her (“She shall pursue her lovers, but not overtake them; and she shall seek them but shall not find them,” 2:7). Failing this, she tries to return to her first husband. Yet she does not realize how much Hosea has done for her. He uncovers her shame in the sight of her lovers and proceeds to punish her for her misdeeds (2:8-13).

All of this is symbolic of God’s relationship with Israel. Israel had been enslaved in Egypt. Yet in Egypt she had discovered her first love in the idols and false gods of the Egyptians. God delivered Israel out of Egypt. She became his bride in the wilderness. Yet she was not faithful. While she was supposedly God’s wife she went after other gods. She did this in the wilderness beginning (but not ending) with the golden calf (Ezekiel 16). God punished her but ultimately he forgave her. He brought her back. He gave her the promise land in which to live, a, “land flowing with milk and honey.” However, she still was not satisfied. She continued to go after other gods. God in his foolishness played the jilted husband and kept pleading with her to come back to him (I Cor. 1:21). The husband-wife imagery is especially notable given the fact that the worship of gods like Baal and Astarte included fertility rites with promiscuous sex and human sacrifice, including even the sacrifice of children.

II. God’s “Therefore” – 2:14-3:5

Given all that God has said about his relationship with Israel which mirrors Hosea’s relationship with his faithless wife, the “Therefore” of 2:14 should signal the fact that Israel is now completely abandoned by God. She should be completely cut off. There are passages where God speaks of his “fierce anger” against Israel lasting forever (Jer. 15:14). However, as we have seen throughout the prophets of the Old Testament and especially here with Hosea, God’s “Therefore” leads to the opposite of what we would expect.

God will speak tenderly to Israel. He will bring her back to Himself. He will replace judgment such as he inflicted on Israel in the Valley of Achor

(Joshua 7:20-26) with a “door of hope.” Rather than divorcing Israel which would be the logical response to all her infidelity, God reasserts his marriage pledge:

“And I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy.” 2:19. God will reaffirm his promises to Israel as Hosea reaffirms his children (Rom. 9:25-26).

Paul speaks of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:7). Do we know what Paul means by “redemption?” Redemption comes from the word “redeem” which means to buy something back, to restore it to its original state. God is buying us back as his creation, **as his lover**, through the cross of Jesus Christ. We are being restored to him as we are also being made into a new creation. He is making Christ who had no sin to be sin us for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (II Cor. 5:17-21).

How can God explain this to us? One answer is Hosea chapter three. Gomer has gone back to her life of prostitution just as Israel bakes “raisin cakes” for the ancient goddess known as Inanna, Ishtar or Astarte. The raisin cakes’ purpose is not simply to provide a sweet desert. They are part of the debauched ritual of fertility.

To put it bluntly, this is disgusting.

Hosea should walk out on Gomer and never see her again (in our view). Yet for the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus’ socializing with tax collectors and prostitutes was equally disgusting (Luke 5:29-32).

Hosea goes and pays the prostitute’s fee for his own wife (3:2). She is to refrain from any sexual activity just as Israel will be without a king or a place to worship in the time of the exile under the Assyrians. And then “the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God” (3:5). Since human sacrifice was the ultimate form of worship in these idolatrous cults, God will give us his greatest sacrifice, his Son.

We are the prostitutes. This is God’s payment to redeem us.

How can we comprehend such a God? (Rom. 11:33).

Questions for Us –

1. Do you think Hosea is foolish to continually pursue Gomer? Do you think God is foolish to keep pursuing us?

2. Do you see why Paul called Jesus' sacrifice for us "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (I Cor. 1:23)?
3. If you were a friend of Hosea's how would you counsel him?

Chapters 4-5 – "God's Lament"

God has an indictment against Israel. God condemns the fertility cults that were widely practiced in Israel. However, what does this mean for us living in the twenty first century? It means a great deal because the sources of that idolatry are still very much with us. These include faithlessness, disloyalty, greed, bloodshed, drunkenness, sexual immorality and pride. The most serious problem is that Israel has forgotten the word of the Lord (Hosea 4:6). Therefore, there is no knowledge of God.

I. The Indictment Against Israel – chapter 4

We now get a full picture of the situation in Israel that prompted God to give Hosea his shocking command. God's ordering Hosea to marry a prostitute was a symbolic way of showing how God was being frustrated by the faithlessness of Israel. Yet in spite of all that God continued to love Israel.

Here now God lays out the crisis in Israel in clear terms. The list of their offenses is sobering and indeed disturbing:

1. No faithfulness or loyalty
2. No knowledge of God
3. Swearing
4. Lying
5. Murder
6. Stealing
7. Adultery
8. Greed

This is to say that Israel has made a mockery of God's law. The people have broken the commandments not occasionally but on a regular basis. How has this happened?

The problem begins with the leadership. The priests and the prophets have turned away from the Lord (vs. 4-6). These leaders have become greedy. They have in fact corrupted the people. They will not be able to enjoy their food or their wine. They have in fact indulged wine and have

fallen into the trap of worshipping the idols of the land. Moses explicitly warned them about this (Deut. 6:14-15).

The problem with the fertility cults of the ancient world was not only the direct worshipping of false gods like Baal and Astarte. It was also the way the way those gods were worshipped. Since they were allegedly gods of fertility their worship included not only sex with temple prostitutes but open sex in general. The belief was that sexual practices among humans (and even humans with animals (Lev. 18:23;20:15-15; Deut. 27:21)) helped the crops to grow. Their growth in turn helped to sustain life. This was central to the worship of these false gods. Hence the general terms of “whore” and “whoredom” are used repeatedly to describe Israel’s unfaithfulness (vv. 11-15). The sacrifices on the tops of the mountains and under the shade of the trees involved sexual practices (v. 14). The shade of the tree was more conducive to the “sexual orgies” (v. 18)!

One of God’s concerns is that the degenerate activities of Israel would infect the southern kingdom, Judah (v. 15). The point of this chapter is that once God has been forsaken everything and anything becomes possible. The apostle Paul says the same thing (Rom. 1:18-32).

II. God’s Judgment – chapter 5

God follows the indictment now with the pronouncement of judgment on faithless Israel. God refers to Israel as “Ephraim.” Ephraim was the second son born to Joseph (Gen. 48:50-52). His descendants became a major tribe in Israel. Joshua was part of that tribe. Eventually Ephraim merged with Israel once there was a separation between the northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) kingdoms. In the judgment here Ephraim is included along with Israel. Judah also will not be exempt.

God has had enough. The bottom line is that Israel has a “spirit of whoredom.” God’s ultimate judgment, again in the words of the apostle Paul, is that God gives them up (Rom. 1:24-32). They will seek for God and not find him (v. 6). The “new moon” which was associated with the cycle of life and the fertility cults will “devour them.”

God is about to pour out his wrath on them “like water.” The essential fault they have is pride (v. 5) and vanity (v. 11). They will seek outside help by going to Assyria but this will accomplish nothing (Assyria actually will eventually conquer Israel). God will in effect attack them like a lion (v. 14). Yet in their distress they will beg for God’s favor (v. 15).

How does all this relate to us? We need to recognize that we are all vulnerable to the influence of idolatry. It begins with pride and then

continues into faithlessness and finally a breakdown of the knowledge of God.

The pop singer Katy Perry stated in an interview that she began as a gospel singer (she wanted to be the next Amy Grant). Her parents were both ministers. However, she wanted to be certain to achieve fame. So, in her words, she sold her soul to the devil. Was she kidding?

This was Israel. By turning to the idols Israel (along with Ephraim and Judah) sold themselves into the powers of darkness. C.S. Lewis has said that the only thing worse than over-emphasizing the power of evil is to under-emphasize it.

Nonetheless God's judgment is never the end. It is not the end here.

Questions for Discussion –

1. Where do we see idols in our world? How can we recognize them?
2. Why do you think Israel, in God's words, played the whore when they had God's law to guide them?
3. What would be examples of God giving us up as a form of judgment?

Chapters 6-8 – “God's Desire”

This chapter begins with a hopeful statement. Israel is talking about returning to the Lord. They review the pattern of God's deliverance on the third day. This of course foretells the Resurrection. However, God is not satisfied with Israel going through the motions. He desires “steadfast love and not sacrifice” (6:6). Yet Israel continues to turn away from God. They trust in political alliances. These will not save them. It is all too easy to fall away from God (7:14)

I. Israel's Love Like a Morning Cloud (6:4) – chapter 6

Israel is confident that the Lord will restore them. God will heal them in spite of their faithlessness. There is a continuing pattern in scripture of God's deliverance on the third day. We see multiple examples of this. This is what gives Israel their hope and confidence. Examples of the “third day” include

- a. Abraham and Isaac – Gen. 22:4

- b. Moses at Mount Sinai – Ex. 19:14-17
- c. God and Samuel – I Sam. 3:7-8
- d. Solomon and the two prostitutes – I Kings 3:16-18
- e. Isaiah and King Hezekiah – II Kings 20:1-6
- f. Ester and the King – Esther 5:1-2
- g. Rebuilding the Temple – Ezra 6:15; John 3:19
- h. Jesus Christ – Matt. 16:21

Israel holds on to God's promise of deliverance on the "third day." Yet this has become an empty hope. Their lives don't match the faith they profess. In one of the most famous statements in the Bible, God says that he desires "steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (v. 6). Jesus quotes this verse twice in the New Testament (Matt. 9:11; 12:7). It is important to note the context of those quotes. In both cases Jesus is speaking against the Pharisees. They have turned the Law of God into an inflexible rule. Their focus is in the wrong place. They no doubt resented this quote from Hosea which they certainly knew. They would have countered that they were not like the "whoredom" that was taking place in Israel. They were upright and faithful, not like the people of Hosea's time. Jesus' point however is, that both the Pharisees and the Israel, Ephraim and indeed Judah of Hosea's time, were going through the motions of worship. They were faithful to the letter of the Lord but they had lost the Spirit and the freedom it promises (II Cor.3).

II. Spreading Corruption – Chapters 7-8

Sin is never an isolated problem. It is an infection. It spreads. It is contagious. Israel and Ephraim have both become corrupted by Samaria (Israel's capital, I Kings 16:21-24) and this in turn will spread to Judah (8:14). We need to remember that all this is taking place in the reign of Jeroboam the second (1:1; 14:23-27). We don't have many details of his reign. Most of what we have comes from the Books of Hosea and Amos. Suffice to say that Jeroboam II did "what was evil in the sight of the Lord." He reigned forty-one years. God was merciful to Jeroboam in spite of the evil he did. Israel was in a desperate situation. God provided help and strength in spite of the rampant idolatry.

However, Israel and Ephraim remained ungrateful. Their attitude was that God would protect and support them no matter what. God's indictment is that their wickedness actually made the king glad (7:3). They were all adulterers, both physically and spiritually. The prophet Amos gives us some more details of the corruption which included exploiting the poor as well as sexual immorality (Amos 2:6-8). Even though God protected them he did not recognize their corrupt king (8:4). At the enthronement of the king the officials were so drunk they became sick (7:5).

Jeroboam the first had reintroduced the worship of the golden calf into Israel. Only in his case he made two calves (I Kings 12:25-33). This idolatry persisted into the time of Jeroboam II (8:5-6). For all their talk of returning to God they in reality were returning to what they had practiced in Egypt (8:13). The situation has become so desperate that the people are speaking lies against God (7:14). What were these lies? They were the false promises that God would deliver them in spite of their continuing prostitution. They sought alliances with other nations like Assyria. They didn't realize that this would lead eventually to their being conquered by that nation (8:9-10).

The northern kingdom was being judged just as Hosea had judged Gomer (2:9-13). They ignored the warning of God that they were sowing the wind and reaping a whirlwind (8:7). They would return to Egypt in a double sense. First, they were returning to the idolatry of worshipping the golden calf which they had known in Egypt. Second, they would again go into exile and slavery.

They continued to offer sacrifices to the true God. However, God would not accept them (8:13). The same fate will befall Judah who literally will have Jerusalem and the temple burnt to the ground (8:14; II Kings 25:8-21).

We may well ask, what of the picture we saw of Hosea and Gomer in the first three chapters? Hosea judged Gomer but then went to what we would regard as an impossible extreme by literally buying her back. How can this terrible indictment of rampant injustice, immorality and idolatry ever be purged?

Any way we look at the situation there is no possible hope for Israel and Judah. None. But with God, "all things are possible" (Mark 10:27).

Questions for Discussion –

1. Why do you think the theme of "the third day" is so important in scripture?
2. What are some of the ways that we take God for granted?
3. What hope can we take from god's statement that he desires steadfast love (mercy) rather than sacrifice?

Chapters 9-11 – “Called Out of Egypt”

The list of Israel's corruption is a devastating one. As Israel prospered she became more and more degenerate. The people have prostituted themselves to false gods. God is stating that “The days of punishment have come” (9:7). There is no hope for Israel or for their offspring. They have refused to listen to God so God, in response, has turned away from them. Their fate is to become exiles in Assyria. Yet with all their failings God refuses to give them up. They are in effect going back into slavery in Egypt. Yet God will continue to call them out of Egypt. This is our hope. God is not a mortal. His not like us. He will not come in wrath (11:9).

I. “A Thing of Shame (9:10) – chapter 9-10

The list of Israel's sins continues. This is no time for rejoicing (9:1). To the contrary, it is a time of mourning, in fact, a time of deep distress. Again and again we are told that Israel has played the whore. Reference is made to one of the degenerate practices that is also alluded to in the Book of Ruth (chapter three). The cycle of life was crucial for all ancient people and it was closely tied in with the harvest. If the harvest failed, the people faced starvation. On the other hand, a good harvest was an occasion for celebration. These celebrations would take place “on the threshing floors.” What would happen is that the men would not only eat and drink but apparently they would also invite prostitutes to “wash their feet” which was a euphemism for having sex (II Sam. 11:8). This is why Boaz wanted to make sure that Ruth left the threshing room floor under the cover of darkness (Ruth 3:14).

God here is saying that Israel's prosperity, her celebrations on the threshing room floor, will not save her. The warning here is that “The days of punishment have come” (9:7). Israel had apparently fallen into the trap of thinking that economic prosperity was a sign of God's favor. That may be the case but it can hardly be assumed. In fact, possessing wealth in the New Testament is more often an occasion for turning away from God (Luke 12:13-21).

Israel has reached the point where they are not only disobedient, they have become hostile to God (9:7). God's indictment continues. Israel has “deeply corrupted themselves” (9:9). This goes back to their idolatrous practices even in the wilderness (Numbers 25). The day of judgment has come. The people have not listened to God (9:17). In fact, the more Israel has prospered the more they have fallen into idolatry. God continues, “They utter mere words; with empty oaths they make covenants” (10:4). One of the consequences of the breakdown of their faith is that “litigation springs up like poisonous weeds.” Their fate is

sealed. They will be taken captive to Assyria (10:6). Yet God still calls out to them. In addition to a harvest of crops they need to sow for themselves “righteousness and steadfast love.” It is “time to seek the Lord” (10:12).

Yet the warning is not heeded. They have “plowed wickedness” and “reaped injustice.” Israel is caught in “great wickedness.” God’s last word is “At dawn the king of Israel shall be utterly cut off” (10:15). All hope is now gone.

What can we learn from this? Two of the greatest temptations we face are sex and material wealth. It would be a mistake to paint sex and money as inherently sinful which the church unfortunately has done at times. The Bible has graphic passages celebrating sexuality (Prov. 5:15-19; Ezekiel 16:6-14). The whole of the Song of Solomon is an erotic poem. In the same way wealth and prosperity can be signs of God’s abundant goodness. Yet God’s blessings can never be taken for granted (Deut. 8:10-11). Too often the church has not maintained a balance on these issues. We need to cultivate a spirit of gratitude to God for all his gifts and always remember that the goodness we receive from him is intended to draw us closer to him.

Israel at this point is a graphic warning about losing the balance altogether. Is this then the end? It certainly sounds that way.

II. “How Can I Give You Up?” – chapter 11

It is at this point that the key theme of the Book of Hosea reemerges. We are confronted again with God’s scandalous grace. God remains the one who requires mercy and not sacrifice (6:6). He is also the one that demonstrates this mercy. God reaffirms his love for Israel. The phrase, “Out of Egypt I called my son” is applied to Christ in the Gospel of Matthew (2:15).

God reaffirms the fact that from the beginning Israel was disobedient. They kept sacrificing to idols. Nonetheless God led them “with cords of human kindness, with bands of love” (11:4). Israel’s faithlessness in the face of God’s love sealed their fate. They will, in effect, return to the slavery of Egypt when Assyria conquers them. This is what they deserve. God’s judgment is fair and right.

But, then, God questions himself: “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel” (11:8). God’s compassion, his mercy, overrides everything else (Rom. 11:32). God will not finally destroy his people. He will not carry out his “fierce anger” (11:9). God is not like mortals. He will not come in wrath (11:9). The judgment will fall. Israel

will go into exile. However, that is not the end. God will return them to their homes (11:11).

We end with an encouraging note about Judah who still walks with God. However, as events will demonstrate, Judah will follow the same path and go into exile later under the Babylonians. Yet the reality as we will see is that God will act the part of Hosea and redeem his rebellious and faithless wife. Is this fair? Not at all. However, as God reminds us, he is not like us. That fact should make us supremely confident.

Questions for Us –

1. What do these chapters teach us about God's judgment?
2. What are the dangers we face in our spiritual lives? How do the false gods of sex and wealth impact us? What about litigation in our world?
3. How objectionable is God's statement of his compassion? What lessons can we learn from God's "steadfast love?"

Chapters 12-14 – "I Will Love Them Freely"

We come now to the climax of the prophecy of Hosea. The list of failures of the northern kingdom which embraces Samaria and Ephraim is overwhelming. They have no excuse, no defense. This section parallels Paul's indictment of Jew and Gentile in Romans 1:18-3:31. Yet after the condemnation there is an abrupt shift. God's mercy overwhelms any demands of the law (Hosea 6:6; Rom. 11:32). God loves Israel freely and restores them. In effect the whore becomes a virgin (Matt. 19:26). This is the complete scandal and everlasting promise and hope of the gospel.

I. "I Will Destroy You, O Israel" (13:9) – chapters 12-13

This is now the final judgment on faithless Israel. God uses the example of Jacob who of course was the namesake for Israel. From the womb Jacob was treacherous. He cheated his brother out of his birthright (Gen. 25:29-34). God is saying here that this set up a pattern of disobedience. Yet Jacob strove with the angel of God and prevailed (Gen. 32:22-32). He is finally reconciled with his brother whom he cheated (Gen. 33:1-17).

What God is saying here is that it is never too late to repent and to return to the Lord. Israel has a last chance but will they take it? Injustice still continues with the use of “false balances” (12:7). The tragic reality is that they keep on sinning (13:2). Israel commits a double idolatry. On one side there is the continuing worship of the false god Baal (13:1). There is also the worship of the two calves which first began in Egypt and was re-introduced by Jeroboam to keep people from going to Jerusalem to worship in the temple there (I Kings 12:25-33). The golden calf represented the Egyptian cow-goddess Hathor. This of course had first appeared in the wilderness (Ex. 32). The expression that people are kissing calves represents the sexuality involved in the worship of these fertility gods (Num. 25:1-5).

God seeks to remind Israel that he and he alone has been their God since he called them out of Egypt. There is no other savior (13:4). God fed them in the wilderness. However, after they were satisfied they forgot him.

What is this like in the living parable of Hosea and Gomer? The inference of all this would be that Hosea, having paid her prostitute’s fee, now finds that Gomer, beyond being a whore, has become a priestess of a false god. Her favors are now part of the worship of this false god. The payment for her services are the offerings made to the false god. The degeneration is so widespread that the daughters of Israel are now participating in this (4:14).

To let this sink in we have to picture Hosea, the prophet of the Lord, forced to watch his wife presenting herself as the priestess of an idol. She invites him to join her but even he will have to pay her fee, a fee that will go into the idol’s temple. We can imagine Hosea turning away in disgust only to be confronted with another Israelite woman approaching him and saying, “Lie with me” (Gen. 39:7).

Hosea would turn away with the conviction that no hell could be hot enough for these people. This is where God is. God says to them, “I will destroy you, O Israel; who can help you?” Israel had asked for a king. No king can save them now. God turns them over to hell (Sheol). God summons Death and Hell,

“O Death, where are your plagues?

O Sheol, where is your destruction?” (13:14)

This then is the end of Israel. Gomer and the other prostitutes, along with the false prophets, should all be burnt at the stake and cast into hell. No one could ever say that God is unjust for carrying out this judgment. There is no more terrible statement than God saying “Compassion is hidden from my eyes” (13:14).

Can we recognize ourselves here? If we can't we're not paying attention. How many idols do we bow before, especially the one called "greed?" (Eph. 5:5). How much injustice are we willing to tolerate? How many times have we promised to be more faithful and we aren't? Paul quotes Ps. 14:3, "There is no one who does good, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10).

This then is the end of the story of a corrupt and defiant people.

But wait, it's not the end. How can that be?

II. "I Will Heal Their Disloyalty" – Chapter 14

This chapter begins with another call for Israel to return to the Lord. They should confess their sin and guilt. They need to realize that Assyria will not save them. They must put away their idols. They are told that in God "the orphan finds mercy" (14:3).

But this is not new. These things have been said before and Israel has not changed. But then God speaks. There is no way to paraphrase the shocking message,

"I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall strike root like the forests of Lebanon. . . They shall again live beneath my shadow, they shall flourish like the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon" (14:4-7).

But how can this be? Israel has been so faithless. Yet God says that their fruit, their righteousness, comes from him. This is what Paul means when he says that we are justified by God's grace as a gift (Rom. 3:23-24). God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all (Rom. 11:32). In the words of New Testament scholar, Leon Morris,

"And God's final purpose is that he may have mercy on them all. That purpose is not condemnation or the like. It is always mercy" *The Epistle to the Romans*

This is the true gospel which cannot be compromised. It is the gospel that called Augustine out of the Roman Empire, that called Martin Luther to nail his ninety-five theses, that inspired Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr. and Mother Theresa. This is the gospel which changes the world.

We do not have a final picture of Hosea and Gomer. Based on the conclusion of the book we can imagine it. Hosea finds Gomer again. He loves her. She returns to him. She becomes his virgin bride.

But you say that is impossible. Yes of course it is. To conclude this study, turn to Matthew 19:26. Read it. Now read it again.

“Those who are wise understand these things” (14:9).

Questions for us –

1. How does the Book of Hosea expand our understanding of the gospel?
2. What can we learn from the warnings of this book?
3. What can we learn from this book’s final chapter?