



***Becoming Fully Devoted Followers
by Studying the Followers Before Us***

WEEK 25

HOSEA

JUNE 18-22, 2007

DAY	<i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i>	ABBREVIATED STUDY
Monday	Hosea 6-10, Psalm 121	Hosea 1-3, Psalm 121
Tuesday	Hosea 11-14, Psalm 122	Hosea 4-6, Psalm 122
Wednesday	Isaiah 1-6, Psalm 123	Hosea 7-8, Psalm 123
Thursday	Isaiah 7-12, Psalm 124	Hosea 9-11, Psalm 124
Friday	Isaiah 13-18, Psalm 125	Hosea 12-14, Psalm 125

READ

Hosea 1-3
Psalm 121

REFLECT

Hosea was the first of the Minor Prophets in the Old Testament. His prophetic career spanned about 59 years, during the years from 748 BC when he began his public ministry, until his death in 690 BC. His prophecies were delivered in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, with its ten tribes, toward the end of the prosperous and morally declining era of Jeroboam II. Subsequent kings are named in the opening verses, and the message of Hosea's prophecies was no doubt apropos during their reigns, including Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

Among the prophets, Hosea has been called the "Prophet of Love." In spite of the indignities he was commanded to endure, and the harsh messages he was inspired to deliver, he never lost sight of the underlying, and under-girding reality of God's love for a badly behaving people. A reading of the entire book of Hosea in one sitting does not thrill the reader with beautiful prose. However, one scholar – *Eichorn* – waxed eloquent about the magnificence of the Book of Hosea: *"His discourse is like a garland woven of a multiplicity of flowers; images are woven upon images, metaphor strung upon metaphor. Like a bee he flies from one flowerbed to another, that he may suck his honey from the most varied species . . . Often he is prone to approach allegory; often he sinks down in obscurity."*

Note that there are two basic divisions of the book. Chapters 1-3, set in three separate poems, express the idolatry of Israel using both reality and imagery of the matrimonial relationship. Then Chapters 4-14 express in detail the extent to which Israel has fallen out of God's favor, the threat of impending punishment, and ultimately the readiness of God to reclaim His people when they wake up to their apostasy (*a total desertion of one's principles*), repent, and come back to a vital relationship with Him.

Right off the bat, Hosea received instruction from the Lord to do something no one would ever expect. It was like a contemporary pastor being directed by God to go to the Playboy Mansion, and buy a wife. Unthinkable! But why? Hosea was called to live out in his marriage to the harlot Gomer, a parable of the gross dysfunction that had developed in the relationship between God and Israel, His people. It was more than enough to get Hosea's attention, and surely that of his people. It was a picture filled with *sub rosa* meanings that scholars have been pondering for centuries. It's amazing how God selected a **person** to bear the symbolic reality that also defined the **condition** of a nation.

We must read these first three chapters with an understanding of the two marriages of Hosea as a picture of Israel as a nation unfaithful to Jehovah; first punished; then ultimately reclaimed by Him. Read in these verses the unchanging love of God for Israel, even though contaminated with Canaanite paganism and fertility cults. Hosea bent every effort to warn the people to repent in the face of God's perpetual love for them.

Four themes will emerge through the next eleven chapters: 1) Idolatry; 2) Wickedness; 3) Captivity; and 4) Restoration. The helicopter view of this powerful prophecy shows Israel being depicted as Jehovah's adulterous wife, shortly to be put away, but eventually to be purified and restored. Try to get the big picture. Avoid putting too much direct correlation between the descriptions in the text and our contemporary understandings of things like harlotry.

RESPOND

Be grateful that God rarely asks **us** to do outrageous things in His name. At the same time, be grateful for Hosea, who bit the bullet, married the whore, bore the disturbances in that painful relationship, and yet understood the message God was wanting to convey to a nation gone astray.

PRAY

The Lord, the keeper of Israel, brings help. God is your guardian, keeps away every evil. . . always. Lord, keep me faithful to You. Psalm 121

REMEMBER: God often empowers imperfect vessels and situations to accomplish His work.

READ

Hosea 4-6
Psalm 122

REFLECT

Hosea's prophetic ministry followed closely upon the ministry of Amos, whose scathing prophecies as a "Southerner" to the prosperous, dissolute Northern Israel, were harsh. By contrast, Hosea spoke with the tender, heart passion of a native son. He was the "home missionary" to his countrymen. As the apostle of love in the Old Testament, Hosea was not timid about announcing judgment for apostasy, exposing the sin of the people as a sad commentary on their apostate condition. But he also proclaimed the Golden Strand of God's mercy and love.

What had gone wrong? Where had Israel gotten off the straight path to Jehovah? How can the relationship between Hosea and Gomer describe the condition of Israel in relationship with God? The imagery seems quite clear. The wandering eye, the straying into alternative alliances, the lack of attention to the primary allegiance – these are the actions of one who was described as the "wife of harlotry." Still, Hosea would not allow Gomer to leave his house because he loved her, in the same way God loves His people. After pointing out the rottenness in Israel "who has forgotten his maker," Hosea – in warning, and with hope – declared that God will yet "heal their faithlessness."

This imagery points to the facts of Israel's condition. Hosea seems to focus on the failed leadership in Israel. Priests and cult prophets were worse than useless. The monarchy was a direct slap in the face of God, who was their real king. While the leaders were ineffective, the underlying and undermining problem was the pervasive sell-out to Baalism. That pagan cult had infected the cultural and religious life of the nation, both by Baal worship itself, and by the paganization of the worship of Yahweh, until the two were indistinguishable.

What had become the attraction of Baal worship? This Canaanite theology involved the dying and rising of the fertility god, Baal, the husband of mother earth. Popular rites were celebrated according to the annual seasons of dryness and rain. Cult prostitutes were the celebrants,

with accompanying orgies of food and sex. It seems likely that Gomer was one of the Baal 'ladies of the night,' symbolic of the unfaithful, wayward nation of Israel. It was Hosea's challenge to his pagan peoples to acknowledge that true fertility comes, not from the marriage of Baal with mother earth, but from the rain-bringing God of Israel.

Israel had simply allowed Baalism to invade its entire life. Hosea was deeply concerned about the erosion of the covenant history of God's people. He believed that the lack of basic faithfulness, covenant loyalty, and actual intimate knowledge of God was leading the nation to imminent destruction at the hands of the Assyrians. This impending exile was to be God's way to smash Baalism, and discipline His people out of His deep, redemptive love. The prophet's plea was to hear Jehovah's father love as a call to repentance, rebirth and a resurrection to new life. Do you hear the New Testament echo?

The leadership in Israel had allowed this invasion of paganism. It had adulterated the worship of Jehovah by allowing pagan rites and idols to deflate the core content and dynamic of true worship. Such awkward associations weaken the integrity of the real elements of God-worship, and the people suffer. Inappropriate alliances with foreign influences and practices always produce weakness, often leading to complete collapse and extinction. Is there a word of caution for contemporary forms of worship that incorporate purely secular idioms in an effort to be "relevant"?

RESPOND

It is important to gain spiritual discernment when determining what "faithful" elements of Christian life and practice must be held carefully, free from invading distortions or skewed interpretations.

PRAY

My heart leaped for joy when they said, "Let's go to the house of the Lord." Let my heart be bathed in the warmth and nourishment of pure worship. Psalm 122

REMEMBER: Improper associations often lead to erosion of essential values.

- D.E.E.

READ

Hosea 7 - 8
Psalm 123

REFLECT

In Peterson's introduction to Hosea in *The Message*, he comments that "God goes after us at our worst, and keeps after us until he gets us . . ." When Hosea really gets into the core issue between God and Israel, it's all about loyalty. His main theme is Israel's unfaithfulness to her God, followed by hints about what He proposes to do about it.

Idolatrous and apostate Israel had forsaken her true God to join in the sexual fertility rites and idol worship of the nature god Baal. She seems appallingly ignorant of her confused condition, mixing Jehovah worship and Baal worship. She therefore must be punished, disciplined, re-educated and redeemed. The three family analogies are bluntly stated: God's people are children of harlotry; Israel is a mother of harlotry; and despite all this, God loves Israel and will re-educate her through discipline. These images are reflected in the "arranged marriage" between Hosea and Gomer, with God being the arranger. (In that ancient day in the Near East, such an arrangement was normal practice.)

Hosea's descriptions of a spiritually destitute people read like the daily news reported in the L.A. Times. The list of offenses is long, like a Grand Jury indictment. The Lord's case is explicit: no faithfulness toward God; no knowledge of the Lord's authority and commands; swearing; deception; murder; stealing and adultery; violence; bloodshed; mourning; much languishing – In short, a sorry population of guilty Israelites whose loyalty to Jehovah had eroded enormously, resulting in very bad behavior.

Whenever a favored, blessed nation forgets its primary relationship to the source of its status; whenever there is a vacuum of meaning in the fabric of the population; there will soon be a condition when there are few restraints left to discipline behaviors and maintain the sanity of the body politic. Such was the case with Israel. Where were the Ten Commandments in their collective thinking? What standards of conduct were available for discipline?

How far can Israel go before disengaging completely from God? They certainly took a major risk with their improper associations with Baal. Here was Israel in the afterglow of their former reliance on God. They had prospered. They then strayed. Like cut flowers that look fresh for awhile, they eventually die because they are severed from their sustaining roots. The nation was wilting, dangerously close to losing everything. In another analogy, Israel was like the sinking sun which leaves its splendor on the horizon, inexorably sinks out of sight, and ultimately loses any remnant of the glow once known.

Israel was outwardly prosperous. Yes, but with more prosperity came more elaborate altars and idols, and with vanishing substance of the true elements of Jehovah worship. Even the prophets stumbled (4:4f). And the people were destroyed for lack of knowledge (4:6). The prophet is compelled to point out the erosion of a loyalty that once guided and empowered God's chosen people.

The "word of the Lord" that came to Hosea carried heavy-duty messages, first to him personally – to marry a harlot – then to his own country, with descriptions of gross departure from their privileged status as the chosen people of God. A daunting task for the prophet! Yet he was faithful to the tasks, and in the process of delivering the oracles, he discovered spiritual truths that have been a valued resource to our present days.

RESPOND

Consider in our own time the multiple occasions when primary loyalties that have been compromised take the "starch" out of a once firm witness to truth. It happens often without an awareness of the erosion taking place. With God's supervision, disaster can be avoided, and the witness restored to full health.

PRAY

"I look to you for help, God. We're holding our breath, awaiting your word of mercy" Keep me loyal to You in all I do. Psalm 123

REMEMBER: Eroded loyalty often leads to bad behavior

- D.E.E.

READ

Hosea 9-11
Psalm 124

REFLECT

Prophets have a very difficult role to play. It's not simply an acting job, getting the attention of the people, then laying down the indictments. Far more important is the conveyance of the "Word of the Lord" with power, persuasion, and alarm. Hosea brings all these to his task. He mourns the depraved condition of his people, but still pounds away at the Lord's ultimate desire for restoration of righteousness and justice, purity and holiness.

When we keep in suspension all of the lists of evidence for Israel's "harlotry," it is not difficult to understand God's fury, disgust, and impatience over their condition. Hosea (7-8) points to their "desolate hearts that have become immune to their condition: wickedness everywhere; all kings have fallen; none of them call on Me." The people mixed up the equation by turning for help to alien nations, rather than to Jehovah. They strayed, rebelled, forgot their Maker, and built palaces. "How long will they be incapable of innocence?"

D-Day has arrived. Hosea lays it on the line: "The days of punishment have come" (9:7). God's patience is not unlimited. He is a long-suffering God. He lets the leash out as far as it will go. BUT !!! Enough is enough. God's fury rises when He is ignored. Judgment comes.

All of Israel is serving itself. They are reaping more fruit. They are building more altars to Baal. Everything seems to be going well. But their hearts are faithless. There is guilt and shame. When God has had enough, He will chastise.

Yet, Hosea always reintroduces the redeeming refrain. God is furious, but He is also loving, full of mercy, and longs for Israel to "sow with a view to righteousness, reap in accordance with kindness; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord until He come to rain righteousness on you" (10:12). Until then, "you're in for hard times."

At the core of God's fury and disappointment with Israel is the loss of love for Jehovah. "You are what you love." And for Israel, their historic love for God had been transferred to Baal. Such lost love could only result, eventually, in severe punishment from the God who commanded, "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me." The resulting action: "God will break down their altars and destroy their pillars" (10:2). Added to such a demolition is a period of exile, of being captives again in a pagan land.

The prophet's message in Chapter 11 seems couched in a plaintive plea from the Lord: "Check out the history of our relationship"; "Remember how much I have helped you"; and while you are reflecting on these things, "Understand that I am hurt by your forgetfulness, your turning away from me, but I will not destroy you again." And God wept.

Leap forward to our time in history. Has God blessed our land? Were there strong roots of reliance on Providence in the formation of our "land of the free?" Have there been acknowledgements across our national history when God's protection and direction have been exercised? If we believe that our nation has been blessed, and that God has been the source of those blessings, dare we expunge His benevolences from our history, and wipe out the many visible expressions of reliance on Him that are perpetual reminders that there is a God, that He is real, and that He loves all mankind?

RESPOND

The experience of Israel in their forgetfulness of God's sovereignty and loving mercy, should sensitize us who live in the Age of Grace to be vigilant in avoiding anything in our lives that might nullify our witness to the authority of God, and thus prevent us from feeling God's fury when He detects our faithlessness.

PRAY

If God hadn't been for us . . . we would have been swallowed alive. Oh, blessed be God! He didn't go off and leave us. Psalm 124

REMEMBER: God's fury rises up when He is ignored.

- D.E.E.

READ

Hosea 12-14

Psalm 125

REFLECT

Pity the poor prophet. He is charged with delivery of heavy messages under impossible circumstances. And for Hosea, there was added the very difficult marital situation that in itself became part of his message. But if you re-read chapters 1-3, you will see again that Hosea kept the “final word” in sight, even in the struggle of his marriage. It was simply the assurance that “in time, they’ll come back.” He spoke it in terms of his marriage, but also in terms of the return of Israel to her God, Jehovah.

The fact that God chose Israel as the object of His particular concern, the vehicle of His providence, the agent of His purpose and will, throws light upon the nature of divine love. From the human angle, there were other nations that might have been more likely choices: Egypt for her art; Assyria for her power; Phoenicia for her wealth. Yet God chose Israel – puny, despised, often in captivity, with not much evidence of civilization. And God loved Israel; “like a loving father, the Lord taught them to walk, and took them up in his arms” (11:3). It was the *harness of love* that kept Israel connected to Jehovah, however tenuously.

God’s chosen ones can never get so far away that a return become impossible, and Hosea pleaded for his people to hear that good news. If there had a bungee cord in existence in Israel, Hosea could have used it as an illustration of the truth that the chords of love from the heart of God stretch out to the limits, but ultimately provide a return. Only we can choose the sinful actions that sever the ties, to our peril.

Hosea declared the reality that God must punish for the sake of His righteousness. He must shift abruptly from his refrain of God’s love to the corrective word of discipline. Israel had been “feeding on wind.” Wind is not a substantial diet. It simply inflates without nourishing; it fills yet leaves one empty. To change that condition, discipline had to be

exerted. But it was God’s initiative. It was He who longed to have His people return from their faithlessness. “We love . . . because He first loved us” (I John:4:19).

When man strays, it is on his own initiative. However, when he returns to God, it is in response to the call of God. And in returning, our genuine action is measured in terms of ethical results. “Hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.”

Israel had fallen to the dangers of prosperity. “When they had fed to the full . . . they forgot me.” (13:5-6) All the “stuff” from their embrace of Baal – the orgies, the rites, the idols – had squelched their former experience of righteousness and faithful worship of Jehovah. Now it was time to get back to their core experience of God. And God wanted them back: “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for my anger is turned away” (14:4). Faithlessness is like a disease. It needs healing. And God was ready for Israel’s return, healed.

The great hymn of Frederick Faber puts a central focus on the magnificent, patient love of God for wandering people.

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, Like the wideness of the sea;
There’s a kindness in his justice, Which is more than liberty.
For the love of God is broader Than the measure of man’s mind,
And the heart of the Eternal Is most wonderfully kind.

RESPOND

Keep fresh and wonderfully alive the reality of God’s amazing grace, and the extent to which He reaches out in His initiative love to haul us back to Him when we stray.

PRAY

*God, be good to your good people, to those whose hearts are right.
Psalm 125*

REMEMBER: God always leaves open the door for our return.

- David E. Edwards