

HOSEA NO. 1
October 9th, 1998
The Prophecy of Hosea

Hosea 1:1; 4:1-6; 14:1-9

Last week I concluded a series of morning messages on the Holy Spirit and his work in our lives and in the church. Such a sermon series on a Biblical subject or theme serves a useful purpose and I preach them from time to time; but I assure you that my primary pattern for preaching will always remain the consecutive exposition of books or parts of the Bible. Last spring we finished one and a half years of sermons on the Gospel of Mark. Now, Lord willing, we will spend several months in the prophecy of Hosea.

Preaching this way assures us that we will hear what the Lord would say to us and hear it in the order and the proportion which He has chosen. The very best way to master the Bible, the best way to prevent a preacher's harping on but one or a few themes at the expense of others, the best way to capture a sense of the Bible's perspectives on God, man, sin, salvation, and the Christian life, is just this way: to take whole parts of the Bible and study them from beginning to end. It is a time-honored method of preaching—Chrysostom used it in the fourth century and Calvin in the sixteenth—and, as I say, the exposition of books of the Bible will always be the centerpiece of my preaching to you.

I hope very much that you greet the commencement of a new series of sermons on a biblical book with gladness and anticipation. What a treasure the Bible is, and, therefore, what a sacred privilege and duty it is for us to master it in every part, to hide it in our hearts—Hosea and Mark together.

In anticipation of his being with us later this month, I have been reading Dr Carl F.H. Henry's autobiography, Confessions of a Theologian. At one point Dr. Henry writes:

“The late twentieth century is bone-weary of the indefinite and inconclusive and indecisive; what it needs is a sure Word of God. . . . That God has revealed himself intelligibly, that Jesus of Nazareth is the incarnate Logos of God, that the Scriptures are the Word

of God written, that the Holy Spirit uses truth as the means of human persuasion and conviction, that not even the twentieth century can cancel God's truth. . . these emphases our generation needs desperately to hear." [p. 325]

Fixed truths, moral absolutes, divine imperatives, sure hope, life-transforming power—that is what we have found and the world can find in the pages of this Holy Book which God has given us, the truth of which the Spirit of God wields as a sword, as a divine Excalibur!

It is a great privilege to have the Bible, a far greater privilege to know by the Spirit of God, that the Bible is indeed the sure and certain Word of God, and, thus, to be able both to fashion one's own life according to what you know to be the truth, and to be able to speak the truth and give the truth, the truth that alone can deliver and save them now and forever, to lost men and women all around you.

I have written in my Bible this thought from Amy Carmichael:

“The amazing thing, is that everyone who reads the Bible has the same joyful thing to say about it. In every land, in every language, it is the same tale: where that Book is read, not with the eyes only, but with the mind and heart, the life is changed. Sorrowful people are comforted, sinful people are transformed, people who were in the dark walk in the light. Is it not wonderful to think that this Book, which is such a mighty power if it gets a chance to work in an honest heart, is in our hands today? And we can read it freely, no man making us afraid.” (Thou Givest, They Gather, p.3)

Well, I hope that is what you feel and that you will look forward, with relish, as I do, to sustained and careful examination of another part of this great Book, the Bible, the Scripture, which the Apostle Paul says, comes right out of the living God's own mouth! Here is the mind, the will, and the pleasure of our God; the bright light which so brilliantly illuminates our way while all about us people stumble in darkness.

This morning, I want to spend my time introducing the prophecy of Hosea to you; giving you some view of the whole, before we begin to examine the

Book section by section. An overview, I think, will also help you to see how immediately relevant this book is to our circumstances in the present day. Though Hosea lived seven and a half centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ, his message is as timely as today's newspaper.

I. First then, let me say a few words about the time in which Hosea lived and preached; the historical context and setting of this book of the Bible.

The dates of the Kings of Judah, mentioned in Hosea 1:1, cover the last 68 years of the 8th century B.C., that is from 768 to 700 B.C. Hosea preached in Israel, however, in the northern kingdom, and must have begun his ministry during the reign of Jeroboam II, who was king from 782-753 B.C. Jeroboam was followed in rapid succession by six ineffectual kings leading up to the destruction of the northern kingdom by the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C.

Now during Jeroboam's reign, Israel, though but a matter of a few years from its obliteration, was at the height of its material prosperity. Jeroboam II, also known as Jeroboam the Great, taking advantage of a period of Assyrian weakness, extended Israel's political boundaries to what they had been in the heyday of King David. Militarily and economically it was the northern kingdom's golden age; and no one imagined that it was so soon to crumble under the wrath of God.

In any case, as a result of Israel's protracted unbelief, her longstanding fascination with the sensual pagan religions round about her, and the wealth and prosperity of Jeroboam's day, faithful followers of God and of his law were a tiny minority among Israel's population in Hosea's day. Judah, which has been described as Canaan's 'Bible-belt', resisted paganism with some more success, but in Israel, polytheistic paganism—a mixture of many of the pagan religions of that time and area—was the dominant faith.

Their hope was not in God in any case, nor had they any fear of Him; their hope, as we shall see, was in diplomatic arrangements, in human efforts to resolve international tensions, and their fear was of Assyria and what she might do to Israel.

In other words, though we may hear Hosea's sermons with reverence, in his own day, Israel was no place for him to find a sympathetic audience; and, as a matter of fact, he did not. No doubt when he was not entirely ignored, his preaching brought resentment and ridicule! His was not an easy life. People

didn't believe him, or respect him, or like him. His preaching effected no change; looked at from a worldly perspective, he was largely a failure; and, like Jeremiah, it was small comfort for him to know that he was proved right in the end.

But think about this: how different is our own day from Hosea's, really? We too enjoy great prosperity and that prosperity in our case as well has been accompanied by a moral collapse of staggering proportions; and, sure enough, the church is very often, in its unbelief and worldliness, standing smack in the way of the one possible solution to our society's woes. Even Christianity so-called, in our day has accommodated itself to the sensuality, materialism, humanism, and paganism all around it.

I don't know what you thought about the debate between our vice-presidential candidates last week, but I was profoundly discouraged by the whole dishonorable and disgusting display. Here are two men who identify themselves as Christians, but who, very clearly, have placed all of their confidence in human calculations and have no fear of the judgment of God.

They say unkind and hurtful things to one another as if the Lord Christ never said, "Judge not, lest ye be judged! For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." They obviously care much more for what immediate political gains unkind words might bring, than for the prospect of having to answer for their words on the great day! Well, that was the logic of the society in Hosea's day.

Our vice-presidential hopefuls, too, are expert at justifying and complimenting themselves, of speaking well of themselves while they speak ill of others. They have no eye for the law of God which says; "Your boasting is not good. For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?"

And then, here are two candidates who are more interested in pandering to the materialism of their potential supporters than, as self-confessed Christian men, showing the terrible wrong and the inevitable and grisly outcome of defying the laws of God as this society has made a profession of doing.

And then, when the debate is all over, the discussion which succeeded it, ad nauseam, had not to do with the truth, or who came closest to it, but

with who won the battle of the sound-bites. The cynicism of our society has become so deeply ingrained, that we can now seriously discuss a politician's skill at avoiding the truth or his skill at sidestepping significant comment on crucial matters, as a virtue, as a sign of political virtuosity. So it was in Hosea's day.

And as the prosperity's foundation has begun to crumble, and as distant enemies draw nearer—AIDS, the deficit, crime, the breakdown of the family, political instability in the world—our society, like Hosea's, is not more willing, but fiercely less willing to hear the true explanation for her woes and the only certain path to deliverance from her impending doom.

How like the Word of God; that we should pick up the sermons of an 8th century B.C. prophet, and hear truth which unmask our own day, and holds the only promise of salvation for our society, as surely as it was the truth in Hosea's own time.

II. Such was the setting of Hosea's preaching. Now, let me briefly summarize that preaching, and Hosea's message. You may want to jot some notes in your Bible as a permanent introduction to the book for all your subsequent reading of it.

Like the other prophets of this period of Israel's history, the burden of Hosea's preaching is that Israel has violated God's covenant with her and that therefore the curses, which God threatened to bring upon her if she proved herself unfaithful and disobedient, were about to be visited upon her.

Those curses can be found listed in both Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. One commentator indicates that in his various messages, Hosea announces twenty of the twenty-seven different curses which God promised to visit upon his people if they forsook Him.

Fully two-thirds of the book of Hosea is comprised of Hosea's presentation of the evidence that Israel has forsaken God's covenant. As a prosecuting attorney, Hosea indicts Israel and builds the case against her. A quarter of the book is devoted to describing the curses which God is about to visit upon his rebellious people; and the final tenth of the book is devoted to announcing the blessings which God will shower upon his people later on, in the distant future, after their punishment has been exhausted.

In both Leviticus 26:41-42 and Deuteronomy 30:2-3, God says that after punishing his people, when they forsake him, he will again return to them,

have compassion upon them, and restore their fortunes. This too, Hosea promises, though only after the terrible curses have run their course.

So the book of Hosea is comprised of alternating sections of evidence that Israel has betrayed the Lord and his covenant; of curses that are soon to be visited upon her for her unfaithfulness; and, scattered throughout the book, are seven short sections announcing the blessings which will follow in the distant future.

III. Another way to describe the message of Hosea is to point out the key vocabulary of the book, the words which carry his main points.

1. One of those words is ‘prostitution’ which occurs in various forms sixteen times in the book to refer metaphorically to Israel’s spiritual adultery and unfaithfulness to God’s covenant.
2. Another key word is the Hebrew word ‘turn’ or ‘turn back’ which is often rendered ‘repent’ in English Bibles. With this word Hosea both calls Israel to repentance and speaks of the Lord’s return to or repayment of Israel for her sins.
3. Another important term is the great covenant word *hesed*, meaning ‘loyalty’ or ‘covenant faithfulness’. It is used here in Hosea, obviously, with regard to Israel’s lack of that loyalty and need for it.
4. Sixteen times in Hosea we find the word ‘love’. Eleven of these times reference is made to Israel’s love, but it is always a false love, a love for other things than for God, and four times it is used of God’s love for Israel.
5. And then, the verb ‘to know’ and its noun ‘knowledge’ occur eighteen times in Hosea usually to Israel’s lack of knowledge of the Lord, and of the Lord’s knowledge of Israel and of her sins, and how her guilt is not hidden from Him.

In short, Hosea is concerned with great themes—sin and judgment; Divine compassion and the necessity of faith and obedience. It is a message always timely, but yet more in a day such as ours, so similar to that in which Hosea

lived and preached. It is in many ways a gloomy book; but it is the truth—and the truth alone, Jesus said, can set men free!

His hearers in his own day responded to the truth as he preached it with stony resentment over and wilful rejection of what he said in the Lord's name. May our response be entirely different: heeding with reverence, faith, and obedience, all that God has to say to us—in His warnings, in His commands, and in His promises in this part of his holy book.