

HOSEA NO. 6
December 4th, 1988
The Point of No Return

Hosea 5:1-15

TEXT COMMENTS:

- v. 3 'corrupt' = 'unclean'
- v. 6 Another of the curses which God long ago promised to visit upon those unfaithful to his covenant. E.g. Deuteronomy 31:18 'I will surely hide my face from them because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods.'
- v. 7 'New Moon' with a slight emendation of what could have been a natural error in copying, could be read 'new people' and then the verse would be the fulfillment of the curse promised in Deut 28:33: 'A people that you do not know will eat what your land and labor produce and you will have nothing but cruel oppression all your days.'
- v. 8 The picture is of an invasion of Israel from the south, i.e., by Judah herself. In 733 B.C. Israel's king Pekah, who had succeeded Jeroboam II, and Rezin King of Syria, formed an alliance to stop the aggression of the Assyrian Empire. They asked Judah to join their league and when she refused, they attacked her, fearing she would join forces with the Assyrians. King Ahaz of Judah then appealed to the Assyrians for help against Israel and Syria and the Assyrians, always happy for any opportunity for conquest, first took Damascus and then attacked the northern kingdom, desolating its northern areas, deporting large numbers of its people and leaving virtually only the territory of Ephraim and Benjamin independent and self-governing. With all of Israel's attention focused on protecting its northern frontier, Judah was then able to take some of the territory of Benjamin to enlarge the buffer between itself and Israel.
- v. 10 Probably a reference to Judah's military acquisition of the territory of Benjamin, so violating the sacred tribal land allotments which God's covenant had fixed.

How necessary the preaching of the prophets for the church today! How many of their central themes, how much of the burden of their preaching has largely disappeared from the mind of the church in our time!

One of those themes, one of the solemn messages the prophets were sent to deliver, was the terrible seriousness of rebellion against God; the great danger of forming by practice and repetition a habitual unwillingness to answer the Lord's summons to faith and to obedience, of perpetuating over time a refusal to believe what God says or to repent of one's sins before the Lord.

And the seriousness and the danger of that, according to the prophets, is not only that someday we will have to give an account of our lives to God; not only that eventually everything will come to light in the great day; but, there is a danger which is immediate and which is fulfilled in this life and this world.

And that danger is that protracted indifference to the word of God; a defiance of God's summons to faith and repentance practiced over weeks and months and years can finally render a person's heart so hard, so calloused to the word and presence of God that it becomes impervious to the influence of that word and actually beyond hope of salvation.

To put it another way—for Hosea puts it both ways in vv. 4 and 6—a refusal to give answer to God when he speaks, protracted over time, can at the last cause the Lord to withdraw from a person or a community—to leave, not ever to return.

The great prophets of the Old Testament, together with the whole of Scripture, proclaim; and faithful ministers of God's Word have always proclaimed—however the idea may cut across the grain of today's comfortable and non-threatening approach to salvation—that in the spiritual life, there is *in fact, a point of no return*.

Hosea, in fact, declares in 5:4,6 that Israel had passed the point of no return on both counts:

1. In the first place, as he says in v. 4, their sin and their unbelief were such a fixed habit of mind and heart, that they were beyond repentance and faith in God.
 - (a) As with tobacco or alcohol or other vices, there is a point which is reached sooner or later when the damage done to the lungs or to

the liver cannot be undone; though a person may live for sometime yet, he or she has passed the point of no return, the damage is too great to be cured.

- (b) So in the spiritual realm—persistent refusal to believe what God says and to obey his commandments finally so hardens the heart and poisons the mind as to render them impervious to change.
- (c) Such people become, as John Owen put it: ‘sermon proof and sickness proof.’ And so the Israelites had become. In spite of Hosea’s preaching and that of Amos and others, and, even in spite of the beginnings of the judgment which the prophets had promised, in spite of the fact that the shoe was already dropping, this people was so habituated to their rebellion against God that they were passed hearing or believing the Word of God; the only word whereby they might have been saved.

2. But, says Hosea, this people had also passed the point of no return because, by their many refusals to heed God’s warnings and accept his offers of mercy, the Lord’s patience was exhausted, the Lord had departed from them and was now unwilling to hear their prayers. When the troubles began to overtake them, they did cry out to the Lord, but it was too late; he would not longer hear their prayers. Amos speaks of those days as days when men will stagger this way and that searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it. [8:12]

Seek the Lord *while he may be found*, the Scripture says, call upon him *while he is near*. The Israelites of Hosea’s day had not done that, and now, when they finally saw their need of Him, they could not find Him.

Now this is a principle often enough illustrated in the Scripture.

1. Israel refused God one too many times at Kadesh-Barnea when she refused to trust and obey the Lord and refused to enter the promised land for fear of the people who lived there. God visited judgment upon her for that sin and the next day the people, recognizing their error, did what they should have done the day before, organized as an army and entered the land. But it was too late; God was not with them and they were soundly defeated. They had passed the point of no return

and were held at arm's length by the Lord until that whole generation had perished in the wilderness.

2. King Saul disobeyed the Lord once too often when he took it upon himself to offer sacrifices which only Samuel should have offered; and after that, though he pled for another chance, the Lord would not hear him and withdrew his presence from him.
3. The Jews in Jesus' day were so habituated in their unbelief, in their rebellion against the gospel of salvation from sin through the Messiah, that even though great miracles were performed before their eyes, even though a man rose from the dead, they would not believe.
4. And so it has been ever since. The Apostle John, in the Revelation, tells of plagues being visited upon the earth and says that 'the rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of their sins. . . ' [9:20-21] And so it was in medieval Christian Europe during the days of the black death, the terrible plague which took perhaps as many as one-third of the lives of those living in Europe in the mid-14th century. But did that irreligious, superstitious people repent and turn to God, as you might expect when God's hand of judgment was so heavily upon them? No! they became more wicked than they had been before and indulged in all kinds of coarse and impure revelry, practicing with abandon the ancient adage: 'eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die!' They had become by a long practice of unbelief and defiance of God's law and word, like their ancient brethren before them in Hosea's day, sermon proof and sickness proof.

BUT, YOU MAY SAY, does not the Scripture say that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, and does that not mean that it is never too late; that one can always be saved, even to the last moment he lives in this world?

Yes! and No!

1. It is always a theoretical possibility that one might believe and repent on one's deathbed and be saved. But, in fact, this almost never happens. It is very rare that older people are won to Christ under any circumstances, much less in the pain and confusion and self-preoccupation of one's deathbed.

2. Augustine said that there is one case of deathbed repentance recorded in Scripture—the thief on the cross in Luke—that no one may despair it is never too late—but only one that no one should presume. And it is worth pointing out that we do not know the spiritual background of that thief; whether he was a man who all his life had known the Word of God and had often been summoned to believe in God and keep his commandments. Perhaps, but I suspect it is more likely, that he was an irreligious man who knew very little of God and of God’s salvation until he saw it in Jesus’ face and heard it in his words as our Savior hung on the cross.
3. The puritan Thomas Brooks put it this way: ‘Though true repentance be never too late; late repentance is seldom true.’
4. The fact is, however possible in theory it may be for practiced unbelievers to repent late in their lives, repentance is God’s gift and God, ordinarily, does not give it to those who have spent their lives spurning his offers of mercy and especially not to those who have lived in the church but time after time have not believed in Christ or repented of sin when summoned and invited to do so.

Is this not precisely the warning Hosea gives us in the text we have read? Who can help those calling for salvation now that the judgment has begun to fall? Only the Lord God can help; but there is the misery; he will not. Time was when *he* would but *they* would not; now they would, but *he will not*.

Now, I want simply to apply this solemn fact—that there is in the spiritual world and life a point of no return—to you, and that in four particulars.

I. First, in view of this truth, surely it is a grave error not to fear sin and its grip upon our lives.

No one will ever take the presence of sin in his or her life lightly, who knows that sin can so easily become a habit which will eventually take a life quite beyond hope of repentance or mercy in Christ. When once you see the sins of Israel—which, after all are just the ordinary sins of today—taking hold because they were permitted to take hold, becoming so much the habit of life, the pattern of life as to make these people sermon proof and sickness

proof, you will never think that sin is something to be toyed with, or its power or its reach something to be underestimated.

John Owen somewhere reminds us that ‘Sin always aims at the utmost. . . every unclean thought or glance would be adultery if it could. . . every thought of unbelief would be atheism.’ And Hosea reminds us that sin perpetuated in a person’s life, however otherwise religious he may appear, will finally bear apostasy and atheism in full flower.

It is precisely because of sin’s capacity to gain absolute mastery over a life that Scripture says such things as: ‘Flee youthful lusts. . .’ and ‘Be merciful to those who doubt, snatch others from the fire and save them, to others show mercy mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.’

The other evening I finished reading again Homer’s The Odyssey. What a great story, and what a valuable story. You remember perhaps that before Odysseus left the Island of the Enchantress Circe, she told him to beware of the song of the Sirens—so compelling that it had led many wise and brave mariners to their deaths. And you remember what wise Odysseus had his sailors do for him. As they approached the island of the Sirens, he had them chain him to the mast and ordered them that under no circumstances, no matter how hard he plead with them, were they to untie him until they were beyond earshot of the Sirens. And so despite Odysseus’ pleading, he and they passed safely by.

And so will wise and godly people do to protect them from the siren song of sin, of temptation, of the world, of unbelief—when they realize that listening to that song can cast them into a captivity from which they will never escape.

Fearing sin and its grip is the first, all-important step toward avoiding the danger of passing the point of no return in the journey to hell.

II. Second, in view of the truth that it is possible to pass the point of no return, it is surely important and wise for us to make a practice of nipping sin in the bud in our lives; of giving sin no quarter and no entrance into our hearts.

When Diabolus sought to retake the City of Mansoul in John Bunyan’s allegory The Holy War, his first move was to shoot down Captain Resistance; and his strategy is the very same today.

Every Christian in this room knows exactly of what Robert Murray Mc-Cheyne was speaking when he wrote: ‘Satan often tempts me to go as near to temptations as possible without committing the sin. This is fearful—tempting God and grieving the Holy Spirit. It is a deep-laid plot of Satan.’

Well it is much easier to toy with sin, to allow it some entrance into our lives, promising ourselves we will let it come so far and no further, if we think of that sin only as something wrong or unworthy or dishonorable or harmful to our spiritual prosperity. BUT, IF WE SEE IT FOR WHAT IT IS, AN INFECTION WHICH CAN SPREAD THROUGHOUT EVERY PART OF OUR LIVES AND FINALLY RENDER US DEAF TO THE LORD’S VOICE AND PARALYSED, POWERLESS TO MOVE IN RESPONSE TO HIS SUMMONS, then we will be more anxious and determined to keep sin out, to give it no entrance—as we feel toward any other life threatening virus. We would never toy with AIDS, we would never grant it the opportunity of entering our body, because we are well aware that once it has come it will never leave until we are dead! Well, so it is with the cancer the Bible calls sin.

And it was for this reason that John Owen laid it down as a cardinal principle of Christian living that, in our battle with sin and temptation in our lives day by day we should ‘venture all on the first attempt.’ He meant we should throw everything we have against sin when we see it coming or when its suggestion rises in our minds and hearts; beat it down when we still have our wits about us and are still in command of our spiritual powers, before it has sung its bewitching song and taken away from us a sound mind and a stout heart.

III. Then, in the third place, this fact, that it is possible in the spiritual world to pass the point of no return, ought to keep us from ever taking our salvation for granted—and rather keep us always protecting, always building, always cultivating the salvation which God has begun in us.

If you think that salvation is an easy or a light thing, or that it is a sure thing, you will rest content with what you have. But, if contrarily, you realize that many people in the household of God, though thinking themselves saved, have by long practice at hearing the Word of God but not really believing it or obeying it, have hardened their hearts until they are impervious to God’s calls, you will take care to make *your* calling and election sure; take care to

work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

The fact that it is possible to slip away never to return to faith and repentance; that it is possible to put off seeking God only to discover too late that when you finally realize you must seek him he cannot be found—ought to make every believer scrupulous about his own salvation and keeping it in sound, ready, and clean condition.

Does that strike you as being overcautious, too careful about salvation and about your claim upon eternal life? Or as somehow making an uncertainty of the immutable gift of God? Paul did not think so. If ever there was a man who had a right to think that he was safe and secure, that he was in no danger of passing the point of no return; it was surely the great Apostle to the Gentiles.

But how does Paul himself speak. He says ‘I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.’

And again: ‘I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, *if only somehow I might attain to the resurrection of the dead.*’

Is that the way you speak of your salvation, taking nothing for granted because so much is at stake; well aware of how many have made shipwreck of their faith by becoming inured, habituated to the sins in their lives, unwilling to give them up, to struggle against them in obedience to the Word of God, unwilling to answer the Lord’s summons when it comes and to live by his mercy. You will speak more like Paul when you realize as clearly as he did how possible it is to pass a point of no return in the matter of one’s everlasting salvation.

IV. Finally, this fact that there is such a point of no return in the spiritual life ought to make some of you to stop right now with your procrastination.

Some of you have attended this church for sometime but still delay to answer the Lord, still delay to come, though he has in this room said many times to you now, ‘Come to me!’ You have delayed believing in Christ though you have been summoned to do so many times; you have delayed repenting of your unbelief and your self-interested life; of your ignoring God and his

commandments, though the Lord has addressed you on all of these points many times. And you continue to delay to accept the mercy and the salvation which he has so often offered you here.

Perhaps you think that it is not so urgent a matter for you, because you are attending church; perhaps you think that this somehow makes matters better between you and the Almighty. But, in fact, the opposite may well be the case; for to hear and not to believe, to be summoned and not to come, is worse than never to hear and never to be summoned in the first place.

Indeed, if by making a habit of not believing and obeying the Word of God as you hear it you finally become, like Hosea's contemporaries, sermon proof and sickness proof—and that is a state very easy to reach—then the day will come when you will heartily wish you never heard a sermon in this church nor read and heard the Word of God in this place.

Perhaps you think you can call upon the Lord at any time you choose, so you needn't repent and come to him now. But Hosea and the whole of Scripture warns you that you must seek the Lord while he may be found, and call upon him while he is near; for there will come a time to those who habitually put off answering the Lord, when he will no longer be willing to hear even if you call upon him.

Or as McCheyne once put it: 'God has last knocks.' Oh, how do you know, my friend, that this is not his very last knock on the door of your heart and that failing to get you to open the door today, he may never come to knock again?!

Of this I can assure you, beloved, from Hosea's own sermon on this solemn subject of passing the point of no return: there are now multitudes of people in hell and also multitudes of people still living on this earth with whom God is finished striving, and whom he will never again summon to faith in Christ, who lost their souls not because they did not have the opportunity to be saved, but because again and again they put God off when he warned them and invited them and commanded them—they put him off until he left them, never to return.

There is a point of no return; and you will never know that you have passed it until it is long since too late. So now, this very moment, call upon the Lord and offer him your complete repentance, faith, and love and then pledge with all of us who are children of God in this room, to take the utmost care

of God's salvation, protecting it from even the faintest beginnings of the grip of sin and unbelief—that we may never be among those many who finally are driven by impending doom to call upon the Lord only to discover that he will no longer hear our cries.

Or as the Holy Spirit himself puts it:

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. . . . But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'today', so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.”