

HOSEA NO. 11
January 29nd, 1989
If . . . then

Hosea 10:1-15

TEXT COMMENTS:

Omitting chapter 9: have referred to several of its verses in the sermons already preached; it continues the same themes we have already explored in our progress through the book. But it is worth nothing the punishing repetitiveness of the prophets' preaching (so often puts us off when we read them): a testimony both to our thick skulls and to the importance of the message.

COMMENTS IN MARGINS:

In vv. 12 and 13 of Hosea chapter 10, the prophet says in a rather general way, that if Israel would trust and obey the Lord, she would prosper; but because she has disobeyed him and betrayed his covenant, she has begun to suffer and is about to be destroyed.

There is nothing at all unusual about this 'if . . . then.' The Bible is full of such statements. 'If only you had paid attention to my commands,' the Lord tells Israel through the prophet Isaiah, 'your peace would have been like a river and your righteousness like the waves of the sea.' Long before, when God made his covenant with Israel during the days of Moses, he had promised them that if they would fully obey Him, they would be set on high above all the nations and all manner of blessing would be poured out upon them. And the blessings were listed: children, crops, health, victory in battle, wealth, holiness, and so on. But, at the same time, the Lord promised Israel that if she betrayed his covenant and proved disloyal to him, then he would curse her instead, and she would be deprived of all of those blessings and come to ruin.

And, as I say, the Bible is full of statements of that general principle. 'The way of the transgressor is hard;' 'but in keeping the commandments of God there is great reward.' The Book of Proverbs is devoted to the theme that godly living brings blessing and prosperity and that sinful living brings ruin.

Hosea then is saying nothing in vv. 12 and 13 but what we find many times elsewhere in the Bible, in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. BUT IT DOES RAISE A QUESTION and one that has become increasingly important in our day.

Does God really mean that if we are faithful and obedient as a people, we will prosper; and if we are not faithful, we will suffer for it?

1. There are preachers today, Bible believing preachers who claim that if we only had faith enough we would all be rich, all be healthy, and all be rising above our problems.
2. On the other hand, there are many evangelicals who have risen quickly to deny that AIDS is a judgment of the Lord on the sin and practice of homosexuality.

How are we to understand the Bible's 'if... then'; what does Scripture mean when it promises that faith will have its reward and sin will pay its wage; how does that come about in the daily life we observe all around us?

These questions are not at all new. They were raised in Scripture long before Hosea's time by godly folk who wondered why the world seemed not to function as they thought it should. Job was a righteous man and yet he suffered terribly and both he and his comforters had great difficulty understanding how that could be; for was it not the case that God promised to reward the faithful and punish the wicked? The author of Psalm 73 came near to spiritual despair, because as he observed life it seemed to him that often the wicked lived happier, more trouble-free, more luxurious lives than the righteous? How could that be, he thought, if the living God who loves righteousness and promises to reward it and hates wickedness and promises to punish it still sits on his throne and still does what pleases him in heaven and on earth. These were vexing questions and the Bible does not dodge them; it faces them head on, even while it continues to say that if you are faithful to God he will reward you and if you are unfaithful to God you will suffer for it.

Our day is no different and the questions are no less vexing. My parents sent me for Christmas a copy of the newly reprinted biography of J. Gresham Machen, by the late Ned Stonehouse. It includes a fascinating account of young Machen's year as a student in Germany and how he came so powerfully

under the spell of Wilhelm Herrmann, the champion of theological liberalism in that day and, as such, one of the most powerful enemies of evangelical Christianity that could be then found in the world. Machen had been raised in a believing home, he trusted in Jesus Christ, he believed the Bible to be the very word of God, but he was unprepared for Herrmann. He wrote home to his parents:

“I should say that the first time I heard Herrmann may almost be described as an epoch in my life. Such an overpowering personality I think I almost never before encountered—overpowering in the sincerity of religious conviction. . . . I tell you he is alive. . . . I can’t criticize him, as my chief feeling with reference to him is already one of deepest reverence. . . . and I have been thrown all into confusion by what he says. . . .” [p. 106]

Now we perhaps at one time supposed and may still devoutly wish that all theological liberals, that all who deny the ancient truth upon which our faith is built, would be bitter, unhappy people, divorced, alienated from their children, people whose speech is full of expletives, and preferably who would be alcoholics and have some sexually transmitted disease. But, I know and many of you know, that it is not so. Unbelievers, even unbelieving Christians can often be very attractive and happy people. They can often be very good and worthy men and women whom other people appreciate very much. Further, they often are responsible workers and enjoy a large measure of this world’s goods and live their whole lives in the prime of health.

We must take seriously Hosea’s ‘if. . . then’; we must believe that faith is rewarded and unbelief is punished, but how ought we to believe it and what precisely does it mean in our day to day world?

Well, it seems to me, the great necessity is for us to fashion a view of Hosea’s ‘if. . . then’ that takes into account *all* that the Bible has to say about this matter, and I think all of that teaching can be summarized in four points.

I. First, it is without question a general rule, a true proverb, if you will, that people who genuinely trust and obey the Lord, do prosper and that people who live in rebellion against God’s will suffer for it.

In keeping the commandments of God there *is* great reward and the way of the transgressor *is* hard, and these things are so in this world and this life *as a general rule*.

The Bible does not hesitate to say this: indeed, the Book of Proverbs is full of such statements.

For example: ‘a heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.’ Or, ‘The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are satisfied.’ Or, ‘dishonest money dwindles away, but he who gathers money little by little makes it grow.’

There are, of course, many exceptions; but as a general rule, those who live in the enjoyment of God’s love and according to God’s commandments, live lives which are peaceful, happy, fruitful, and secure and those who spurn God’s law, those who think they know better than God how a man or a woman ought to live, usually find unhappiness and frustration.

It is true that faith generally brings prosperity on every level of human life.

1. Christians ordinarily, personally and individually struggle less with fear, with bitterness, with low self-esteem, and so on—and no wonder! The Almighty loves them and has promised to bless and keep them forever! They certainly less often have sexually transmitted diseases, or commit suicide!

Dr. Armand Nicolai of the Harvard Medical School, a Christian psychiatrist, conducted a study of psychologists to find what they regarded as the basic requirements for a well-adjusted, healthy personality. The results laid special stress on four things: acceptance of the inevitability of death, self-identity and purpose in life; sensitivity to the needs of others; and a developed set of personal standards. Well, God’s salvation in Jesus Christ, gives a person all of those things in spades! The sting of death is gone; life now has the highest possible purposes—to glorify *God* and to enjoy him forever; the experience and the practice of love is at the heart of the Christian life; and God has given us his Word, thoroughly to furnish us for every good work, to serve as a light to our feet and a lamp to our path.

2. The families of earnest Christians rarely are divided by divorce; but are, as a rule, happy and healthy. Parents love children and children their parents because God has taught his love to both.

3. It is true broadly in the economic sphere as well. When the psalm writer boasts that he has never seen the righteous begging bread, he is confessing the simple but happy truth that those who live by faith in God and according to his commandments live, as a rule, diligent and productive lives, prosper in their work, have what they need and more, and, should they ever suffer some setback, live amidst a community of brothers and sisters who will see them through.

Indeed, even on a broader canvas it may be seen that the more a nation or a people conforms itself and its economic life to the laws of God, the more that people will prosper. You may be aware that scholars have long drawn a connection between Calvinist and Puritan theology in Holland and Britain, for example, and the tremendous expansion & prosperity which those countries enjoyed in the centuries following the Reformation.

4. And, the same may be said about political life. The closer a political system conforms to the truth as God has taught it in his word—the truth touching man and his dignity, and sin and its universality and malevolence, the divine appointment of rulers and their accountability to the divine judgment, and the sanctity of the law of God, the happier and the safer that people will be and the more just their state.

It is generally true, then, that the way of the righteous shall prosper, and, indeed, that the more righteously we live as Christians, the more we will prosper.

II. Second, in expounding Hosea’s ‘if...then’ we must note that Hosea does not say, nor does the rest of the Bible say, ‘immediately’.

“If you believe you will prosper *immediately*” or “if you rebel against the Lord you will suffer for it *immediately*.” God brings the fruits of faith or of unbelief to light in his own time and he does not at all reckon time as we do, all the more as we do in this society of instant gratification.

This was certainly the case with Israel. Hosea’s own ministry stretched over perhaps 20 or 30 years and when he began to preach Israel’s doom, she was and remained for some time a nation at peace and enjoying an almost unprecedented prosperity. Only slowly, during the course of Hosea’s life and

work did the judgment he was prophesying begin to appear. And, of course, Israel had been in deep rebellion against the Lord for two centuries prior to Hosea's ministry. Two hundred years had elapsed since Israel had betrayed the covenant which the Lord had made with her, and still the Lord's shoe had not yet dropped. Such is the patience and the longsuffering of our God.

You may remember from your reading of Genesis 15 that when God first told Abraham that his descendants would be slaves in Egypt 400 years before they could inherit the promised land, the reason given why Abraham could not inherit the land immediately was that 'the iniquity of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.' The people of Canaan were already wicked, but God's patience being what it is and his justice being what it is, he was unwilling to destroy them until their wickedness had reached its final culmination. And so, until it was *right* for Israel to invade Canaan and destroy its people, as they would later do under Joshua, she must wait, even if that waiting should cost her centuries of hardship.

As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow put it in verse:

Though the mills of God grind slowly,
Yet they grind exceeding small;
Though with patience He stands waiting,
With exactness grinds He all.

Very often, as was the case in Canaan while Israel was in Egypt and in Israel in the days of Jeroboam II, the prosperity of the wicked is only the calm before the terrible storm.

And what is true of judgment is true also of blessing. The best of God's favors are often bestowed after long waiting for them and faithful seeking after them in prayer and obedient living. In this waiting God both strengthens our faith and deepens our eventual joy:

God's help is always sure,
His method seldom guessed;
Delay will make our pleasure pure,
Surprise will give it zest.

III. In the third place, regarding Hosea's 'if...then' we must say

that Scripture measures blessedness and also punishment in different ways than mankind is accustomed to measure these things.

Hosea, after all does not say that if the Israelites seek the Lord and repent of their sins they will all drive Mercedes chariots and have Rolex sundials in their back yards; no, he says that if they seek the Lord, he will shower *righteousness* upon them! *Righteousness*, says the modern American suburbanite; *Holiness*, says even the typical American Christian; what do I want with *that?! Give me a good job, a promotion, a lot of money, good health; then, I'll take some righteousness, not too much, however. "You can't be too skinny or too rich!"* said Jackie Kennedy Onassis; but many think you can be too righteous!

But the Bible and the real Christian has another set of values altogether! To be holy, to be near God, to have God's smile in one's heart; to have one's life blessed to the salvation of others, to be privileged even to suffer for Christ's sake—all of these things are the true fulness of life and make for, as the Bible says, a life that is truly life [1 Tim 6:19]. And these joys are so strong and so great and so good that they can lift even a much afflicted life right out of the sorrows and pains of this world.

The author of Psalm 73 confesses that it had really rocked his faith to see how often the wicked had more of this world's goods than the righteous did, and how they very often enjoyed good health and happiness and seemed not to pay for their rebellion against God. But by the end of the psalm he has come to a better mind and realizes that whatever the wicked have, they do not have God, and in comparison to knowing the Lord and his love, the wicked have nothing at all.

'Whom have I in heaven but you?' he says, 'And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.'

And Thomas Halyburton, the Scottish minister and theologian, only represented a whole host of Christian men and women, when on his deathbed, with painfully swollen limbs, he said to those at his side, 'lame hands, and lame legs; but see a lame man leaping and rejoicing.'

To a real Christian, the prosperity, the success he most seeks and longs for God to give him in answer to his faith is not money or possessions or health: it is God himself in his heart, and victory over his sins, and the joy of the Holy Spirit, and the grace to serve Christ faithfully in the world and to suffer

for righteousness' sake.

IV. Finally, Hosea's 'if...then' and the promise of the Bible to reward faith and punish unbelief must be understood against the broad background of the Bible's teaching of the world and the life to come.

Hosea prophesied doom for Israel on account of her betrayal of the covenant, but the doom she suffered at the hands of Assyrian armies, was but the foretaste of that judgment which awaited her in the world to come. And the blessing which God promises to lavish on those who love and serve him, though rich beyond words in this world, is rich beyond thought in the world to come.

You will never take the measure of what faith brings or what unbelief brings until you see the full issue of each in the next world.

This was the lesson which the writer of Psalm 73 had forgotten when, as he admits, 'my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.' He saw what an easy life many of them had and how hard a life many had who trust in the Lord and he began to wonder if it were worth it to trust and follow the Lord.

But then, he says, 'I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.' That is, he went to church and during the singing of 'For all the saints who from their labors rest' or 'The Sands of Time are Sinking' or 'Lo, he comes with clouds descending' or as a result of a particularly stirring sermon on heaven or hell, it all came back to him and he realized how foolish it was for him to judge a person's condition by the present and not to take into account that person's eternal destiny.

1. It is not possible to envy a person's health who will be executed tomorrow; or to envy a person's wealth who will be imprisoned tomorrow, never again to spend a dime of his money; or to envy a person's happiness, when you know that in a few short moments that happiness will be turned to the deepest and the most impenetrable gloom.
2. Indeed, in view of eternity and the reality of hell, a true believer can only pity the unbeliever who prospers now, knowing that, as Bernard

of Clairvaux once wrote: ‘there will be no greater misery in hell than to remember one’s false joys’.

And, conversely, with the sure hope of 1) eternal bliss and 2) perfect happiness and 3) complete fulfillment and 4) life in the very presence of the Lord God and 5) the full enjoyment of the fellowship of the saints all crowding into the Christian’s heart while he walks through this world to the heavenly city, the truly amazing, the genuinely astonishing thing is that we are ever sad or downcast! ‘I wonder many times,’ Samuel Rutherford said, ‘that ever a child of God should have a sad heart, considering what his Lord is preparing for him.’

Oh yes, there is an ‘if . . . then’ in the Scripture. A reward promised for faithfulness to the Lord and a curse threatened for unfaithfulness. Make no mistake. You can see it as a general truth everywhere you look today. But you can appreciate it fully only if you remember that God will bring both blessing and cursing in his own time, that the blessings of God and his curses are not always the crude and physical and worldly things we imagine, and that the true issue of faith and of unbelief will only be known when Christ has come and has made the great and the irrevocable separation between the saved and the lost, the sheep and the goats.

We have this past week in the most remarkable of ways been reminded that the calculations of the kingdom of God are far different than those of the world. I will not comment on Ted Bundy’s conversion, whether it was genuine or not. I do not know. But surely, it may have been; and if so it would brilliantly illuminate the mysterious ways in which God fulfils the ‘if . . . then’ of his covenant.

But we can use another example of like kind instead to provide that illustration, this of a Japanese criminal, Tokichi Ichii, who was hanged for murder in Tokyo in 1918.

“He had been sent to prison more than twenty times and was known as being cruel as a tiger. On one occasion, after attacking a prison official, he was gagged and bound, and his body suspended in such a way that “my toes barely reached the ground.” But he stubbornly refused to say he was sorry for what he had done.

Just before being sentenced to death, Tokichi was sent a New Testament

by two Christian missionaries, Miss West and Miss McDonald. After a visit from Miss West, he began to read the story of Jesus' trial and execution. His attention was riveted by the sentence, "And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'" This sentence transformed his life.

"I stopped: I was stabbed to the heart, as if by a five-inch nail. What did the verse reveal to me? Shall I call it the love of the heart of Christ? Shall I call it His compassion? I do not know what to call it? I only know that with an unspeakably grateful heart I believed."

Tokichi was sentenced to death and accepted it as "the fair, impartial judgment of God." Now the Word that brought him to faith also sustained his faith in an amazing way. Near the end, Miss West directed him to the words of 2 Corinthians 6:8-10 concerning the suffering of the righteous. The words moved him very deeply, and he wrote,

"Paul described the Christian 'As sorrowing, yet always rejoicing.' People will say that I must have a very sorrowful heart because I am daily awaiting the execution of the death sentence. This is not the case. I feel neither sorrow nor distress nor any pain. Locked up in a prison cell six feet by nine in size I am infinitely happier than I was in the days of my sinning when I did not know God. Day and night... I am talking with Jesus Christ.

"And Paul also said of a Christian 'As poor, yet making many rich.' This certainly does not apply to the evil life I led before I repented. But perhaps in the future, someone in the world may hear that the most desperate villain that ever lived repented of his sins and was saved by the power of Christ, and so may come to repent also. Then it may be that though I am poor myself, I shall be able to make many rich."

The Word sustained him to the end, and on the scaffold with great humility and earnestness he uttered his last words, "My soul, purified, today returns to the City of God."

Seek the Lord, sow for yourself righteousness, do it now, whether it is early in your life or late, and you will reap the fruit of unfailing love in this world and in the next. *The mouth of the Lord has spoken!*