

HOSEA NO. 13
Returning Every Day From the Far Country
February 12th, 1989

Hosea 14:1-9

TEXT COMMENTS:

With this sermon on the 14th chapter we are finished with the prophecy of Hosea. I pray that in hearing these sermons this book has been opened to your understanding and that you have its message to some degree inscribed upon your hearts. I tell you, it has been a great privilege to me to prepare and to preach these sermons and I know that Hosea will speak to me for the rest of my days a much clearer message than ever it had before. I very much pray that it will be so with you as well. How unsearchably rich are the books of God's Holy Word and how infallibly do they so generously repay careful study!

- v1- Marginal comment —turn from sin to God—the main
- v2- Marginal comment Old Testament for what we call
- v3- Marginal comment repentance.

Hosea's last chapter is a reprise of a main theme of his preaching from the very beginning of the book: it is a call to repentance, an invitation to Israel to repent of her sins that she might have, again, God's forgiveness and acceptance instead of the wrath and judgment which is about to fall upon her.

'Return' he cries; as he had before in chapters 2 and 3 and 6 and 7 and 12!

I. What exactly is repentance? What is Hosea calling upon Israel to do? What does he mean by 'Return to the Lord your God!'

Well, repentance is not merely the recognition of one's own sin. It would not be enough for Israel to recognize that she had disobeyed the Lord and betrayed his covenant. And, it is not enough today for anyone, or for any of us, simply to know that we have sinned. Pharaoh confessed that he had

sinned in not letting Israel go from Egypt after the plague of hail: ‘This time I have sinned,’ he told Moses, ‘The Lord is in the right and I and my people are in the wrong.’ But he did not really repent, he did not ‘turn’ as Hosea says men must.

Nor is repentance as God requires it merely a sorrow and remorse for sin. Judas was so overcome by sorrow when the enormity of his betrayal of the Lord Jesus came home to him that he committed suicide; but he had no repentance.

Nor is true repentance merely an outward manifestation of turning from sin. Israel often gave the Lord such outward manifestations, weeping, mourning, the tearing of clothes, the wearing of dust and ashes. But she did all of this without real repentance and so prophets such as Joel had to warn her: ‘Rend your hearts and not your garments’, give God, that is, a true repentance that goes down to the bottom, not merely outward acts of penitence while the heart remains pointed toward sin. This is the case with all who come to God, perhaps in the church, and who confess their sins, but who have no real intention of forsaking those sins for Christ’s sake. Bunyan describes such a person in his portrait of Mr. Presumption in Pilgrim’s Progress, who had been at the cross with his past sin and had left the cross to commit the same sin at the first opportunity. And Dante has a reprobate in hell who, all the time he was repenting, had his eye on his next opportunity. But this is sham repentance and God, who sees the heart, knows the difference.

II. In Holy Scripture, true repentance consists of several things.

1. First there is a change of mind about sin. It becomes not a thing to be loved, but to be hated and abominated.

David expresses the mind of every man or woman whom the Spirit of God has brought to a true repentance when, in his great penitential psalm he said to God:

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to your unfailing love; blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

Sin is something dirty to him, from which he wishes to be clean.

Sin was something that hung heavy on David’s heart and hangs heavily on the hearts of all who truly repent.

2. Then, true repentance is a change of heart about sin. Sin is abhorred not only because of its consequences but because it is an offense against the all-holy and all-worthy God and because it is so wrong in itself, so ugly and so ungrateful. Sin is seen now chiefly as the evil which separates us from God, and the one who has been brought to repentance now wants nothing so much as to be right with God and to walk with God. And so he feels deep within and prays to God:

I hate the sin that made thee mourn
And drove thee from thy breast.

3. Then, true repentance is a turning away from sin to God for pardon and forgiveness. True repentance is always the fruit of a genuine faith in Christ and it is called into being by the wonderful discovery that there is forgiveness with God. Indeed, there is no real repentance ever in the heart of a person who does not think that his sin can be removed and forgiven.
4. Then, finally, repentance is a change of will and behavior, in which sin is repudiated and a person now follows after Christ and strives to keep his commandments. It is not just sorrow for sin but the abandonment of sin; not just confessing of sin, but standing against the sins in one's life for Jesus' sake. Though no Christian has anything like complete success in banishing sin from his life, in his repentance, that is what he desires, that is what he aims for, and that is what he strives for.

And this true repentance is not just the beginning of a Christian's life, but is the continuation of it as well. There may be a grand act of repentance at the beginning, when first a person becomes a Christian, but repentance will continue to be the principle of that Christian's life so long as he is in this world. Repentance is the disposition of a true Christian's soul—there will always be sorrow for sin so long as there is sin in a Christian's life; there will always be shame for sin so long as he fails his Savior; there will always be a determination to rid his heart and mind and behavior of anything which does not please God; and there will always be a turning away from his sins to God to confess them, to ask that they might be forgiven in Christ Jesus, and to plead for strength to put them to death for once and for all. And so the Bible frequently calls upon Christian people, upon you and me, to renew our

repentance, to practice our repentance every day and, as John the Baptist put it, to ‘produce fruit in keeping with repentance.’

It is something worth remembering that the first of the 95 theses which Martin Luther nailed to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, so beginning the great reformation of the Church, read: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying ‘Repent ye’, intended that the whole of the life of believers should be repentance.”

This genuine turning away from sin to Christ, to his salvation and to his commandments, a turning in the mind and the heart as well in the life; that is what Hosea calls Israel to and what he and the whole Bible calls us to and ever more to every day we live in this world.

And so, I want to recommend repentance as a way of life to you, beloved, this Sabbath morning. I want to make you hunger and thirst for more and more repentance in your heart and your life; I want to whet your appetite for repentance that you might pray for it more ardently and seek after it more diligently. And *I* must do it, for I fear that you are unlikely to get much encouragement in this way from any other direction!

III. Repentance today has a bad press! It is thought of as too gloomy and negative a subject to be popular or even helpful to people such as we are in America today.

But how wrong they are who think so; and what harm they do who preach so! For repentance is the Bible’s path to joy. In my study in preparation for this sermon, I read an article on repentance in a theological encyclopedia and in the bibliography of that article was listed a German work by Julius Schniewind, a scholar of a former generation which bore the interesting title: Die Freude der Busse, i.e. “The Joy of Repentance.” I haven’t read the book, but the title is just right and happens to be Hosea’s great point in the final chapter of his book — *the joy of repentance!*

Now, don’t mistake me. I do not at all mean to minimize the fact that real repentance involves sorrow, and shame, and self-reproach. We must not shrink from that as so many do today.

Indeed, far from shrinking from it, we should embrace that godly sorrow and mourning. It is right that sinners such as ourselves should feel the weight of our sin and if we felt it more than we do, we would love Christ more and rejoice more in his great salvation and hate sin more and work harder to be

rid of it in our daily lives. It was this recognition of the great value of genuine sorrow for sin that made Archbishop Lancelot Andrewes pray in his famous Private Devotions:

“I need more grief, O God, I plainly need it. I can sin much, but I cannot correspondingly repent. O Lord, give me a molten heart. Give me tears, give me a fountain of tears. Give me the grace of tears. Drop down, ye heavens, and bedew the dryness of my heart. Give me, O Lord, this saving grace. No grace of all the graces were more welcome to me. If I may not water my couch with my tears, nor wash Thy feet with my tears, at least give me one or two little tears that Thou mayest put into Thy bottle and write in Thy book!”

Oh yes, repentance has grief and sorrow and self-loathing in it; there can be no denying that! But all of that grief is but the path to a truer and a far greater joy than can ever be known by anyone who refuses to grieve aright over his many and great sins.

Hosea says it plainly here, *repentance is the path to and the prerequisite of joy*. It is so in several ways.

I. In the first place, repentance is the foundation of a joy unspeakable and full of glory because it is the prerequisite for forgiveness of sins.

‘Forgive our sins and receive us graciously’ that, Hosea says, is the prayer of a repentant people, and, what is more, a prayer that God will never fail to answer. As the Lord promises in v. 4, when his people come to him in a spirit of genuine repentance, he will turn his anger away from them and love them freely.

This is throughout the Bible the greatest thing in the life of any man or woman—that his or that her sins should be forgiven. To be forgiven is the greatest privilege and the highest pleasure known to any sinful person. The Scripture does not hesitate to say that the most wonderful thing about God is that he is a God ‘who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of his people.’ It reserves its most thrilling language for the description of this divine forgiveness, now speaking of God separating our sins from us as far as

the east is from the west, now speaking of his burying our sins beneath the sea, or trampling them under his feet, or casting them behind his back, or remembering them no more, or sweeping away our offenses like a cloud. And the godly in the pages of Holy Scripture sing of nothing with such pathos and power and wonder as of the forgiveness which God has lavished upon them.

“If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared. O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins. (Psalm 130)”

Or,

“I will praise you, O Lord. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. With joy you (I) will draw water from the wells of salvation. (Isaiah 12:1-2)”

And many other passages of almost unbearable beauty like these!

It is the Bible’s universal testimony that there is no joy greater than the joy of a sinner under conviction of his sin who discovers and who experiences God’s forgiveness and God’s mercy. And it is also the Bible’s consistent testimony that the more accurately anyone sees the mountainous guilt of his or her own sin, the heavier the burden of it, the more shameful and ugly and fearful and threatening it appears to him or to her to be, the greater will be that Christian’s joy and thrill and amazement and wonder at the knowledge that God has forgiven; the greater in his or her eyes will be the glory and the majesty of God’s forgiveness.

Or, in other words, the deeper the repentance, the deeper the joy; the truer the repentance the greater the joy.

The prodigal son came to himself, that is, he began to repent, lying, as you remember, among the pigs, with his inheritance squandered and the greatness of his foolishness and his wickedness heavy upon his heart. He knew his sin,

like David it was before him in all of its ugliness and shame, he felt it and was revulsed by it. He had no heart any longer for excusing himself, he only wanted to be forgiven, and so he returned to his home, hoping against hope that his father would receive him and forgive him. Imagine then his joy when his father not only received him, but carried on with great joy over his son's return and brought out the best robe he owned to put it on his repentant son.

Had the prodigal never wallowed in shame with the pigs he would never have known the exquisite joy, greater than which there is no human joy, of being forgiven and loved and berobed by his merciful father. And so it will be for you and for me. The truer our repentance every day, the greater our joy in our everyday forgiveness.

For, as Alexander Whyte once wrote: "... we are always returning home from the far country, and we are always saying: 'Father, I have sinned.' And our Father is always saying over us, 'Bring forth the best robe and put it on him.'"

The greater our sense of sin and revulsion from it and repudiation of it, the greater our thrill will be in the knowledge that our heavenly father, in Jesus Christ his son, has carried all of that sin away and forgives us of every last remnant of it.

II. Second, repentance is the foundation of joy unspeakable and full of glory because it is a great engine driving our praise and our worship of God.

Hosea says that true repentance will say to God: 'Forgive all our sins that we may offer the fruit of our lips.'

There is nothing that gives purer pleasure or deeper pleasure to any man or woman in this world than praising God. He is so grand and his mercies are so unsearchably magnificent, so indescribably wonderful that is pure joy to contemplate Him and his saving love, to consider his works of grace and love toward us, and to sing praise to Him for them. Tell me it is not so, any Christian in this room : that your highest joy in life is experienced in the praise of God, that when you are swept up in the wonder of his love and goodness and mercy, and are singing God's praises with a full heart and voice, you are most yourself, you feel most alive, and find yourself wanting that captivating moment never to end.

My first trip to Europe, in the summer after my graduation from college and in company with two college friends, began horribly. It is a story too long to tell, but that first night in Paris, I was inadvertently separated from my friends. I spent the whole night not knowing where they were, locked out of the train station, my luggage missing, with no French money. I spent that cold night, deeply worried about my friends, first sitting alone on a table of a closed and dark sidewalk cafe and then, when it became too late and too cold, I sought the warmth of an all-night bar. The next morning we finally did find one another but we were so thoroughly demoralized that we had no thought but to get a rental car and head for the country, which we did. Ah, but in God's providence our first stop was the cathedral at Chartres some 40 miles from Paris. We were depressed and tired, and all of us secretly worried whether we were going to have any fun at all on this trip, and whether the next six weeks were going to be like the first night. But stepping into that church, the misery of the last night and morning evaporated in a moment! Chartres is so magnificent, so breathtaking in its beauty and majesty, that walking through it and climbing high into her towers made us all feel as though we had stepped nearer to heaven itself, and the pure pleasure and the joy of it was enhanced, I think, a great deal, by the sublime contrast between that great house of prayer and the miserable night which had gone before.

So it will always be for us. The deeper our repentance, the darker the night of our shame for and mourning for our sin, the more beautiful and majestic God and Christ and their salvation will appear to us and the heartier our praise and love to God for His so great forgiveness; and the greater our praise, the deeper our love, the greater and the deeper our joy—for joy is just the reflex and afterglow in the heart which is full of praise and love for God.

III. Finally, repentance is the foundation of true joy because it is the true path to the new and rich and fulfilling life which God grants his people.

Look at the extravagant way in which the Lord describes what he will do for his people, if only they will turn away from their sin to him and to his righteousness. These wonderful agricultural images of fruitfulness—the Lord will cause Israel to blossom like a lily, send down roots like a Cedar of Lebanon; he will have splendor like an olive tree, blossom like a vine, and so on. In those days that place these were all the more powerful images of

blessing and enrichment and fulfillment and success.

In every aspect of life, God promises to love his people freely and cause them to prosper, if only they will repent and turn from sin to Him. In your marriage, your family, your business, your studies, your private worries and your public duties, your emotional life, and in everything else, repentance is the key to God's favor and to your own joy. For God will not bestow his favor apart from our repentance, nor upon our children apart from our repentance!

Have you heard the sad story of John Wesley's sister Hetty? Hetty was the most outstanding of the daughters of Samuel and Susannah Wesley, the most beautiful, intelligent, sensitive. At the age of 27, though forbidden by her father to have anything to do with a certain male admirer, she spent some time with this man in the belief that he was about to marry her. He proved not to be a man of character or of his word and she returned home broken-hearted, pregnant and filled with shame. She begged her father for forgiveness but he treated her as though she were untouchable and despised her for having dishonored his own name. Finding a man, who in his estimation had enough honor to marry so defiled a person as his daughter, he forced her to marry him, even though he was a drunkard, semi-literate, and of little character.

Hetty plead with her father for reconciliation, especially at the time of the birth and early death of her child, but he met her pleas with sarcasm and stony rejection. Her boorish husband was often brutal in his treatment of her and she took refuge in writing poetry, its plaintive beauty and pathos expressed in one of her lines: 'the broken heart can bleed no more.'

Her father remained inflexible to the end of his life; his name had been shamed and he had no forgiveness for that! He went to his grave without ever having shown her the least mercy. Imagine—no forgiveness for *his* daughter, for she had dishonored his name. What of Samuel Wesley's terrible sins and all the dishonor he had heaped on the home of God, of whom he was supposed to be a minister!

If Samuel Wesley had known or practiced genuine repentance; if he had ever felt the guilt and shame of his own sins against God, if he had ever in true repugnance turned from them to God to find grace and mercy and forgiveness; if he had been a man like Albert Durer, Martin Luther's artist friend, who in a supreme act of penitence, put his own head and face on his famous portrait of the prodigal son, even Hetty's great sin would not have prevented her from having a life of happiness and love.

What love and forgiveness reigns in the families, where the spirit of true repentance, of sorrow for sin and shame for it and turning from it always to God to find mercy, I say where the spirit of true repentance rules. Would you not rather live in the prodigal son's family, with all of the sin that had been committed there, than in Hetty Wesley's family with all of its lack of joy and hardness of heart? Would you not rather live and grow up in a family upon which rests the favor of God because repentance is found there?

Repentance is the key, repentance is the way to a life of joy and love. So says Hosea, the Lord's prophet.

Israel would have had to weep and mourn over her sin, to turn from it and repudiate it, and seek from her God forgiveness and new life. But she would not stoop and so she fell under the Assyrian conquest never to be heard from again.

But those who repent and who make repentance a way of life, for them the Lord has forgiveness full and free, the sublime pleasure of the worship of God, and a most beautiful and fulfilling way of life. Who is wise? He will understand these things!

Tertullian said: 'I was born for nothing but repentance.' The man or woman who agrees and who practices the same, will have great reward. And that is Hosea's main point.