

Hosea 4-8: God's Dispute with Israel

Introduction

Beginning in chapter four Hosea begins a new section of the book. While Hosea is hard to organize into a clear, concise outline, this section resembles a court scene where God calls His people to court because of their violation of the covenant agreement they made with Him when they entered the Promised Land. God had a controversy with them because there was a lack of faithfulness, kindness, and knowledge of God in the land. As we go through the remainder of Hosea's book, he deals with each one of these points in reverse order beginning with Israel's lack of knowledge of God.

This lack of knowledge led to some specific sins committed by the people. These are listed in 4:2-5. Check out the sins listed in the table. God says that nature testifies of the sins of the people. This could be in reference to the witnesses called upon when Israel entered the covenant with God many generations before. Deuteronomy 30:19 says, *I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse.* Every part of nature was suffering because of the sins of the nation. The disappearing fish in the sea would indicate that severe drought gripped the land. The people were so hardened in their sin that there was no pleading with them. That time had passed. When the nation would be destroyed, there would be no escape—day or night.

Responsibility for the condition of the people not only rested with themselves, but it also fell squarely upon the priests. God singles them out for condemnation in 4:6-10. They failed to instruct and train the people in the ways of the Lord. Because they rejected knowledge, they would be rejected from being priests and their children would be forgotten by the Lord. The priesthood had become very prosperous and influential during the reign of Jeroboam II. They were corrupt and served God superficially. They even delighted in the sins of the people as that would give them more of the best of the meat from sacrifices to feast upon. The priests, like the people, were not going to be exempt from certain punishment. They would be repaid for their deeds, 4:9-10.

More sins

Beginning in 4:11 we note some extreme sins committed by the people which were repugnant in the sight of God. *Harlotry* had become commonplace among the people due to general immorality and the worship of Baal. Drunkenness was condemned because it *takes away the understanding*. Hailey writes that *wine and new wine* had to do with fermented grape juice. "New wine indicates fermented wine with the ability to intoxicate."¹ In this state of decreased or non-existent understanding, the people turned to idols constructed of wood and superstitious black magic. The *diviner's wand* was probably a practice where two rods were held up vertically and then allowed to drop as the medium uttered a chant. "The oracle was inferred from the way the sticks fell whether forward, backward, to the right, or to the left."² Idolatry was practiced on the top of every hill. Canaanite people felt higher elevations would bring them closer to their deities. Because of their participation in these idolatrous acts, the people of Israel were said to have

committed spiritual adultery, 4:13. Not only were the people guilty of spiritual adultery in violating their covenant with God, they were also guilty of physical adultery. Men thought nothing of joining themselves to temple prostitutes, and their daughters gladly participated in the temple rites that glorified sexual gratification, 4:14.

Judah beware!

As Hosea prophesies primarily to Israel, he does not fail to leave out Judah. Judah also had to deal with idolatry throughout its existence, and within one hundred forty years of Hosea it too would be destroyed and carried off into captivity. The worship of idols was one of the principal reasons. In 4:15-16, Judah is warned not to go off into idolatry and not be like their brother Israel who is called a stubborn heifer. This reference is to the closed heart of the people and their obstinance in refusing to go along with God's expectations in living up to the covenant which they agreed to. The reference to a lamb in a large field (4:16) tells Israel that God's veil of protection was being removed. Just as a lamb would be extremely vulnerable to an attack by a predator while grazing in a large field, so Israel would be left exposed to be overtaken by its enemies.

Judah was told to leave Israel alone. Ephraim (the most influential province in Israel at the time of Hosea's writing) had joined himself to idols. The language in verse seventeen involves an intimate relationship like that of the marriage relationship. Ephraim had forsaken her true husband, the Lord, and joined herself to Baal and other Canaanite gods. Ultimately, they would be brought down because of their sin. God could no longer tolerate their violation of the covenant.

Pride goes before destruction

In 5:1, Hosea calls the attention of the people once again. They needed to give heed to what he was about to say because the judgment of God applied to them. The people were caught in their own sin and all that awaited them was destruction. Everyone in the kingdom was going to be subject to this judgment: common people, the king, the priests—everyone! Mizpah was located east of the Jordan in Gilead and Mt. Tabor was in the west near Nazareth. People on both sides of the Jordan would be subject to this judgment because of deep depravity. All would be chastised, 5:2.

Israel would not be able to escape the punishment as they were not hidden from God. Their hearts were completely aligned against repentance—the sweet taste of sin had dulled their senses for truth. Pride blinded Israel from seeing their dependence upon God. They looked at their country, power, might, money, and physical surroundings and took all the credit. Pride goes before destruction, Proverbs 16:18! Israel would stumble in their iniquity, 5:5. The Southern Kingdom would also fall for its pride and stubbornness, but God would allow them more time because they were not as hardened in sin as their brothers to the north.

God would remove His presence from them

Some of the saddest words in the Old Testament are found in 5:6-15. After God began to bring judgment on His people, the people would be awakened from their spiritual sleep and search for God. They would not find Him. *He has withdrawn from them*, 5:6. Looking back over their history, Israel had a

very repetitive cycle where they fell out of favor with God because of unfaithfulness (idolatry). God would send in a nation to oppress and afflict them. After suffering at the hands of the aggressors, the nation would suddenly “get religion” and cry out to God for relief. He would raise a deliverer to carry them out of the oppression and for the remainder of that generation the nation would serve the Lord. Once that generation died off the cycle would repeat itself. If Israel hoped that they would be able to call out to God for deliverance from Assyrian aggression, there was no hope this time. God would allow them to be destroyed as punishment for their sin.

In these verses Ephraim is the focus. It should be viewed as being representative for the nation of Israel as a whole. For much of Hosea's later ministry Ephraim would be the largest tribe left since Assyria had annexed most of the nation. As Assyria marched in, Israel would be tempted to better its position by making agreements with the invaders. It is thought that 5:13 is a reference to Menahem's agreement to pay high tariffs to Pul to keep the nation from being totally destroyed. Refer to 2 Kings 15:19. *King Jareb* was another name for the King of Assyria. King Jareb literally means “king striver” or “king contention.” The king of Assyria was not going to help Israel out, making deals with him only increased Israel's problems exponentially. God was going to be to both nations as *a lion*. *There would be none to deliver*. Again, any false hope of God changing His mind at the last moment was too far gone. God would remove Himself to *His place* until the period of exile humbled them, and they would earnestly seek Him, 5:15.

Many people are confused by the wording of the first few verses of Hosea 6. Should 6:1-3 be placed at the end of chapter five? Should these verses be viewed as genuine repentance by the people? Or is this a sarcastic response by the people where they feel that if the Assyrian aggressors overtake them, God will surely come to their rescue if they “repent.” This author tends to lean toward these verses indicating “superficial” repentance. They most likely felt that when they began to be squeezed by the Assyrian expansion, all they had to do was call out to God and He would shorten the time of their punishment. This position is backed up by the wording in 6:4: *What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? For your loyalty is like a morning cloud and like the dew which goes away early*, 6:4. In verse four we get a glimpse of the extreme hurt and betrayal experienced by God at Israel's rejection of Him. This was personal with God. Because of their fleeting obedience, God sent prophets who warned of destruction and judgment.

God's true desire

Hosea 6:6 is a very powerful verse. *For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings*. God wants a real relationship with His people. He wants our genuine love. It is the kind of love that manifests itself in righteousness, 1 John 3:18. It is an *agape* type of love that is commanded in the New Testament, John 13:34-35. This is what God has always wanted from His creation. Sacrifices (under the Old Testament law) and religious acts of service (under the New Testament law) mean nothing without a connection of love and adoration for the Creator. If that is missing, God will reject the sacrifices and worship every time.

As you read 6:7-11, remember that this is “personal” with God. The betrayal and hurt are real. Read these verses from this perspective. They rejected righteousness and embraced sin. Entire cities had been given over to wickedness. Even priests were guilty of murder! Shechem was a city of refuge located between Bethel and Samaria. Bethel was the religious center of the Northern Kingdom while Samaria was the capitol. Those who would be traveling to Bethel would be carrying items to be offered for sacrifice which would have been easy prey for priests or anyone who wished to rob people of their belongings.

A corrupt political situation

Chapter seven gives us Hosea's perspective on the political upheaval that characterized his times. Assyria was increasing its influence over the region and there was betrayal, mayhem, and murder in Israel's political establishment. It is suspected that 7:3-7 gives us insight on the background behind Pekah's assassination of Pekahiah in 740 B.C. In these verses the friends and acquaintances of the king betray him, secretly plotting his murder and the overthrow of his government. Pekahiah's father, Menahem, had agreed to pay heavy tariffs to the Assyrians in exchange for remaining in power and having some independence. The wealthiest families in the kingdom were required to pay this tariff, 2 Kings 15:19-20. The payments to Assyria continued in Pekahiah's reign and the wealthy class revolted. During much of Pekahiah's reign Assyria was preoccupied with other matters and did not flex their military muscles as much. Pekah and his associates were motivated by anti-Assyrian sentiment and plotted against the king. Pekahiah was assassinated in 740 B.C.

After Pekah began his rule, he immediately began to move the nation into an anti-Assyrian stance. Pekah began reaching out to his neighbors in efforts to form an alliance against Assyria. Aram (Syria) and Egypt were the primary partners in this alliance (see 7:11). Pekah and Rezin (the leader of Syria) implored Judah to join this alliance, and when Ahaz (King of Judah) refused, Pekah and Rezin go to war with Judah. Hosea's wording in 7:8 explains the situation: *Ephraim mixes himself with the nations...strangers devour his strength, yet he does not know it.* While Israel desperately reaches out to its neighbors, no thought whatsoever is given to God. They had been called to be separate from the other nations and depend upon God. As they turned to other nations, their uniqueness as a nation was completely lost. While they felt they were increasing their strength by forming alliances their strength was being depleted. God was going to bring His judgment against them, *I will bring them down like the birds of the sky*, 7:12. Woe was coming to them because they forgot God. *Destruction is theirs, for they have rebelled against Me*, 7:13.

In 7:14-16 we see another example of God's broken heart. God wanted true repentance. Instead of crying out for Him, they were concerned only with their physical blessings being taken away. God had trained and strengthened them. He gave them great power over their enemies. Yet they turned their advantages into opportunities to sin. As Assyria clamped down on them with pressure, they looked to everyone but God. *They turn, but not upward*, 7:16. Because of this, they would perish. The alliance they built with Egypt would not sustain them against the overwhelming power of Assyria. In 734 B.C. Tiglath-pileser invaded Gaza and had victory against the Egyptian forces there. If Israel was counting on Egypt for strategic protection, all hope faded when Assyria subdued the forces of the African nation.

Israel will reap the whirlwind

In Hosea's day the trumpet was used to call men to war. Assyria, like an eagle, was going to come down upon them with no warning. This was because of their rebellion against the law of God. They violated the covenant they made with Him so many generations before. As the destruction ensued, they would call out to God, we know you...but for all intents...they did not. Their lack of respect and reverence for Him had driven God away...for good. When Hosea says Israel has rejected the good, Hosea was saying that as a nation Israel detested good. Because of this, *the enemy* [would] *pursue him*, 8:3.

For generations Israel had gone about things their way, seeking no assistance from God. They placed kings in power without seeking spiritual counsel. They set up an unauthorized religious system and initiated religious practices associated with it. They claimed this was all to worship the Lord. Here God disassociates Himself with their worship. *With their silver and gold they have made idols for themselves.... He has rejected your calf, O Samaria*, 8:4-5. But this time God was incensed with their lack of purity: *how long will they be incapable of innocence?* It had been quite some time since they had lived righteously before the Lord. Because of their sowing to the wind, they would reap the whirlwind. They would get more than they bargained for. This is the deal that is always made with sin. Sin always brings out more consequences than bargained for. What had yet to be swallowed up by Assyria would be very soon. Their days were numbered.

God condemns their alliances with foreign nations. Israel aligned itself with Assyria in its waning years to keep from being cut off completely. God would no longer accept their sacrificial gifts and would remember only their iniquity. Hosea 8:14 is especially important in understanding God's hurt. *For Israel has forgotten his Maker*. If one gets to the bottom of the matter, the root of Israel's sin comes to their having forgotten God. They turned their backs on Him. This time they were too far gone to save. The end was coming.

For discussion

1. What are some of the specific sins committed by the people listed in 4:2-5?
2. Describe the status and position of the priests during Hosea's day.
3. Why is knowledge of God vitally important?

4. What was a diviner's wand?

5. How prevalent was idolatry at this time? Did they feel ashamed for openly worshipping idols? What does this say about the progression of sin?

6. Why was Israel called a stubborn heifer?

7. How was Israel a lamb in a large field?

8. What blinded Israel from seeing their dependence upon God?

9. Who was King Jareb?

10. Do you think the repentance in 6:1-3 is genuine? Why or why not?

11. What in Hosea 4-8 makes the reader see God's personal and deep hurt over Israel's treachery?

12. What did God really desire from His people?

13. What would happen to Israel because of their trust in other nations?

14. How can Israel's reaping the whirlwind help us live better spiritual lives?

(Endnotes)

- 1 Hailey, Homer E., *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Louisville, KY: Religious Supply, 1993), p. 150.
- 2 Smith, James E., *The Minor Prophets*, p. 231.