

PICTURES OF GOD'S DISAPPOINTMENT

Hosea: Unbroken Love From A Broken Heart

by Doug Goins

"A picture is worth a thousand words," the maxim says. And the best writers, teachers, and other communicators know how to paint word-pictures that capture our imagination and help us visualize conceptual truth. PBC's pastor Ron Ritchie has an incredible ability to act out truth, and he runs all over the stage as he teaches. It makes an impact, and you don't forget the points he makes. Pastor Steve Zeisler has a wonderful gift of using his family and community and friends to illustrate the practical application of truth. Steve also has an uncanny ability to illustrate any and every spiritual principle from football!

The Old Testament prophet Hosea also has a wonderful ability with words. In epigrams he paints word-pictures about Israel's spiritual and moral condition. In our earlier studies in Hosea we saw two: He told Israel that they were like a stubborn heifer---a rebellious calf that wouldn't stay under God's authority. And he told them that their love for the Lord was like a mist or an early morning fog that evaporated as soon as the sun came up, and God couldn't count on it to be sustained.

In chapter 7 Hosea paints four more pictures that describe the nation's spiritual struggles. In verse 4 he says that the nation is like an over-heated oven. In verse 8 he says Ephraim is like "a cake not turned"; a half-baked pita bread. In verse 11 he says Ephraim is like "a dove, silly and without sense"---bird-brained. Finally in verse 16 he says they are like "a treacherous bow," defective and unreliable. All four of these pictures describe Israel's essential spiritual problem of refusing to turn to *Yahweh* in repentance of sin, refusing to come to know him in deeper intimacy, and resisting cooperation with him in a lifestyle of more consistent obedience and greater integrity. As the first six chapters of Hosea have shown us, it really is our spiritual problem today as well. In these chapters the life of the nation Israel is a mirror in which we see our own lives reflected.

The prophet Hosea began preaching and writing in the northern kingdom of Israel about eighty years after the prophet Elisha ministered there (Ron Ritchie has just finished a series on the life of Elisha from 2 Kings; see Discovery Papers 4373-4378). Hosea's ministry spanned the last fifty years in the life of the kingdom. The history of that time is summarized in 2 Kings 14-19, which describes a nation that was spiraling downward into political anarchy and economic confusion. The sin of idolatry persisted in the worship of Baal. Everywhere Hosea looked, there was increasing oppression among the people, injustice, and moral and spiritual decline. And yet as we have been discovering from the prophecies of Hosea, the amazing thing is that God never gave up on his people. Hosea's favorite word to describe God's commitment to them was *hesed* ---loyal love; covenant love; or unconditional, stubborn love. He loved them with compassion, but part of that love was also confrontational judgment.

God's commitment to sin-sick Israel

The opening three verses of Hosea 7 are an introduction to and summary of the rest of the chapter. We are immediately greeted by the contrast between a God of restoration who is committed to Israel's best and a people of corruption, decay, and decline. (Our passage really begins with the last phrase of chapter 6 verse 11.) God says:

When I would restore the fortunes of my people,
when I would heal Israel,
the corruption of Ephraim is revealed,
and the wicked deeds of Samaria;
for they deal falsely,
the thief breaks in,
and the bandits raid without.
But they do not consider
that I remember all their evil works.

Now their deeds encompass them,
they are before my face.
By their wickedness they make the king glad,
and the princes by their treachery.

In the opening lines God addresses the nation using four different names. The first thing he calls them is "my people." It speaks of his loving possession of them. He miraculously rescued them from Egypt, and now they belong to him. It is a covenant name; he is totally committed to them. It speaks of security and safety.

The second name God gives them is Israel, their national name. It is the name he gave to Jacob, "The Usurper" or "The Manipulator." After Jacob wrestled with God all night at the brook Jabbok and asked God to bless him, God gave him the new name Israel, which means "The Exalted One with God" or "The Prince of God." It reminds the nation of their identity, of their worth and value, and of the fact that God created them to reign with him in dignity.

The third name is Ephraim. Ephraim was one of the half-tribes in the north (Ephraim and Manasseh were Joseph's sons). Ephraim means double fruitfulness, double effectiveness, or richness. This name became God's nickname for the nation, just as parents often give their children a special, loving nickname.

The final address is to Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom. Hosea talks about the wickedness there. It was the place where Elisha had focused most of his ministry eighty years earlier, and it is where Hosea did most of his preaching. It was the place of the kin

Another thing that comes out of these first three verses is God's wonderful heart of commitment to do four positive things for his people. The first is restoration: "...I would restore the fortunes of my people...." That is a beautiful Hebrew idiom descriptive of being freed of any kind of circumstantial degradation or destruction. The nation was like a priceless antique that had lost touch with its own worth and beauty and had fallen into disrepair for any number of reasons---neglect, abuse, or misuse. But God was committed like a skilled furniture restorer, a craftsman with a delicate touch, to restoring them to the original beauty and glory for which they had been created.

Secondly, God is committed to healing: "...I would heal Israel...." What a gracious intent. God's longing is to show mercy to his self-destructive, sin-sick people. As the history unfolds, we will see that they are a nation that is terminally ill, and yet God wants to be like a physician who heals their wounded body. Heal is one of Hosea's favorite terms for the reversal of Israel's immorality, and also for the reversal of the consequences that come with it. God wants to heal not only the sin but also the mess that comes with sin in life.

The third thing to which God is committed is exposing or revealing sin: "...the corruption of Ephraim is revealed, and the wicked deeds of Samaria...." On the face of it, it sounds like bad news; no one likes to be exposed. And yet that is the only way real healing can begin. We can't get well until somebody tells us not just that we're sick, but how sick we really are. We can't be restored as a priceless antique until somebody tells us, "You don't belong in the basement covered with dust and ignored. You belong in a place of honor in the front hallway." God has to tell us how bad things are before change can begin, so this ministry of revealing is very important.

And finally, God is committed to paying close, personal, specific, attention to the nation: "...I remember all their evil works...they are before my face." God isn't keeping a safe, objective distance from the ugly rebellion of sin. I learned in counseling classes in seminary about therapeutic distance or the necessity of boundaries. We may need that, but God doesn't. He is passionately willing to enter into our self-inflicted suffering as a result of sin. God has no need for self-protection. He sees sin for what it is, calls it what it is, and still wants to get involved.

This gracious intent of the Lord's collides with the reality of Ephraim's rebellious, sinful attitudes and actions. The general wickedness that is being expressed in the people's lives is summarized in five different Hebrew words in these first three verses. God doesn't want us to miss the point. The first word, which we already

mentioned, is corruption. It means gradual deterioration, or the long-term process of destruction from sin. The Hebrew word wickedness is used three different times, once in each verse. Wickedness literally means compulsive sins, those we can't seem to resist. Deceit is used twice; it means dishonesty toward ourselves, God, and other people. Then he mentions two specific criminal activities that seem to typify the culture of that time. One is breaking and entering. The thief breaks in and violates the sanctity of the home. The other is banditry that breaks out, and like gang warfare, becomes more and more the norm in the society. We have encountered all five of these words earlier in this book. Hosea is just continuing to discuss what he already wants the nation to understand.

The people are defrauding one another; ignoring God; and even believing that God doesn't remember or notice, that somehow they can get away with the lifestyle they have chosen. But God says, "I know exactly what's going on!" He says in verse 2 that it has gotten so bad that their deeds are now holding them under siege. They are in bondage to their own sinful choices. They can't break out. There is even the implication that they don't care very much anymore about their sinful lifestyle or try to seek freedom. They refuse to repent and renounce their past sin that led to this captivity. And God's heart is broken as he views them.

That leads us now to the four pictures I mentioned at the beginning of God's deep, painful disappointment with his people whom he loves wholeheartedly. It reminds me of the anguished cry of God in Hosea 6:4: "What shall I do with you, O Ephraim---what more can I do?"

Over-heated in human relationships

The first picture in verses 4-7 says that Ephraim is like an over-heated oven:

They are all adulterers;
they are like a heated oven,
whose baker ceases to stir the fire,
from the kneading of the dough until it is leavened.

On the day of our king the princes
became sick with the heat of wine;
he stretched out his hand with mockers.

For like an oven their hearts burn with intrigue;
all night their anger smolders;
in the morning it blazes like a flaming fire.
All of them are hot as an oven,
and they devour their rulers.
All their kings have fallen;
and none of them calls upon me.

In Hosea's day, an oven for baking was about three feet long. It was cylindrical, and across the top was an aperture for the smoke, flames, and heat to escape. The fire would be built very early in the morning. When it was first built it would roar out of control with flames and smoke shooting up. Then as the coals died down and there was an even heat on the bottom of the oven, the baker would take kneaded cakes of dough and slap them on the inside of the oven walls to be baked.

Yahweh says that his people are like that red-hot oven early in the morning. It can't bake anything yet because the flames are too high; the fire is at the height of its intensity. There is a startling picture in verse 6 of the flames and smoke pouring out of the top. The comparison here is to Israel's sexual passions, which he calls adultery. This speaks of three things: First, sexual immorality is increasing in the life of the nation. Second, it speaks of their adulterous involvement in the worship of the Baals, their unfaithfulness in their relationship to God. And third, it speaks of the inflamed political scene of Hosea's day after the death of King Jeroboam II. The baker's oven pictures the passions of kings, court officials, and influential nobility who are all driven by the heat of treachery, manipulating the royal court and the king to get things the way they want them. And they

are ignoring God in all of these maneuverings.

The first twenty years or so of Hosea's ministry were under Jeroboam II. It was the golden age of the nation, with political stability and economic blessing. But for the next thirty years after Jeroboam died, there was political chaos. There were six kings in these thirty years, four of whom died by assassination. Verses 5 and 6 probably record one such assassination. The conspirators are getting the king drunk, perhaps tricking him into toasting Baal or some other pagan god, making fun of *Yahweh* God. Then they lie in wait all night so they can murder him and his royal court. This whole paragraph is a picture of the kings, the leaders, and everyone in the nation all turning from God, all driven by personal passion. The whole situation finally culminated in the Assyrian invasion, the fall of Samaria, and the deportation of the people to Assyria.

In Galatians 5:16,19-21, the apostle Paul makes it clear that even as Christians filled with the Holy Spirit, we can choose to live with our passions burning like flaming, over-heated ovens. Paul calls this the deeds of the flesh: "But I say, walk, by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh...Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these...." Then Paul goes on to say that people who persist in that lifestyle will never inherit the kingdom of God.

Those kinds of deeds and the circumstances that Hosea is summarizing in verses 4-7 are like an uncontrolled fire such as the destructive wildfires that are raging all around the northwest. This passage vividly depicts passions or emotions that are out of control: anger; competitiveness; and lust for power, position, or prestige. It describes a success orientation that is very much self-defined and self-driven. The deeds of the flesh deal death in relationships all around us. We can be like human flame-throwers when the flesh rears its ugly head.

I was at a dinner earlier this week with several close friends whom I've known in ministry for many years, folks who have walked with the Lord for a long time. We were talking about the process of sanctification in our lives, of the Spirit's conforming us to Jesus more and more. The conversation turned to a time of confession and of embarrassment at how carnal we still are. I made note of the fact that in that circle of Christian leaders, most of whom you would know, we admitted that we still explode with anger. We still struggle with lust. We hide from people we want nothing to do with. We allow people to trigger the emotions of frustration and resentment in us. We are still embarrassingly insecure and self-absorbed. Every time any of that expresses itself, violence is done to a relationship that God calls us to offer life to. And death results. We need to look carefully at this paragraph: Are we adulterers? Are we like an oven that burns with intrigue in our hearts? Do we devour people like a fire out of control?

Half-baked toward God

The next picture is in verses 8-10. Hosea says that Ephraim is like a half-baked pita bread:

Ephraim mixes himself with the peoples;
Ephraim is a cake not turned.

Aliens devour his strength,
and he knows it not;
gray hairs are sprinkled upon him,
and he knows it not.

The pride of Israel witnesses against him;
yet they do not return to the LORD their God,
nor seek him, for all this.

In the historical context, this picture of their being like a half-baked cake suggests several things. First, it speaks of Ephraim's intermarriage with Gentile peoples in direct disobedience to God's command to maintain the purity of who they were physically, relationally, and spiritually. It also refers to the half-breed children

born from the Canaanite fertility orgies in which the Jewish men indulged. And finally, it refers to the mixture in the life of the nation coming from their growing economic dependence on other nations instead of trusting in God to meet their needs.

The cake's problem starts with flour that is not mixed right. The word mix here is a liturgical word that comes out of the exodus. There was a meal offering to God in which pure flour was to be mixed well with oil so that every particle of flour was coated with oil. Remember, oil always represented the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The problem with the nation is that the flour of their lives is being mingled not with the oil of the Spirit of God, but with idolatrous dependence on human strength from other nations, or with dependence on the Canaanite fertility god Baal. So the dough of the cake is polluted. God can't accept it.

Another problem that is mentioned in the last line of verse 8 is that the dough is baked only on one side; the baker never gets around to turning it over. So one side is burnt to a crisp and the other side is raw---gooey, sticky, and unappetizing.

I was telling my family about this picture at dinner one night last week, and they remembered a family camping trip of ours when they took all the left-over pancake batter and filled up the skillet with it. Then they made it more interesting by putting in a live beetle, twigs, and pine needles; and then they cooked it on one side. It was awful, nauseating. The Lord is saying to this nation, "Your dough is putrefied, sickening, and half-baked; and it really does nauseate me."

On my first trip to Israel with the PBC pastors ten years ago, we were staying on the Mount of Olives, and I walked down below the old city wall. In a poor Palestinian neighborhood there was a woman out in front of her house, and in the middle of four or five big rocks that were flat on top she had a fire going. It heated the rocks all the way through. She had little cakes or bread that she patted out, and then she poured oil on the flat surface of the rocks, put the cakes on them, and was letting them cook there. But she got distracted talking to her children who were bickering, and the cakes ended up burned on one side. I remember how she spat out her disgust---I couldn't understand her language, but she wasn't pleased! She took the cakes and threw them into the fire because they were inedible. The point is that the bread has to be turned or it is useless. The nation Israel was charred on the side of their false hope toward other nations, but they were soggy toward *Yahweh*. They paid more attention to the Baals than to him.

We can't evade the impact of this picture for us this morning. The reality is that we can be half-baked Christians with a soggy side. We have to admit that we are over-cooked on the side of depending on human resources, but often soggy on the side of trusting God. Our soggy side exposes our anxieties, fears, and worries. In times of pressures, stress, or perhaps difficult decision-making, we singe black on the side of consulting people, but we remain uncooked on the side of depending on the Lord to renew our strength. We'd much rather race around gathering human opinions than learning how to quietly wait and pray like Jesus did.

I was personally convicted of that this week. Candy and I had gotten a small inheritance awhile ago, and I realized that I was spending an inordinate amount of time (relative to the size of the inheritance; it's not that big a deal) talking to investment counselors and accountants. But Candy and I hadn't prayed once about what to do with it. I didn't bring God into the process. In verse 10 Hosea calls that sort of attitude pride: "The pride of Israel witnesses against him...." It is self-reliant, prideful activity that replaces returning to the Lord and asking him what he wants me to do. I sometimes do that instead of deepening my relationship with him. Again, we need to look into this picture and see how we are mirrored here. Are we half-baked in areas of our life in relating to the Lord?

Bird-brained about how to live

In the next picture in verses 11-13, Hosea says that Ephraim is like an easily deceived dove or pigeon:

Ephraim is like a dove,
silly and without sense,
calling to Egypt, going to Assyria.

As they go, I will spread over them my net;
I will bring them down like birds of the air;
I will chastise them for their wicked deeds.

Woe to them, for they have strayed from me!
Destruction to them, for they have rebelled against me!

I would redeem them,
but they speak lies against me.

Ephraim is portrayed as a silly, fluttering, simple-minded bird; inconsistent in its ways, flitting from place to place---bird-brained. Verse 11 says they are without sense, or having what one commentator called "the culpable ignorance of people who have abandoned covenant knowledge and thereby perverted their knowledge of all other reality." What is lacking in the life of these people isn't intelligence, nor even common sense. It is spiritual discernment; the ability to make spiritual judgments about how to live life, or to make decisions.

Verse 13 says they have strayed away from the Lord. I thought about nine exotic birds and parrots that flew away from the Great America amusement park. They left the trainer not understanding that they couldn't make it on their own because they weren't designed to live in the city. Only the trainer could care for them and provide for them.

Israel places false hope in the great international powers between whom they lie, Egypt and Assyria. They fly back and forth between them erratically and thoughtlessly. That is what happened in the series of assassinations and new monarchies that came to the throne: Each one of them made up a new foreign policy about where they were going to go for military support and economic aid. To the rest of the nations Israel looked downright goofy---they didn't know what they were doing; they were just flying all over the place. Hosea says they are driven by fear and gullibility. They are calling out for help in all the wrong places for the necessities of life.

But in the middle of that naiveté, gullibility, and rebellion, there are two more wonderful things that God is committed to doing. In verse 12 he says, "I will spread over them my net---I will draw them to myself, and then I will chastise them." We saw in one of our earlier studies (chapter 5) that chastisement really means instruction. When the word is used in the Old Testament it always refers to the instruction given by the father of a family to his children. So it is instruction coming from someone with responsibility to care, guide, protect, and guard. God's chastisement is remedial. His chastisement is to discipline Israel for a new obedience, and God makes the same commitment to us. In spite of our naiveté, stupidity, ambivalence toward him, and pigeon-headedness; when he judges us, captures us, and brings us up short, it is to restore us to a life of healthy submission to his will.

Verse 13 says God is committed to redemption as well: "I would redeem them...." As Hosea under God's direction had redeemed his wife Gomer---he had purchased her freedom from the slave market and welcomed her back into a restored love relationship as his wife---so God is committed to redeeming Israel. But she has to quit lying, Hosea says: "...They speak lies against me." Israel has to start telling the truth about God's character and his saving activity. She has to confess her proneness to wander from God, her smoldering anger. She has to quit lying about the sin in her life in her relationships to other people around her. She has to quit lying about her unwillingness to ultimately trust God for her identity and worth.

We heard a powerfully honest confession of the kind of life described here in verses 11-13 a few weeks ago when Walt Heyer shared his testimony with us (see Discovery Paper 4377). It was a life of ambivalence toward God, himself, and his family and friends. He told us about his unwillingness to trust God to completely restore, heal, and redeem him from the gender confusion that came from the horrible devastation of childhood abuse. He pursued security in alcohol and cocaine and finally in a sex-change operation. But he said that didn't end his confusion. The great word of confession we heard from Walt was that, unlike the nation Israel as it is profiled here, he had stopped lying. He had accepted the truth about himself and had begun to fully trust the God of restoration and healing and redemption. So let's look once again at this picture and see

how we're mirrored here. Are we behaving like silly, senseless doves in some area of our lives?

Ineffective in serving God

In the final picture in verses 14-16, God says Ephraim is like a defective bow:

They do not cry to me from the heart,
but they wail upon their beds;
for grain and wine they gash themselves,
they rebel against me.

Although I trained and strengthened their arms,
yet they devise evil against me.
They turn to Baal;
they are like a treacherous bow,
their princes shall fall by the sword
because of the insolence of their tongue.
This shall be their derision in the land of Egypt.

God is the archer, and the nation is a bow that God designed to shoot straight and true in warfare. But the bow has gotten warped and it doesn't shoot straight anymore; it is totally untrustworthy. You don't know where the arrow is going to go when you shoot it. God can't trust or use his people anymore. The reason, Hosea says, is that they have turned away from God and turned to the Baals. "The insolence of their tongues" implies that the nation is voicing distrust in God's ability to meet their needs. But the result is that they have become an object of ridicule in the nations around them. They have lost their strength and courage. It has been eroded through the years because they have abandoned God, the source of supernatural power available to them. In the days of conquest under Joshua they were famous throughout the ancient Middle East. Everyone was amazed at what God did through this little country. They were fearless in warfare because they fought battles God's way. But now people make fun of them---they are ridiculous, cowardly, and impotent. And we have to ask ourselves the question: Are we, too, ineffective in serving the Lord? Is God having trouble trusting us and using us?

This section also talks about the process of defection from God. The opening lines of verse 14 tell us that not even in their confusion and anguish---by the end of the thirty-year period the super-powers are closing in and invasion is imminent---do they call out to God. It says they wail on their beds, moaning and groaning about the situation. But they won't call out to the Lord and return to him in repentance.

This chapter that we've surveyed in Hosea stands in stark contrast to the attitude of King David in Psalm 4. He wrote this psalm out of a time of great personal crisis in his own life, when the nation was under incredible strain. But in contrast to the nation as it is pictured here, David calls out to the Lord in trust and confidence, claiming his identity before the Lord. Even though the psalm is an admonition to the people Israel, I was struck by verses 4-5 at the heart of it, where David is addressing himself as well. He says:

"Tremble, and do not sin;
Meditate in your heart on your bed, and be still. [Selah.]

Offer the sacrifices of righteousness,
And trust in the LORD."

David is saying to himself and to us this morning, "Let's be honest about our spiritual condition, be willing to look at ourselves, examine our hearts with God, and offer him the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart. Most of all, let's put our complete trust in the Lord and only in him."

Long before the inner crisis of separation from God and the outward threat of Assyrian invasion, Israel had little by little closed their heart to the overtures of *Yahweh*'s love and correction, until they got to the point that

they didn't even know how to call out to God anymore. They didn't know how to express their need to him; they just wailed on their beds. There is a character in John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men* who is accurate in saying this: "Men don't get knocked out, for I mean they can fight back against big things. What kills men is erosion. They get nudged into failure."

Sometimes such nudging over the years renders us incapable of handling the big things when they come. In the crisis, we are so unacquainted with God that we wail on our beds rather than pray. That is when we flame like over-heated ovens and flit about like silly doves going from place to place, person to person, and group to group looking for remedy and relief. The middle of a crisis is not a good time to get ready for a crisis! God speaks beautifully and tenderly to us in Psalm 4: "Quit racing around looking in every other place. Come home to me." Focus on that relationship. He is the one who will restore joy to our hearts, who will guide our meditation.

Let's renew that kind of intimacy and relationship with the Lord. Let's "offer the sacrifices of righteousness" and put our trust in him. Let's confess where we have drifted and once again receive God's grace. Contrition can replace contrariness, arrogant self-determination, mixed motives, distorted relationships, and grandiose plans and purposes. All these things can be melted and tempered and recast by God's loving hands. We can be molded into his heart's desire. And all he wants from us is the sacrifice of our hearts and inner person joyfully under his control, and our outer person willing to live a life of open integrity before him and obedience to him. It is not too much for him to ask of us, especially since he is the only one who knows what is best for us.

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