

# THE JUDGMENTS OF GOD

*Hosea: Unbroken Love From A Broken Heart*

by Doug Goins

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Every fall after the in-gathering or harvest there was a celebration in the nation of Israel. the *Torah* commanded the people to gather for a season of worship and praise. It included singing, dancing, feasting, and extended times of praying to the Lord---expressing gratitude for the grain and the wine and the produce that they had harvested, and clearly recognizing that God had done it. It was a wonderful family celebration.

It is into that context that Hosea marched uninvited and preached the sermon found in chapters 9 and 10 of his prophecy. Imagine the consternation in our service if Hosea showed up uninvited to confront us with the following words! This message exploded like a thunderclap. He really rained on their parade. Look at chapter 9 verses 1-9:

Rejoice not, O Israel!  
Exult not like the peoples;  
for you have played the harlot, forsaking your God.

You have loved a harlot's hire  
upon all threshing floors.

Threshing floor and winevat shall not feed them,  
and the new wine shall fail them.

They shall not remain in the land of the LORD;  
but Ephraim shall return to Egypt,  
and they shall eat unclean food in Assyria.

They shall not pour libations of wine to the LORD;  
and they shall not please him with their sacrifices.

Their bread shall be like mourners' bread;  
all who eat of it shall be defiled;  
for their bread shall be for their hunger only;  
it shall not come to the house of the LORD.

What will you do on the day of appointed festival,  
and on the day of the feast of the LORD?

For behold, they are going to Assyria;  
Egypt shall gather them,  
Memphis shall bury them.

Nettles shall possess their precious things of silver;  
thorns shall be in their tents.

The days of punishment have come,  
the days of recompense have come;  
Israel shall know it.

The prophet is a fool,  
the man of the spirit is mad,  
because of your great iniquity  
and great hatred.

The prophet is the watchman of Ephraim,  
the people of my God,  
yet a fowler's snare is on all his ways,  
and hatred in the house of his God.

They have deeply corrupted themselves  
as in the days of Gibeah:  
he will remember their iniquity,  
he will punish their sins.

This blast of an opening summarizes a number of issues that Hosea has dealt with over and over again in the first eight chapters of the book. Once again he talks about the tragic history of ingratitude and idolatry in the nation. He speaks of their loss of any sense of who they have been created to be, how they belonged to their Creator God, and the certainty of God's tough love exercised in chastening judgment, which is designed to drive them back to him.

We will not examine these two chapters in detail, but quickly look at some of the themes and pictures that Hosea uses to help his hearers remember the main point: that the nation deserves God's judgment.

### **The judgment of dispersion**

In verse 9 he identifies Israel as a corrupted people. Now, they didn't start out that way; they were created to have a pure lifestyle. But Hosea's language reveals that through a long, gradual process they ended up sunk deeply in corruption. In Galatians the apostle Paul says that when someone sows to their own flesh, they reap corruption (6:8a). That really was normative in the history of Israel. They sowed to their own flesh over and over again; the patterns never changed. And the end result in their life as a people was corruption.

Verse 9 also mentions the city of Gibeah. This is the first of five city names that Hosea mentions in these two chapters. Every time one of these cities is brought up, it reminds the people of their history of sinful rebellion. They are all places of national embarrassment and shame.

Gibeah is a city in the tribe of Benjamin in the north of Judah. It reminds the people of a horrible, violent incident that took place during the period of the judges four hundred years earlier. A homosexual rape was attempted on a Levite of God, and there was a gang rape of an innocent woman who was then murdered. Because of the violence done against this Levite, all the other eleven tribes came in and tried to completely wipe out the tribe of Benjamin. The whole problem began with the Levite himself, a religious leader, because he pretended to be something he wasn't; and it spiraled out of control into a race war. So the name Gibeah triggers memories of humiliation in their national history.

Hosea says twice in verses 1-9 that the time of punishment has come; judgment has been declared. And it is going to be the judgment of dispersion and exile to Assyria. Some of them will try to escape south to Egypt, but they will end up in bondage and exile and will die in captivity. The tragic thing about that captivity, he says, is that there will be no more chance to worship God in liberty and joy. Feasting and family life will all be taken away.

### **The judgment of barrenness**

The picture shifts abit in the second half of the chapter. Look at verse 10:

Like grapes in the wilderness,  
I found Israel.

Like the first fruit on the fig tree,  
in its first season,  
I saw your father.

God is saying, "When I first found you as a people, it was like being in an arid desert and all of a sudden to my great surprise, there were beautiful, juicy grapes---refreshing, cool, and nourishing---or a fig tree with ripe figs ready to eat. You were fruitful and life-giving."

But look what happened in the second half of verse 10:

But they came to Baal-peor,  
and consecrated themselves to Baal,  
and became detestable like the thing they loved.

Here is another example of sowing to the flesh. This mention of Baal-peor goes back even farther into their history, six hundred years or so, to the wilderness in the country of Moab. It was at Mount Peor, east of the Jordan River, where they first got involved in the worship of the Baals, before they ever crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land. So it became known as Baal-peor, or the mountain of Baal.

He mentions the city of Gilgal in verse 15:

Every evil of theirs is in Gilgal;  
there I began to hate them.  
Because of the wickedness of their deeds....

When the nation under Joshua crossed over the Jordan to conquer Canaan, one of the first cities that they set up as a center for worship was Gilgal. Joshua led the nation in prayer at Gilgal, and in the beginning it was a city of true worship of God. Yet gradually through the history of the nation, Gilgal became a center for Baal worship. When Hosea puts Gilgal with Baal-peor, it is almost as if he is saying the geography has shifted: "Yes, you were in the wilderness, and you crossed the Jordan and came to the Promised Land---but your sins never changed. The patterns of idolatry, rebellion, and stubbornness weren't broken just because you entered the Promised Land."

Last Sunday after the service a brother in our church talked to me about his struggle with old sinful patterns from the days before he was a Christian. The idols still keep surfacing, and he keeps having to deal with them. But the difference between this brother in Christ and the nation of Israel as Hosea looks at them is that he is confessing the sin, repenting of it, and asking God to deal with it.

The judgment that is put on the nation is in verse 16:

Ephraim is stricken,  
their root is dried up,  
they shall bear no fruit.

The fig tree or the vine full of juicy grapes will eventually shrivel up until there is no more life in them, because they are cut off from the source of life---God himself. There are some tragic pictures in this sermon about innocent children, the fruit of the womb, who were slaughtered when the Assyrians came in; their life was cut off. And when we are cut off from God, our spiritual life eventually stops being fruitful, too.

### **The judgment of destruction**

In chapter 10 the picture changes a bit. Verse 1:

Israel is a luxuriant vine  
that yields its fruit.  
The more his fruit increased  
the more altars he built;  
as his country improved

he improved his pillars.

The nation was called to be a vineyard, and God as the vine tender blessed them with luxuriance, fruitfulness, and prosperity. But the more of God's blessing that they enjoyed, the more they built altars to the Baals and to the other gods that they chose to serve.

Hosea throws in another city name in verse 5: Beth-aven:

The inhabitants of Samaria tremble  
for the calf of Beth-aven.  
Its people shall mourn for it,  
and its idolatrous priests shall wail over it,  
over its glory which has departed from it.

He mentions Beth-aven again in verse 8:

The high places of Aven, the sin of Israel,  
shall be destroyed.

The name Bethel means House of God. Bethel was the first place of worship that Jacob established when he was running from his brother Esau. He was fearful, and in a troubled dream when he was asleep, God showed him a ladder to heaven on which angels were ascending and descending. When he woke up he said, "This is the house of God" because the dream spoke of the access he had to God. So Bethel was an important place of worship and prayer. But what Hosea says is that Bethel, House of God, has become Beth-aven, House of Iniquity, because even it has been defiled by Baal worship.

The judgment declared is that God is going to destroy all the idols. He will break down altars and destroy pillars in verse 2. In verse 8 the idols are totally destroyed. In chapter 8 we talked about how God will not allow idolatry to stay in our lives; he will wipe it out because he loves us too much to let us get away with having idols at the center of our life.

### **The judgment of slaughter**

In verses 11-15, the final section of chapter 10, we see another picture of Israel. Verse 11:

Ephraim was a trained heifer  
that loved to thresh,  
and I spared her fair neck;  
but I will put Ephraim to the yoke,  
Judah must plow,  
Jacob must harrow for himself.

He has called her a foolish heifer a couple of times before when he made fun of the nation for being so adolescent, willful, rebellious, and stubborn. Here he says she submits to the yoke; she really does like to thresh, or to serve God. But that gradually changes as well, and he ends up declaring judgment because she is unwilling to serve him and live out the role that he has called her to, which is to be a blessing to other people and serve them.

He mentions one more city name in verse 14: Beth-arbel:

...As Shalman destroyed Beth-arbel on the day of battle;  
mothers were dashed in pieces with their children.

Beth-arbel was near the Sea of Chinnereth, later known as the Sea of Galilee. There is no historical record of this battle, but it could have been a Moabite or Assyrian assault. We don't know whether Shalman was a general or king. The point is that the assault of that city ended up with a slaughter of the innocents---mothers and children were hacked to pieces by the pagan soldiers. Israel was like a heifer trained to be in submission to the Lord, and the violent picture of judgment here is slaughter---butchery, if you will. Look at verse 15:

Thus it shall be done to you, O house of Israel,  
because of your great wickedness.  
In the storm the king of Israel  
shall be utterly cut off.

So just as mothers were hacked to pieces with their children by the pagan soldiers, the king of Israel is eventually going to be executed or cut off, and the line of rule will be ended.

Stepping back from these two chapters, we see that God has promised the judgment of dispersion, the judgment of barrenness, the judgment of destruction, and finally the judgment of slaughter or butchery. That would be an awful sermon to sit through if you were coming to the harvest festival and looking for a great family time of worship, good food, and music. It would make you squirm.

But there is good news tucked away in these two chapters. I want to look at two paragraphs, one in each chapter, that focus on a primary cause of God's judgment on the people. In chapter 9 the issue God addresses is the people's unwillingness to submit themselves to the truth that came through the prophet; that is, biblical authority. In chapter 10 the issue is their unwillingness to serve the Lord in obedience, to stay under the yoke in the role that God created for them. But it is clear that if we heed the word of God and cooperate with him, we don't have to be afraid of judgment in our lives.

### **Resisting biblical authority**

Let's look first at the paragraph about Israel's rejection of God's revealed truth. This entire sermon that Hosea preached at the harvest festival was trivialized and discounted by the listeners. Chapter 9 verses 7-9 give us an intensely personal view of the way Hosea perceived the people's reception of his prophetic word. Notice that these three verses open and close with a warning of punishment of sin. And none of us likes the stark truth that sin demands punishment; we are no different from Israel in that way. The statement in verse 7, "The days of punishment have come, the days of recompense have come Israel shall know it" challenges the cry of Israel in chapter 8 verse 2: "My God, we Israel know thee."

Hosea is saying to the nation, "You don't know *Yahweh*, and what's more, you need to know that judgment is coming." But the next two lines of verse 7 say, "The prophet is a fool, the man of the spirit is mad...." That is basically what they are calling Hosea. They are saying his message is insane babbling. Hosea was not alone in experiencing that kind of rejection. Earlier in the life of the nation, an anonymous prophet who anointed Jehu to be king was called a madman by the people. And the prophet Jeremiah who followed Hosea and ministered to Judah in the south was also called a madman by the people when he spoke Truth from the Lord. Jesus spoke of the persecution of the prophets as an analogy to the treatment that his disciples might expect (see Matthew 5:10-12). And he said that a prophet would not receive honor in his own country (see Matthew 13:57).

The end of verse 7 explains two things that are motivating the negative attitude toward Hosea: iniquity and hatred. The people's sin is too great for them to face, so they decide to hate the person who tells them about it. That is typical human behavior. When we can't acknowledge our guilt, we react to our accusers with anger. That's how I respond to my wife when she tells me the truth about my irresponsibility, hypocrisy, or inconsistency. My reaction is to think of how I can discount her, trivialize what she said, or turn the focus off of me. The reason Israel reacts so strongly is not that they don't believe him---deep down inside they know it's absolutely true---but that they can't live with it.

In verse 8 Hosea lays out the prophet's true role: that of a watchman. The prophet watches over Israel for their own good in obedience to God as his spokesman. But tragically, Israel rejects that. Then the problem is compounded by the fact that the watchman can't give his full attention to the dangers that loom before the people because he has to watch his own step for the fowler's snare. It is as if the nation has set traps for him. He can't even minister freely because he is always watching for attacks on his character or on his person. So the attitude of the people hinders the prophet's work.

The hatred that motivates the people in verse 7 also appears in the last line of verse 8. He talks about hatred in the house of his God because they won't respond to truth. Israel is like a terribly dysfunctional family torn

apart by strife.

The issue of listening to truth is what closes chapter 9, in verse 17:

My God will cast them off,  
because they have not hearkened to him;  
they shall be wanderers among the nations.

They don't listen or pay attention, and they don't agree with the truth the prophet speaks.

### **Called to be truth-speakers**

None of us have been given the prophetic office Hosea had, but every one of us is to be a biblically informed speaker of truth in all kinds of interactions with people. The Greek word *prophetes* means to reflect another's glory or light as the moon reflects the light of the sun. We are to be reflectors of truth in the way we live our lives and speak to people. But when we reflect truth accurately and clearly to people, we shouldn't be surprised at angry responses. I am haunted by Jesus' warning to his disciples, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets" (Luke 6:26). I don't want to be a false prophet, but I really do want people to like me and to speak well of me all the time. It upsets me when people object to disturbing truth in my teaching, counseling, or preaching.

When I was a pastor in a Presbyterian church in southern California some years ago, I was preaching on Jesus' parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16-20. (What Hosea is saying here in chapter 9 is similar in that the people shout him down because they think that their prosperity is a sign of God's blessing and approval.) In Jesus' parable the wealthy man builds bigger and bigger barns. He is always taking his own counsel; the only person he refers to is himself—p;"I, me, my...." He never checks with the Lord. In the middle of this self-satisfied reverie, the Lord speaks and says, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Then Jesus adds his commentary to this story: "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

Having gone through the parable, I went on to talk about the deception of prosperity and what it means to be spiritually wealthy or rich toward God. After the service I stood at the back door and greeted the congregation as they came out, as Presbyterians do. Everyone says something, they don't just brush past. Most people were positive and complimentary. But there were a couple of people who hadn't liked it and were sort of angry. And one man said to me, "That was the worst sermon I have ever heard. You're too young to know what you're talking about. Ministers are supposed to preach the gospel!" I have lived with the sting of that ever since.

We are not all preachers of the word, but just as I squirm at that man's emotional reaction to what I had to say, we all have to face the cocker-spaniel part of our nature that really likes to be liked. Contrary to what that man said about the gospel to me, the gospel is really an offense that will trigger hatred in sinful and rebellious people. The apostle Paul calls the good news of the gospel the smell of death to those who are perishing (see 2 Corinthians 2:15-16). If we accept the responsibility of being a truth-speaker and reflecting biblical truth accurately, we are going to be given challenging things to say that will disturb people. But when we encounter resistance, we can empathize with the prophets--Hosea, Jeremiah, Jesus himself, and his disciples. Christians down through the ages have spoken the truth with tough love. Chapter 9 says we not only have to listen and submit to truth, not turning a deaf ear; but we have to be willing to tell the truth as the prophet Hosea was.

### **Rejecting a lifestyle of serving God**

Now let's look at another paragraph in chapter 10 that speaks of Israel's rejection of a lifestyle of submissively serving the Lord, one another, and all the nations that surround them. The nation stubbornly denies its identity as a trained heifer delighted to thresh and plow and harrow in obedience to her Lord and master. That is the primary cause of the judgments of destroying idols and slaughter, or butchery. Look again at verses 11-13:

"Ephraim was a trained heifer  
that loved to thresh,

and I spared her fair neck;  
but I will put Ephraim to the yoke,  
Judah must plow,  
Jacob must harrow for himself.

Sow for yourselves righteousness,  
reap the fruit of steadfast love;  
break up your fallow ground,  
for it is the time to seek the Lord,  
that he may come and rain salvation upon you.

You have plowed iniquity,  
you have reaped injustice,  
you have eaten the fruit of lies."

Verse 11 is *Yahweh*'s wistful reflection on what he had elected his people to be. Ephraim was chosen for a purpose; she was like a young cow who was cherished by the farmer and lovingly trained to thresh out the grain. And in her early years she enjoyed serving the Lord. "Her fair neck" speaks of strength as well as beauty. She was fulfilling the purpose for which she was designed. And he had every right to expect her to serve him faithfully, so he called her to more disciplined responsibility. Plowing and harrowing were more difficult and had greater significance. She was to grow up into responsibility in ministry and service to the Lord.

Verse 12 speaks again of Israel's calling, of their special status as a servant of the Lord, an agent of blessing in the world. It says their purpose is to plow the field, to plant righteousness, and to harvest steadfast love (*hesed*). Then they are to share this steadfast love with other peoples that they come in contact with.

But verse 13 says that, tragically, they didn't fulfill the calling, and he reviews Israel's actual record. Instead of a harvest of steadfast love, Israel has plowed evil, reaped wickedness, and eaten dishonesty.

The final summary statement of the chapter, verse 15, defines their unwillingness to obediently serve the Lord as "great wickedness," or intense evil. We tend to think unwillingness to serve the Lord isn't that big a deal; he can get along without us. But to refuse to be what God has called us to be is evil rebellion. And the nation Israel has failed this wonderful purpose of plowing the field and sowing seeds of righteousness, of serving the Lord and depending only on him for productivity and fruitfulness.

### **Called to be servants as Jesus was**

This theme of serving the Lord is central throughout the Scriptures. As members of the body of Christ, God's holy people, we have been set apart to be his servants in serving others. It is an awesome privilege, and Jesus Christ is both the example and the source of power for our servanthood. It was Jesus, finally, who most perfectly revealed the servant heart of God. Jesus was faithful to serve a rebellious, haughty humanity. Jesus said, "...The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). Jesus' own description of his nature was that he was meek and lowly (see Matthew 11:29). The word meek is most often applied to an animal who is being controlled by a master. It means receptive to authority, willing to be led. Lowly means willing to be taught. And Jesus said we are called to be like him. He called into being a whole new race of servants to whom he could entrust the power of his own Spirit.

In his humanity, the divine Son was subservient and obedient to the Father. As the suffering Servant, he was obedient even to death on the cross for our redemption. And as our risen Lord, he now calls us to be servants. He said to his disciples, "Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master...." (John 13:16), and then he called the disciples to emulate his own servanthood. He said it was enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher and a servant like his master (see Matthew 10:24).

Every day, everywhere, all the time we are called to be servants like Jesus. When we start the day, whatever circumstance or situation arises, we ought to ask the question, "Lord, how can I serve you by serving others?"

The promise of God's word is that if we who realize that we have been elected to serve are willing to ask that question with sincerity of heart, he will release his power to us. Our Christian life is going to be one of struggle and strain and stress until we accept our calling to servanthood as the key to experiencing authentic power. And we are going to be troubled by the lust for power and by a lack of power in our lives until we do. We are going to limp pitifully along hiding behind facades that we have created, kind of like the Wizard of Oz, trying to look more powerful and influential than we really are.

When I was at the same church I mentioned earlier, I once had the privilege of meeting a man who had been a hero of mine when I was in college and seminary. His name was Emile Caillet. He wrote and taught on philosophical theology at Princeton Seminary. He had come to the United States before World War II to escape the Nazis. When I was in college I had read a book that he wrote, the main thrust of which was that it's more important to read the Bible than to read books about the Bible. It had a great impact on me.

I found out through the pastor I was working with that Mr. Caillet, who by then was very elderly, was living in a nursing home in Santa Monica, and he arranged for me to go meet him one day. This was a great thinker whom I had held in awe and admired for years. But I will never forget how the formal conversation began, after greetings and pleasantries. This intellectual giant looked at me intently and said, "Now, Douglas, how may I serve you?" It was clear to me that he had no need to impress me by wielding the power of his intellect. The purpose of his scholarship and of his concern for people, even a young guy like me, was to make a difference through serving.

What I'm learning in my life about servanthood and humility---and I've struggled with this more than most people, I must confess---is that this question is the antidote to false power, competitiveness, and self-centered ambition. It is the question to ask at the beginning of every day. How can we serve our friends, our marriage partners, our co-workers, and other members of our communities? Our purpose is to serve in the name of Jesus Christ and not expect to be served. Our concern should be not what we can get, but what we can give.

Think about the place of service in your friendships. It is through serving people that we earn the right to share our faith, to introduce them to Jesus. And out of servanthood in friendship comes a creatively powerful relationship that we can't have any other way.

Think of the difference that a radical commitment to servanthood would make in our marriages---if we thought of what we could do to serve our mates rather than keeping a scrupulous account of what he or she has done for us lately. Servanthood means listening to our spouse, bearing burdens, doing the practical and sometimes the gloriously impractical things that communicate that we care. Our calling as a servant of our spouse is to initiate affection verbally and nonverbally and in every creative way we can think of, to let them know how significant they are to us. We're called to give ourselves away unselfishly, to forgive without qualification. All of that is really hard. I have been married a long time, and I know. But we're not going to experience the power of the Spirit in our marriages until we're willing to give it a shot.

Think about your vocation. There are few things more liberating than serving the people we report to, the people we may manage, and the people we work alongside. But we have to surrender our worries about future advancement to the Lord. We don't need to jockey for position or use other people as rungs on the ladder to success. A commitment to serve supplants our territorial defensiveness about our own power. Then the Lord can make it abundantly clear where he wants us; and if we are given greater advancement or recognition or the benefits of success, all it will do is give us wider opportunity to be servants, on a different plane.

In the community where we live there are innumerable opportunities to be a servant. The power of our Servant Master is released when we serve the poor, homeless, sick, terminally ill, disabled, and hungry. The most common meaning of the New Testament words minister and deacon is "servant." And Christ, who is our eternal Deacon, our Minister seated at the right hand of the throne in heaven, calls us to serve in his name.

The apostle Paul was thinking of Hosea 9 and 10 when he wrote Galatians 6:2,8b-10: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ...he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."



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