

IS OUR REPENTANCE FOR REAL?

Hosea: Unbroken Love From A Broken Heart

by Doug Goins

A few weeks ago I spent a day with a dear Christian friend I have known for almost twenty years. He and I traveled and performed a lot of music together in our early years. But I had had no contact with him for almost four years because, in his own words, he had been running away from the Lord, from his family, and from Christian friends. In our time together he poured out sorrow over having left his wife and filed for divorce. He talked about how his unfaithfulness to his wife might very well have completely destroyed their relationship. He talked about cocaine and alcohol use, unbelievable financial irresponsibility, a damaged relationship with his eighteen-year-old daughter, and losing the trust of his friends and family. He poured out much regret and grief.

But my friend told me the good news of his repentance last winter in a drug rehabilitation program in southern California. He said, "Doug, I've really come back to the Lord!" Yet there were terrible consequences for what he had done; virtually nobody in his family or his circle of friends trusted him at all, and they were suspicious of this turnaround. After we had talked for several hours, he asked me in a voice choked with emotion, "Do you believe me?"

It was really a difficult question for me to answer. Have you ever been personally confronted with sinful behavior, with moral and ethical failure? Have you ever been called to account by somebody near to you; and although you told them you were sorry and asked to be forgiven, you were wondering if you would have confessed if you hadn't been found out? Were you wondering what it was you were sorry about--just getting caught, or the misery you had brought into people's lives? Were you just feeling sorry for yourself and it helped to get it off your chest? Was it just remorse for the mess you had made of everything, or real repentance?

The passage that we are considering in Hosea 6 addresses the issue of how to know if repentance, whether our own or somebody else's, is genuine. Verses 1-3 are a clarion trumpet call to repent and return to the Lord:

"Come, let us return to the LORD;
for he has torn, that he may heal us;
he has stricken, and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.
Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD;
his going forth is sure as the dawn;
he will come to us as the showers,
as the spring rains that water the earth."

Healing from sin

The first two verses tell us that we need to take the initiative; we must not wait around for God to soften his position toward us. We are the ones who need to come back. But the promise is that if we take that initiative, God is committed to restoring, healing, and giving us back fellowship with him.

Verse 1 clearly continues the appeal that began last week in Hosea 5:15, where God called the people to return after having judged them and confronted them in love; there has been a tearing, and life has been turned upside down:

"I will return again to my place,

until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face,
and in their distress they seek me...."

The prophet takes for granted the need for authentic repentance of sin and reconciliation with God. There is the offer in these words of God's healing and restoring grace, but it is not cheap grace upon which we can presume. We have to interpret the word "return" in verse 1 in the context of Hosea's life and preaching, which we have been studying. He has consistently invited the nation of Israel, and he invites us today, to renounce the ways of sin--the compulsive, repetitive patterns of resisting God that we have developed; and to renounce as well the power of evil that seeks to influence us to worship false gods.

Renunciation of specific personal sin is a central part of true repentance. We have to think in terms of the deeper causes of what we need to confess in our lives to save us from superficiality in repentance. Often we want to escape being specific, so we try to get by with vagaries, generic one-size-fits-all confessions: "Forgive me for not doing what I should have done," or "...doing what I shouldn't have done." Other times our confession means little more to us than Catherine the Great's flippant expression concerning repentance: "The good Lord will pardon, that's his trade." That is not repentance, but presumption on God. In the deeper context of authentic repentance and renunciation of sin, we have to acknowledge that God has torn us and stricken us, as verse 1 says. And we have to face the reason he has had to take such drastic action. Remember, the judgment of God is always done in love and always has a redemptive purpose. Getting well spiritually involves recognizing the underlying causes of our sin-sickness.

The binding described here is not just putting a Band-Aid over a little scratch. It describes radical surgery that God has had to perform on our hearts. But the commitment he makes is that he will attend us all through the process of our recuperation to bring us back to full health. There is a progression in verses 1-2 of God's activity of healing us, then binding us up, then reviving us, and then raising us up on our feet, so that finally we can live fully restored, healthy lives before him. We are comfortable with him again. God's healing requires praise for his confrontational love that forces us to see ourselves as we really are. We need to let him tell us how sick we really are and how desperately we need forgiveness and healing.

We live now in the age of the Spirit on the other side of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Holy Spirit has been given. And God is now committed to work healing in our lives through the power of the Spirit. But Jesus doesn't just give healing through the Spirit as if he were a doctor on demand; he is the Healer who is totally involved in every aspect of life. What doctor is going to come home with us and sit by us through the whole process of recuperation? But that is the commitment that the Lord Jesus makes to us in healing sin-sickness in our souls. As part of that process, the Lord Jesus will dredge up memories of sin that needs to be forgiven and healed. He will discern what we need to repent of and guide our confession, freeing us to admit it and agree with him. Jesus is the only one who has the authority to say, as he did to the man lowered on the pallet, "Your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:1-2). He announces forgiveness with the power of his own death on the cross.

The key to real growth in Christ

Verse 2 speaks of Jesus' death and resurrection to new life:

"After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him."

This reminds me of the vision in Ezekiel 37:11 of the valley of dry bones, where the nation Israel confesses, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off." But in verse 14 the Lord responds to them, "I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it, and I have done it." Israel needed nothing less than resurrection. But even though they did come back to the land, because of their continuing unbelief God did not impart spiritual life and vitality. Nor has spiritual life come since their return again in 1948. Spiritual renewal and

healing are still to come for that nation.

But for us today in the New Testament church, verse 2 has immediate messianic overtones. Like the sign of Jonah, it foreshadows the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And that event is the essence of our regeneration, our being born again and coming to new life in Christ. True repentance and confession of faith in Christ must be a death to self and a resurrection to new life. That is what the apostle Paul focuses on in Romans 6:3-6:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin....

That cycle of death and resurrection continues after our initial regeneration; in fact, it is the key that unlocks growth in Christ. Any hope we have of living a life of integrity, wholeness, and health is dependent on dying and rising with Jesus Christ. The more we are willing to die to our tenacious control of life, the more he is able to resurrect his life in us. When we surrender our moral failures, our sinful choices to him, he will raise out of their ashes a brand-new start. When we cry out for help in our problems, he will give us insight and direction we wouldn't have even dreamed possible. And when we have challenges that are beyond us, it is his resurrection power that gives us strength and wisdom. And finally, the more we give over our worry about the future---the what-ifs, the worst-case scenarios---the clearer his guidance will become for us. The secret of fullness of life is dying to our arrogant, willful self and allowing the risen Christ to express his life through us. Verse 3 makes it very clear that this process of repentance is a continual lifestyle:

Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD;
his going forth is sure as the dawn;
he will come to us as the showers,
as the spring rains that water the earth."

The point is that returning to the Lord, repentance, is part of a relationship of knowing him and acknowledging with our hearts and lives that he is Lord. We learn to cultivate an ongoing, consistent love relationship rather than treating God like some sort of emergency relief when we really get in trouble.

To press on means to chase after diligently, because we know he is life itself. The first part of this verse becomes our motto for daily living---making new discoveries about God's nature, desiring to know him better and better all the time, never settling for sameness in the relationship, never thinking that we have arrived in knowing God. If we cannot say that we have grown in knowing him, then we are really backsliding into the future, presuming on who he is and what he has done. While we need to be childlike and to trust God as our Father, we are not to be childish and to remain in a sort of infantile relationship with him. Everything that we learn about him from the Scriptures and our life experience gets bigger and more wonderful and magnificent.

The second half of verse 3 talks about his faithfulness, or his absolutely guaranteed goodness to us. It is eternal; it is like the sun's coming to us every morning, dividing night from day. You can count on it. The verse also talks about how he pours rain on us, blessing us supernaturally; he is ready to pour grace, mercy, and whatever resources we need into our lives when we come to him in humility. But we must repent and renounce anything that denies his absolute sovereignty over our total lives.

As this passage unfolds, it seems that Israel wasn't ready to give everything to God. In verses 4-6 God expresses frustration over the nation's willful transgression of his covenant love. The people didn't listen to Hosea's call to return. And whatever response they made, it lacked honesty. It wasn't true repentance. It may have been more like the remorse that we talked about earlier.

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?
Your love is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes early away.
Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets,
I have slain them by the words of my mouth,
and my judgment goes forth as the light.
For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.

Shallow love

These words allow us to see into God's very heart at the struggle he had as he looked at his children with love but saw disobedience and rebellion. He was kind of like a frazzled, disappointed parent who says to their child, "What am I going to do with you? Nothing I try works. What's left?" This reminds me of Psalm 78:34-37, where Asaph summarizes Israel's history as one of rebellion and resisting God's love:

"When he slew them, they sought for him;
they repented and sought God earnestly...
But they flattered him with their mouths;
they lied to him with their tongues.
Their heart was not steadfast toward him...."

In verses 4-6 there are four evidences that the repentance that Israel offered God was not honest. The first was an absence of loyal love. The word appears twice, in verse 4: "Your love is like a morning cloud," and in verse 6: "...I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice." The Hebrew word is *hesed*, which means covenant love, faithful love, loyalty, mercy, or lovingkindness. It is one of Hosea's favorite words to describe the kind of committed relationship that God has to us, and he also uses it over and over as he grieves over the fact that they didn't know how to respond to that love. Whole-hearted commitment was not in evidence. What God wanted from the people was renunciation of past sin and faithful, covenant love demonstrated toward him. But the people couldn't do it. There were many tearful declarations of sorrow and contrition, but those passionate promises the people made to be faithful and obedient and to love God with all their heart soon became hollow echoes.

The reason for that, and the second evidence that their repentance wasn't genuine, was that their repentance was based on fickle emotion. Israel's loyalty was as fleeting and changeable as a morning mist or the dew that evaporates when the sun comes up. There is a clear contrast in verse 3 with God's absolute faithfulness, demonstrated by the regularity with which the sun comes up; the commitment of the people disappeared in the face of that sun. When the feelings of remorse wore off, the commitments to change were soon forgotten.

Worshipping in spirit and in truth

Another evidence is in verse 5. If we look carefully, we see that it really speaks of the rejection of biblical truth. The prophets like Hosea clearly and consistently confronted, evaluated, and judged out of broken hearts, taking no delight in the message. But the message of confrontation cut people open and carved them apart, exposing hypocrisy. J. Vernon McGee's paraphrase says, "I have skinned them alive by the prophets." That is what truth did. But the people wouldn't stand still for it. In spite of the faithfulness of these men to tell it like it was, hard and straight; their unrepentant hearts rejected the correction, the warning, and the tough love. So the end result was that God would have to judge. Convicting, prophetic truth was accurate and was meant to lead the people to repentance, but Israel had managed to duck and dodge the call to loyal love for the Lord.

Somebody who has been very dear to me for more than twenty-five years made a choice six months ago to divorce their spouse and leave their family. They invited me into that experience. We met face-to-face and

talked a bit on the phone. But they made a choice to pursue an immoral relationship and a commitment to divorce. In an agonized last-ditch effort, I wrote them a letter. I told this person how much I loved them. I told them that my wife and I were praying every day for them. And I begged them to reconsider the choice. I talked about consequences, and about how God is lovingly and graciously waiting. I have been buried in Hosea and Jeremiah in my teaching ministries, and I quoted from Jeremiah where God says, "You have a choice. You can choose life and blessing and richness and fullness. Otherwise the end result is death," because we can't create life on our own.

The letter I got back this week said this among many other things: "Your verses from Jeremiah are the real clincher for me. The God I know is the God of the New Testament. Yes, I believe there are natural consequences for our actions. [But] I do not believe that God is going to judge me. God is the God of grace, love, and compassion. I am more than ever assured of his love for me." It went on to tell me what a harsh, judgmental person I was. It closed by saying, "You're no friend, you've never been a friend."

You know, the prophets didn't like their jobs. They told the truth with a broken heart; they had to deal with rejection. You probably know what it feels like if you have tried to lovingly confront somebody whose life you saw going down the tube. But the promise is that if we don't deal with the Lord on his terms, there will be difficult, painful consequences.

There is a final evidence that Israel's repentance was not honest: the danger of increasing religious activity that was empty of personal loyalty to God.

"For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings."

God wanted a relationship with them, not just ritual involvement. Even if it had been true worship of him unadulterated by the worship of the Baals, God would have wanted more than compulsive legalism. The sacrificial system, which was so important in the process of having sin atoned for, could itself become a substitute for really knowing God. Busy activity doesn't necessarily evidence a repentant heart. God doesn't want us to placate him in self-justifying rituals, but to praise him by a sanctified relationship with him. Our life is to be the evidence. That is what Romans 12:1 says: "I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." That is worship lived out twenty-four hours a day, a lifestyle of praise to the Lord.

For us today, offering sacrifices instead of knowing God is represented by all that we do to justify ourselves rather than submitting to a personal relationship marked by the two powerful ingredients that we examined in chapter 4: intimacy with God and integrity in the way we live our lives. The things we should do in response to God's loyal love for us sometimes become our effort to earn it, and subtly they can become a substitute for knowing God. Often, we can't even be bothered with God. We want to meet basic requirements and then get on with our own agendas. Our burnt offerings can include dutiful prayer, regular attendance in worship services and Sunday School, and even involvement in all kinds of terrific ministries in the life of the church. But what is to be done in intimate communion with God, we can end up doing for God and then eventually without him at all, because we become practiced in doing religious things. Ministry activity is a part of authentic discipleship, but the danger we face is that we can become so preoccupied with working for the Lord and our self-justifying effort that our personal relationship with him becomes perfunctory rather than primary.

In John 4:23 when the Lord Jesus was talking to the Samaritan woman, he said that God is seeking worshipers who will worship him in spirit and in truth. When he was talking to the Pharisees in Matthew 9:13 and again in Matthew 12:7, he quoted Hosea 6:6 to rebuke the Pharisees for ritual observance without really knowing God. And when a scribe conversing with him in Mark 12 quoted Hosea 6:6, Jesus said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). Mark adds an interesting comment in light of the clarity with which Jesus spoke: The Pharisees didn't dare question him any further. But the tragedy was that the Pharisees didn't really listen to him, just as Israel didn't pay attention to Hosea. There was no change at all.

The lifestyle of the unrepentant

What God wanted was for the nation to exhibit the true fruits of repentance mentioned in verse 6: steadfast love and knowledge of God. But it didn't happen. Verse 7 begins, "But they...." There is a sharp contrast between what God wanted in terms of a love relationship and what the nation offered to him. Listed in the next three verses is a series of offenses against him because Israel resisted faithfulness and knowledge. Verses 7-9 describe the lifestyle of the unrepentant. They look at three faces of national sin. In verse 7 it is personified as Adam in the Garden. Then there are two representative places mentioned in verses 8 and 9, the city of Gilead and the city of Shechem.

But at [like] Adam they transgressed the covenant;
there they dealt faithlessly with me.
Gilead is a city of evildoers,
tracked with blood.
As robbers lie in wait for a man,
so the priests are banded together;
they murder on the way to Shechem,
yea, they commit villainy.

The first problem was the sin of Adam. Like Adam, the nation was challenging God's goodness and provision. This is defined in verse 1 in terms of faithlessness, or not trusting in what God said. The relationship that Adam had with God was a covenant relationship that involved intimacy with God as well as God's expectation that Adam would obey God. Genesis 2:15-17 speaks of how God placed Adam in a garden that was perfect--pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the middle of the Garden, as was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." There was a relationship of communication and intimacy. There was total, abundant provision from the Lord; everything Adam could need for life. And there was the requirement placed on Adam that he trust God and not touch this one area of life that God said would kill him.

But Adam began to relate to God in mistrust, in the fear that he was being cheated out of everything that life had to offer. The sin initially was buying into this lie of Satan. So Adam and Eve rebelled and then rationalized the rebellion, looking for someone else to blame. When God showed up and said to Adam, "What have you done?" Adam said, "The woman that you gave me, she made me do it." And when the woman was called to account, she said, "The serpent made me do it." The implication was ultimately, "God, it's your fault."

Remember, the first word we were called to in Hosea 5:15 was the need to acknowledge personal responsibility for sin. As long as I can blame somebody else, it's not sin anymore but dysfunction. "It's somebody else's fault--I'm a victim." And that too is the sin of Adam. We must be willing to acknowledge our guilt, and the nation was unwilling to do it.

Verse 8 describes another tragic consequence of being unwilling to repent. Instead of healing other people, we end up wounding people. Gilead was a city of evildoers tracked with blood. Gilead was known for its production of aromatic gums and resins used for making healing balms and ointments. Their effectiveness was praised throughout the nation. The prophet Jeremiah in 8:22 makes reference to the balm of Gilead as he grieves over the sin-sickness with which the nation of Judah was diseased. Knowing that exile, the punishment from the Lord, was coming, he cries out,

"Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then has the health of the daughter of my people
not been restored?"

Verse 1 says God is a healer to bind up wounds. His people were called to a ministry of healing, and Gilead was a metaphor of that healing. But that isn't what was happening. Bloodshed was endemic in Gilead; wounding instead of healing. In us, lack of repentance of sin results in our wounding those around us. Instead

of being life-givers and peacemakers and reconcilers, when sin is not dealt with in our lives, we are harmful and destructive in our relationships.

It gets even worse in verse 9, which talks about the sin of Shechem. There is robbery and murder even by the priests. The tragedy is that Shechem was one of the cities of refuge that Joshua had designated during the days of conquest. Of all the cities in the nation, it was to be a place of security, safety, and sanctuary where people could go and know that they would be protected. But that wasn't the case in Hosea's day; the highways leading into the city were dangerous, and the times were so evil that even the religious leaders had joined with robber bands to plunder and even murder the helpless population. The defining sin in the last word in verse 9 is villainy. Your Bible may say outrage or lewdness. The latter may come the closest, because that word in Hebrew carries a connotation of violent sexual sin.

The church of Jesus Christ today is to be a place of sanctuary, a community of faith where people know that they will be safe and secure. But our headlines are full of discoveries that pastors, counselors, and priests are repeating the sin of Shechem: sexual assault or emotional violence carried out against vulnerable people who come to them out of a deep sense of need, admitting weakness and desiring to be cared for spiritually. But now the public religious leaders admit that they are guilty of sexual abuse against children and women. So the word outrage is appropriate today.

A harvest of judgment for horrible sin

At the end of our passage, the bottom line is that God won't let us get away with it. Look at verses 10 and 11:

In the house of Israel I have seen a horrible thing;
Ephraim's harlotry is there, Israel is defiled.
For you also, O Judah, a harvest is appointed.

Verse 10 summarizes all the accusations of verses 4-9, which were equally true of both kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. They are also true of individuals and of the church of Jesus Christ today. God looks closely and sees our unwillingness to repent and renounce our sin, and he sees the behavior that results. And he says that it is a horrible thing. Do you view your sinful rebellion against the Lord as a horrible thing, an abomination to him? Most of us don't. We rationalize and compartmentalize. But God sees the horror that it represents to him and to other people.

This verse echoes Hosea 5:3, where God said,

"I know Ephraim,
and Israel is not hid from me;
for now, Ephraim, you have played the harlot,
Israel is defiled."

He knows us inside out. If we are unwilling to deal with the sin in our lives, the result will be a harvest of judgment. It would take the form of exile for Israel and Judah. And they would end up in complete bondage to sin; they would be inundated with sinful, idolatrous influence. They would not be able to get out.

Remember the story I began with of my friend who ended up trapped in bondage to sin? He began by secretly dabbling in little things. He sowed to the wind and ended up reaping the whirlwind in his life. I was thinking of the words of Romans 6. My friend claimed that he had died to sin while he was still living in sin, thinking that he could control it. But finally it ended up controlling him.

Remember, he asked me, "Even though most people don't trust the genuineness of my repentance, do you believe me?" I told him that I really did believe him, because *agape* love, the supernatural love of God that is poured into our hearts through the Spirit, does believe all things and hope all things, according to 1 Corinthians 13. "I'm called to be hopeful and optimistic about what God is doing in your life," I told him.

But I also said that my optimism was more in the Lord of restoration and healing than in his words of commitment and promise. I warned him of the danger of facile words of repentance that are really flattery and

lies. I told him about the message of John the Baptist to the Pharisees in Matthew 3:8. He called them to show some fruits, or evidence, that would reveal that their hearts were repentant before the Lord. "You know, it hasn't been very long," I said, "and there are many years of destruction and violence that God has to heal and restore. It takes awhile for the fruit to become ripe and ready to eat."

But I encouraged him with the good news that God was completely committed to the process of healing him, binding him up, reviving him, raising him up, and giving him back his life. God wanted that more than either he or I did. I can report that my friend has begun the painful, lonely, and difficult process of making restitution and setting relationships straight. People don't want to listen to him one more time; they don't know whether to trust him or not. But so far, seven months down the line, it looks as if there is a process of restoration going on. The Lord appears to be standing him back on his feet, enabling him to look his Father God in the face again and gradually restoring his human relationships.

I really want you personally to hear the words of Hosea's invitation,

"Come, let us return to the LORD...
Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD...."

That invitation may be just what you need right now. The good news is that it is never too late to turn in repentance. There is nothing we have done that is irreparable or irredeemable, because the God of the universe is committed to healing and restoring us.

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