

# THE SIN OF SYNCRETISM

*Series: Hosea: Unbroken Love From A Broken Heart*

by Doug Goins

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As a father, one of the excuses that I hear most frequently from my children for not having done something is, "I forgot."

Whether you're a child, a parent, a husband, or a wife, if your family has a consistent pattern of ignoring your desires and disregarding what you think is important, it can be more than just frustrating. You begin to sense that maybe your family doesn't trust you, value your opinion, or respect who you are. All of us know how it feels to be taken for granted or ignored.

But have you ever felt forgotten by your family? That would be the most painful experience of all. I have had two conversations this past year in which that phrase came up. First, I talked with a young single man. Recently out of university, he was the last child to leave home, and he had just moved to a new city and a new job. His parents were enjoying the empty nest and the freedom to travel. This young man said with great pain, "I feel like my folks have forgotten me."

I heard a similar comment from a retired widow. She and her husband, who is now with the Lord, had raised four children who were now married. And she said that it seemed as if the only time she heard from them was when they needed her to baby-sit or they needed to borrow money. She used that same painful phrase, "I feel as if they have forgotten who I am."

In Hosea 2:2-13 God himself makes that same heart-wrenching confession about his relationship with Israel. God is the husband who has chosen Israel to be his bride. "She went after her lovers and forgot me," he says in 2:13. This agonized, climactic statement comes at the end of a section that expresses the wounded heart of God. It is a mixture of grief, frustration, and anger mingled with a yearning that reaches out to bring back his wayward wife, Israel. Remember how our story began last week in chapter 1 verse 2 when the Lord called Hosea to take a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry, "for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the LORD." The account of Hosea's marriage and family continues on in chapter 2, the vehicle for the pathos of God's great pain over the nation's spiritual adultery.

Reading between the lines of chapter 2, it seems that Gomer has now left Hosea and the three children for other lovers, and has become totally immersed in cult prostitution and Baal worship. Hosea is left to raise his children alone. According to the levitical law Hosea would have been justified in divorcing his wife. He could have called for her execution under the law for adultery. But it really is his love that is at work throughout this book; it is not the law that somehow has to deal with Gomer. Now the prophet Hosea really feels his heart more and more beating at one with the Lord's as the Lord responds to the spiritual adultery of the nation. So with the pain of his relationship with Gomer piercing his own heart, once again Hosea speaks the word of the Lord to Israel:

## **God's Pursuing Love**

In this passage God is speaking out of a broken heart to the nation he loves. As an abandoned husband he begins with a call to the children to plead with their mother to come home. The passage spells out the charges against the mother very clearly. Verse 2,

"Plead with your mother, plead---  
for she is not my wife,  
and I am not her husband---  
that she put away her harlotry from her face,  
and her adultery from between her breasts;"

lest I strip her naked  
and make her as in the day she was born,  
and make her like a wilderness,  
and set her like a parched land,  
and slay her with thirst.

This corresponds in form to verse 9 of chapter 1, speaking of the broken covenant relationship. God said, "For you are not my people and I am not your God." But this passage is not about the possibility of God's divorcing his wife, or having her executed ultimately. Even though Israel may want divorce in her heart and even though the marriage is no longer functioning, God won't renounce his claim on her. Divorce is not an option for either Hosea or God.

He asks his children to beg their mother to take the most basic first step in turning her life around. He asks that she change her outward appearance by removing the makeup and jewelry on her face and torso that a prostitute would wear. They are embarrassing signs of complete abandonment of her husband. In verse 4-5a he speaks as a husband who has been publicly disgraced in the eyes of the community by his wife. He says,

"Upon her children also I will have no pity,  
because they are children of harlotry.  
For their mother has played the harlot;  
she that conceived them has acted shamefully."

In spite of the fact that he talks about the children's sin and rebellion, the primary focus here is on the outrageousness of what his wife has done. She is primarily responsible.

The fact that the children are also called to account takes us back to chapter 1 verse 2, where he says that the children will follow in the way of their mother. It seems that the mother's lifestyle will affect those children as they grow up, and they will end up rebellious and rejecting their father as well. Remember, in 1:6 God warned that he would not have mercy on the rebellious children of Israel if they continued to reject him. So the mother and the children as a family represent all the people of Israel who are rebellious against God. And the prophet has lost his family just as God has lost his spiritual family.

Then there is the final word that we opened with, at the end of verse 13. God says that he has been totally forgotten. His wife is so absorbed with her own adulterous affairs with other lovers that she can't even remember that he is her husband. She is living as if he doesn't even exist.

All of this describes Israel's behavior toward God. Throughout her history of living in the land of Canaan she abandoned God, disgraced him, and forgot him. The lovers she pursued were the Canaanite gods of Baal mentioned in verse 8 and in verse 13. From the time that Israel entered the promised land of Canaan after the exodus, she flirted with those gods. Eventually she added Baal worship to her belief in *Yahweh*. The sin of syncretism is blending loyalties to several different gods, mixing and matching religions in a sort of smorgasbord. From her early times Israel acknowledged that *Yahweh* really was the God of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God who delivered Israel out of Egypt; and the God of Mount Sinai who gave her the law. So she has no problem with God's historical relevance to her, but she has lost her focus on his imminence, the fact that he is the God of present provision. His importance in terms of day-to-day living has diminished. She has forgotten that this is the promised land that he gave to her and that his first commandment on Mount Sinai was, "You shall have no other gods before me."

## **Bartered Devotion For Desired Provision**

Perhaps we can feel a little sympathetic to Israel when we consider how this could have happened, though. When the Israelites settled among the Canaanite people, they were not good farmers. They were nomad herdsmen who didn't plant crops, so they had to learn from the Canaanites. And in adopting the Canaanite way of life, they observed that the people depended on their gods, particularly the god Baal and his wife Asherah. Baal was the storm god, the god of life-giving rain. They depended on Baal for produce from the land and

reproduction in the herds. So the Israelites began to ask, "What harm could there be in worshipping Baal along with *Yahweh*, to ensure prosperity and reproduction?" They began to build shrines to Baal in each one of their fields as their neighbors did. And gradually the people of Israel were drawn into the deeper mysteries of this sensual fertility cult, with the hope that they could even manipulate the gods for their own reproduction of healthy, strong babies. As the years went by Baal worship became more and more entrenched. They depended more and more on the Baals and less and less on *Yahweh*. This problem of syncretism continued throughout Israel's history.

This passage stresses God's absolute condemnation of Baal worship. It also stresses his absolute power over all the forces at work in nature and life. In Psalm 147 God says that he has absolute, unchanging power to speak and act. He responds to people who are willing to wait for him to act and not look around for other sources of provision. There is a progression in our passage of God's having to assert his rightful place in the life of the nation, confront them with their syncretism, and take away things that they take for granted and assume that they have a right to, physically and relationally, before he is able to give back to them in blessing.

It would be helpful for us to consider some contemporary and personal examples of what syncretism is all about. The church today is not exempt from it; it is possible for us to add to the worship of the God of the Bible in some very subtle ways and also in some blatant ways. Times really have not changed very much.

The *National/International Religion Report*. had an article this week about a church conference that was held in Minneapolis last November. It was sponsored by five different main-line Protestant denominations. Twenty-one hundred women and sixty men from twenty-seven countries attended. It was called The Reimagining Conference, and it was designed to celebrate the midpoint of the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women. Most of the speakers were feminist theologians, and they led participants in reimagining a church where everyone shares common visions of spirituality. Attendees borrowed from native American and Eastern religions in what they called a syncretistic vision of spirituality. There was an unscheduled rally in which about a hundred women joined to celebrate the miracle of being "Christian Lesbians Out Together." Especially noted was "an unorthodox liturgical blessing and communion-like service using milk and honey. The ceremony invoked the wisdom spirit Sophia-Creator-God in a celebration of women's sensuality and warm body fluids. Themes of goddess worship and the invalidity of the concept of sin were pervasive throughout."

Canaanite religious influences still threaten the purity of Biblical faith, but each one of us also struggles with syncretism personally and privately. We have our own seductive false gods. A false god for us that would correspond to Israel's syncretistic worship of Baal is anything or anyone besides God that we depend on for our meaning as a person. It is whatever we add to God and say, "I have to have this for my life to be complete." We can believe in God and at the same time add worship at any number of other shrines---vocation, marriage and family, prosperity, health and fitness, pleasure, prestige, or relationships. It is possible to need people so much that we seek to draw from them the assurance and security that only God can give us. Our concern for status, success, and the trophies for our accomplishments can also expose competing gods. There is nothing wrong with any of these things in themselves. But if they become our passion, then they rob us of total dependence on God.

The essence of Baal worship was bartered devotion for desired provision, whether it was prosperity or fertility. Another problem today isn't just worshipping false gods, but treating the God of the Bible the same way that Israel related to the Baals, so that he becomes a means of accomplishing our ends. We barter for blessings while we maintain control of our own lives. In reality *we* are the false gods of our own lives, so our wills stubbornly resist surrender and our own brand of spiritual adultery begins in hardened hearts that refuse to be a throne for the absolute reign of God. But whatever our false god is, whether it is blatant and obvious or very secret and subtle, the Lord is a jealous God, and with decisive judgment he must expose our distorted allegiances that stand in the way of his sovereignty.

Our passage takes the form of a painful conversation that God has with the adulterous Israel as he tries to expose the syncretism that drives her. The passage may seem harsh and severe, but we must understand that Israel's primary relationship with God is at stake. We must also remember the depths of degradation to which Israel has fallen. God's patience has been tried and his exasperation is acute. But he will not go back on his

marriage vows to be Israel's God and to keep her as his bride. Again, the judgment is meant to lead to reconciliation.

### **The Judgment That Leads to Repentance**

Consider the frightening word of judgment in verse 3. He warns that he will strip her naked, make her as in the day she was born, make her like a wilderness, set her like a parched land, and slay her with thirst. It is severe. She will be stripped naked, publicly humiliated. Her husband has a responsibility to clothe her, but now he will abandon that responsibility. She will be made helpless and vulnerable like a newborn baby. Then he says that there will be death, not execution by stoning as a prostitute would deserve, but death by starvation in the wilderness. This is probably a picture of the nation's forced march across the desert as they were taken into exile. A lot of them would never make it to Assyria; they would die in the wilderness. But the plea in verse 2 was to put away adultery in order to avoid that judgment described in verse 3.

The second half of verse 5 shows one of the rationalizations at work in Israel for the way she lives:

"For she said, 'I will go after my lovers,  
who give me my bread and my water,  
my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.'"

She says, "There is a payoff if I pray to the Baals; I get the basic necessities of life---clothing and food and water---and I also get luxuries---the oil and beverages that I like." Israel has come to believe that she can't trust God to meet her needs, so she looks for those needs to be met somewhere else.

As the dialogue continues in verses 6 and 7, in response to this God says,

"Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns;  
and I will build a wall against her,  
so that she cannot find her paths.  
She shall pursue her lovers,  
but not overtake them;  
and she shall seek them,  
but shall not find them.  
Then she shall say, 'I will go  
and return to my first husband,  
for it was better with me than than now.'"

God is going to impose a discipline of limitation and confinement. He says it will be like growing a hedge around fields as the farmers did to keep animals from going between the fields and to keep wild animals out. There will be barriers that she will crash into. This idea of discipline by restriction will be developed more fully when we get to chapter 3 in a couple of weeks, in terms of how God views it both in the life of Hosea and Gomer and in the life of the nation.

At the beginning of verse 7 it says that she shall seek her lovers, but she will not find them. That combination of words, seeking and finding, is always used in the Old Testament to denote worship or wanting to find God. It says that there is a religious desire driving the nation to find reality, to understand the way God created things to be; but she is looking in the wrong places, pursuing the wrong gods, and she won't find anything. They will not hear her at all; her efforts will be futile. God will not allow her to find what she wants anywhere but in him.

At the end of verse 7 there is an encouraging word about the purpose of the discipline: She will come to her senses and say, "I've got to turn around and go back to the place of innocence where I started." That word "return" or "turn" is the Hebrew word to repent, to have a change of heart. It indicates making a 180-degree turn and going the opposite direction. Judgment will drive us to that decision; that is why God allows it in our

lives. Throughout Hosea we're going to see that word used over and over as God tries to turn people back to him from their headlong plunge toward greater and greater destruction.

In verse 8 we see God's response to Israel's rationalization:

"And she did not know  
that it was I who gave her  
the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and who lavished upon her silver  
and gold which they used for Baal."

It is ironic that God has provided all Israel's resources, and yet Israel doesn't acknowledge him as the source of everything. She uses his gifts as tools of resistance against him. She didn't know it was he, and yet this wasn't an innocent ignorance, because this statement is an accusation that triggers terrible consequences in the verses that follow. Israel is willfully turning from what she should have known. *Yahweh* has given her everything in great abundance, but she has made two tragic errors in judgment: She considers the Baals, not *Yahweh*, to be the source of fertility and the basic necessities of life; and she fails to recognize that God owns everything. Israel has no understanding of the spiritual reality that God really is the Creator and the Sustainer, the very source of life.

Now the threats of judgment come faster and stronger as this passage builds. In verse 9 God says,

"Therefore I will take back  
my grain in its time,  
and my wine in its season;  
and I will take away my wool and my flax,  
which were to cover her nakedness."

Over and over God says, "I will...." He is saying that it is his responsibility; nothing that happens will be accidental or coincidental. He will repeatedly be an active force of judgment.

Verse 10:

"Now I will uncover her lewdness  
in the sight of her lovers,  
and no one shall rescue her out of my hand."

Again she is threatened with public shame or exposure. And nobody can save her from it, because God has determined that it will be part of his judgment. It speaks of God's power to do what he wants and Baal's powerlessness to save her. God promises the same thing in our lives. Sin will be exposed and flushed out. Remember Jesus' word, "...Whatever you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed upon the housetops." We won't get away with anything, for the sake of our own health and survival. God will bring it to light and reveal it.

In verse 11 he talks about the corporate worship life of Israel:

"And I will put an end to all her mirth,  
her feasts, her new moons, her sabbaths,  
and all her appointed feasts."

God is judging the temple worship in the regular Sabbath services in the life of the nation. The appointed feasts that are mentioned were all the activities of worship that God himself had ordained for the nation in the law, such as the three annual feasts of Passover and Pentecost and Tabernacles. The new moons that are mentioned

were monthly gatherings for worship, when no business was to be transacted at all. The Sabbath was the seventh day of rest that God built into the rhythm of every single week. The tragedy is that all these God-ordained opportunities for worship and community life had been co-opted by Israel as she blended together the worship of the Baals with worship of God.

We, at Peninsula Bible Church, can just as easily subvert true biblical worship by adding our own cultural devotion to a certain heritage, or what Jesus called "the traditions of men." Emphasis on attendance figures or growth in numbers is a dangerous addition to Jesus' promise that he will build his kingdom. Inordinate concern for buildings and programs and public popularity can distract us from the central calling we have as the church to meet the spiritual needs of individual people. And God will judge apostate worship today just as he did then.

The last two verses in the passage indicate how God is going to end this compromised worship:

"And I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees,  
of which she said,  
'These are my hire,  
which my lovers have given me.'  
I will make them a forest,  
and the beasts of the field shall devour them.  
And I will punish her for the feast days of the Baals  
when she burned incense to them  
and decked herself with her ring and jewelry,  
and went after her lovers,  
and forgot me, says the LORD."

He says he is going to cut off the annual harvest by bringing drought on the land so that the fig trees and grape vines will dry up. All the beautifully cultivated land will go back to a wild state. It will turn into a place where wild animals will devour people. That is what happened during the exile---the land went back to its natural state.

All of this punishment from God will happen because of Israel's misplaced affection and worship, the festivals of the Baals and her lovers---much religious activity, yet with God left out.

## **God Is Our Strength and Hope**

This entire passage is a challenging confrontation for each one of us personally. It examines the tragic transition in our lives from adoration to apostasy, the abandonment of former loyalties. The stages are painfully clear. The transition begins with ingratitude, with the loss of praise and thanksgiving to God alone as the source of sustenance and everything we have. It is very dangerous for us to get confused about what should be our basic conviction, that everything we have, everything we are, and everything we desire for ourselves in the future, are all gifts from God.

The Bible says that when we start thinking in terms of what we have accomplished, that is sinful pride. And yet it's easy to use a gift from God such as our intelligence and somehow believe that we are responsible for the understanding we gain with it. We can become proud of some unique talent or ability that God has given us, thinking that somehow we have acquired it ourselves. The same applies to the privileges, special opportunities, and accumulation of material possessions that God allows into our life. We start using the words I, me, and my a lot.

It is also misplaced praise to think of any person, group, or institution as the ultimate source of our blessings. We should be grateful to other people, but remember that it was God who provided those people in our lives and decided to use them as agents for our benefit. When I say to one of you, "Thank you for all that you mean to me," there should be the deeper implication that I thank God for using you so effectively in my life. We should be thankful for our church, our family, our small fellowship group, our place of employment, and even our nation; every one of those is a channel of blessing that God uses. But it is not the primary source of

blessing in our lives and is not to be given our supreme loyalty as Lord.

When I was a youth pastor in southern California, one of our elders was Jan Erdezak. He and his wife Olga were Czech refugees who came to this country after World War II. They started a business in southern California that became Olga of California, a women's apparel company. Jan and Olga are very godly, people; and I learned much from them in the couple of years that I worked under him in our church. One time he gave a message to a group of Christian businessmen in which he made a statement about his own greatest difficulty in living out his faith as a Christian. I expected him to talk about pressure, priorities, people problems, or something like that. But here is what he said:

No question about it, my greatest difficulty is remembering that I could not breathe a breath, think a thought, envision a plan, earn a dollar, maintain strength, or remain faithful to what I believe if it were not for the moment-by-moment blessing of God. When I forget that, I'm in trouble.

When we lose our grip on that kind of assurance, we begin to place our dependence on our own ability or on someone else's capacity to provide what we need. We end up making diminutive gods in our lives in competition with Yahweh. In an effort to ensure a steady flow of provision from them we forget God, and apostasy sets in even though it may be covered with a great veneer of religious activity, and our time, devotion, energy, and commitment ends up being given to a lesser god.

Our passage communicates clearly how God jars us with judgment because he won't tolerate other gods before him. We need to maintain a vivid awareness that God is our ultimate strength and hope. We need to do this through consistent repentance, turning back to him over and over as we realize we have become distracted and our focus is wrong, in the awesome realization of God's unwillingness to divorce us and his people Israel even when we have committed spiritual adultery by syncretizing our commitment to him with false gods.

George Matheson was one of Scotland's greatest nineteenth-century Bible teachers, preachers, and scholars. As a young man he was a prodigy in Greek and Hebrew and loved to study the Scriptures. He had to face several false gods in his own life when in his early twenties he discovered he was going blind. There were two things he confessed that he wrestled with. First, he didn't want to give up his biblical scholarship and his study of languages, and he feared that he wouldn't be as effective in ministry. And second, he confessed that he was angry because his identity as a Bible scholar and preacher was so important to him. But then, if that weren't enough, his fiancée broke her engagement to him when she found out he was going blind. (Both vocational ministry and marriage are legitimate sources of secondary blessing, of course.) Once again he raged at God. Then he wrote words of repentance and renewed commitment to God, confessing that he had forgotten God as the sovereign, the ultimate source of meaning and significance in his life. Sung for decades, these are the opening lines of the hymn *O Love That Will Not Let Me Go* :

O love that will not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in Thee;  
I give Thee back the life I owe,  
That in Thine ocean depths its flow  
May richer, fuller be.

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