

ARE YOU PROUD OF YOUR STUBBORN STREAK?

Hosea: Unbroken Love From A Broken Heart

by Doug Goins

Most of us defend our stubbornness, and we're kind of proud of it. We claim that we are fixed in our purpose. Our opinion is absolutely certain, and there is no reason for facts to confuse us; so being unyielding during an argument is a sign of courage, strength, and personal conviction. Sometimes we credit our nation of origin for our stubbornness; when I was in high school we knew a man who would say, "I'm a hard-headed Dutchman!" And Missouri is proud to be the "Show Me State." My children accuse me of justifying my own stubbornness with parental privilege. When they say, "Dad, why are you always right?" I say, "Because I'm the dad, that's why!" But all of us are "spin doctors," trying to create a justifiable image of ourselves.

In Hosea 4:16 this Old Testament prophet uses the word stubborn in his indictment of a people who claimed to live by faith. He says there is a built-in contradiction there. He sets his statement in the context of agricultural life:

Like a stubborn heifer,
Israel is stubborn....

I wouldn't want my children equating my strength of resolve with the stubbornness of a cow! That would be very inappropriate. But God feels the freedom to do that with the nation Israel. There is a second word Hosea uses in this passage to describe a habitual pattern in Israel's lifestyle of faith. It too is most commonly used to describe the nature of a farm animal that has supposedly been domesticated. Verse 12:

For a spirit of harlotry has led them astray....

Hosea speaks there of an influence on the people of God that, in the words of the New King James Bible, "has caused them to stray." These twin themes of straying and stubbornness are consistent throughout the passage.

Let's look first at verses 11 through 14, where the theme of straying from God is addressed. Hosea is going to say that we are totally accountable for straying out from under God's authority:

[Harlotry and] Wine and new wine
take away the understanding.
My people inquire of a thing of wood,
and their staff gives them oracles.
For a spirit of harlotry has led them astray,
and they have left their God to play the harlot.
They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains,
and make offerings upon the hills,
under oak, poplar, and terebinth,
because their shade is good.

Therefore your daughters play the harlot,
and your brides commit adultery.
I will not punish your daughters when they play the harlot,
nor your brides when they commit adultery;
for the men themselves go aside with harlots,
and sacrifice with cult prostitutes,

and a people without understanding shall come to ruin.

These verses open by talking about a lifestyle that takes away understanding, and they conclude by talking about the ultimate result--ruin and destruction.

The passage opens in verse 11 and the beginning of verse 12 with physical evidence in the life of the people of harlotry and idolatry. In our earlier studies in Hosea 1-3 we saw that the reason for Israel's gradual involvement with the worship of the Baals was that they were concerned about fertility. Not being good farmers themselves, they had to learn from the Canaanites who had been there before them. They wanted to ensure the fertility of the crops in the fields as well as of their sheep, oxen, and goats. Eventually they involved themselves in the fertility rites to ensure that they themselves would have healthy Jewish baby boys and girls.

These verses describe two forms of evil at work in the nation. First, harlotry, the word that opens verse 11, was participation in this fertility cult, which involved having sex with the prostitutes at the Canaanite shrines throughout the land. Alcohol was always a part of those rituals where the worship of sex was practiced. But there was something more than wine at work to dull their minds and take away their understanding: an enthrallment with idolatry that gradually replaced any understanding of the relationship they had with God. Remember, earlier in this chapter Hosea grieved over their lack of knowledge of God. We saw it in verse 1:

"There is no faithfulness or kindness,
and no knowledge of God in the land...."

Again in verse 6:

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;
...you have rejected knowledge...."

The second form of evil is mentioned in the first half of verse 12: involvement with pagan divination, soothsaying, or fortune-telling; trying to get answers to ultimate questions in life from idols. Hosea says that they had forgotten their identity as God's people and how deep his commitment and love for them were. God was committed to providing anything that they required. And he had promised to guide and direct them if they would trust him. But they had forgotten that; it didn't make sense anymore. So they practiced pagan divination at the high places. They prayed before Asherah poles, which were like tall, elaborately carved wooden totem poles to Asherah, the goddess of sex. Then they threw divining staffs or sticks up in the air, and, simply put, whichever direction they pointed when they landed, that was the god's sign clearly telling them what to do. That was the state to which they had come.

The prophet Isaiah talks about the foolishness of this in 44:14-17: "Why would you take a piece of wood and use part of it to warm your home, part of it to cook your food, and a third part to carve and worship?" It was also very demanding of God; they were essentially saying to him, "You will tell us what we want to know through this divination."

The second half of verse 12 talks about the spiritual reality behind this physical activity. It is an accusation that the nation was straying out from under God's authority. That is the ultimate result of a lifestyle of idolatry. Look at the second part of verse 12:

"For a spirit of harlotry has led them astray,
and they have left their God to play the harlot."

The people had become so engrossed in idolatry that they were not under the control of the God who loved them and was committed to them, but rather under the sway of a spirit. It was a spirit whose character caused them to wander wildly into a lifestyle of spiritual fornication.

Spirit here primarily means an overpowering urge, or something that comes from outside of a person and irresistibly overwhelms them. It speaks of the evil force of demonic power. This is a picture of how virtually inescapable Israel's harlotry with the Baals had become. We saw a similar pattern in chapters 1-3 in the life of Gomer, whose life became a downward spiral or progression. First she chose to betray her husband by committing adultery. That progressed to promiscuity in cult prostitution. And finally she didn't even own herself anymore; she was a slave in the slave market waiting to be purchased by somebody else. That describes a life of compulsively wandering away from God. The Hebrew root of the term to be "led astray" in verse 12 means to wander as well as to be deceived, seduced, and ultimately led to ruin. All of that is implied in the use of this verb throughout the Old Testament.

Israel's compulsive trust in idols and spiritual adultery had led them to leave their God. That means literally to get out from under God's authority, or his right to reign. They found ways to sneak off and be led astray or distracted. God's love relationship with them had covenant obligations that he expected of his people. (Remember, in verse 10 we saw that knowing God meant both intimacy, a love relationship; and obedience, a lifestyle of integrity or doing what God wanted them to do.) But Israel found that limiting and oppressive somehow, so they chased after the Baals. Verse 13 gives more physical evidence of their harlotry and idolatry:

"They sacrifice on the tops of mountains...."

They were feeling emancipated from the restraint of God's revealed truth in the Law and the other Scriptures that had been given to them. And there was a sense of intoxication with being in control of their own life. So they indulged in the sordid Canaanite practices described here. They sacrificed animals and burned incense to idols on the high places under big shade trees, where it was comfortable and cool. And their own wives and virgin daughters joined the Canaanite cult prostitutes in the sexual fertility rites.

Before we go any farther, it's important that we examine some of the deeper causes of the behavior described in verses 11-13. We need to relate it to our own spiritual struggles today as people of faith. God would say of us that we are his people. As those who claim to have surrendered to the Lord Jesus Christ, the question that we have to address is, "What is our own spiritual adultery?" In the twentieth century we have unique idols toward which we stray, which are just as seductive as the idolatry with which Israel wrestled in the eighth century before Jesus. An idol can be anything or anybody that we depend on for our meaning as persons. If we say, "I have to have this; God is not good enough," then that is an idol.

The greatest idol for American Christians today is probably greed, covetousness, or materialism. The Lord Jesus warned of the danger of "mammon"---money and everything money can buy. He warned that it is dangerous because it wants to control us, and the picture that is being painted in Hosea 4 is of being controlled by something that we start out to worship. We demand that this idol give us all kinds of things---emotional security, physical safety, pleasure, freedom, sophistication, and the possessions we think we deserve. And for the sake of money, resources, and the security they provide, we are willing to make terrible sacrifices---our marriages, our children, our friendships, and even the availability of our time, energy, and possessions for the Lord Jesus to use us as he wants to in his kingdom.

Idols threaten to occupy the throne of our hearts, and in reality God-substitutes never offer freedom. They are incredibly demanding. My own experience with material possessions is that the more I have, the more time it takes to manage and service them. We expect our idols to give us life, but it works just the opposite way. They own us instead of our owning them.

Our straying away from the Lord can be very subtle. We juggle our idols while at the same time expressing our commitment to God. We set up our priorities, our personal goals, our images, our families, our future plans. And then we not only ask God to bless them, but we ask him to work so it all comes out the way we want it to. So we try to keep even the Lord in the idol-polishing and maintenance business for us.

Our prayers also become like the divination of the Israelites at the high places. We are demanding and manipulative: "Lord, give us an oracle. Tell us what we want to know. Give us what we want." We do that

rather than coming to him in humility because he desires us to hear his heart and his purposes. So we end up praying, "My will be done," not "Thy will be done."

In fact, our straying self is probably the most dangerous diminutive god. While we say we're Christians, attend church, pray, and become involved in a few good works, we still control our own lives. We need God only so that he can help us fulfill our own agendas.

But God has absolute authority over us, and he desires to own us completely instead of our trying to jerk him around or demand things turn out a certain way. That issue is the focus of Jesus' parable of the wicked vine-dressers in Matthew 21. In it he says clearly that the vineyard had an owner, who leased the vineyard to sharecroppers. This vineyard had abundant vines, and he had just done a huge renovation project before they moved in. He had built a new wall of protection around it, a watchtower in which they could live and guard the property, and winepresses. He had provided every resource they needed. All that the vine-dressers had to do was work the land, make use of the facilities he had provided, and then enjoy the profits. And the profits would have been good; in the normal relationship for sharecropping in first-century Palestine, the owner would take one-third every year and the tenants would get to keep two-thirds. That was fairly generous sharecropping.

The vine-dressers knew that the vineyard belonged to the owner, not to them---but that was the rub. They began to believe and act as though the vineyard were theirs. They reasoned, "We're the ones doing the work---we prune, clean, fertilize, and harvest. Why does the owner have any claim to the produce at all? It's really ours." So when the owner sent delegations of servants to collect the annual rent on the property, they murdered some of them, beat them, stoned them, and threw them off the land. And when the son who was the rightful heir finally came, they murdered him. They said, "If we kill the heir, it will be ours, once and for all."

This parable of human straying was told by Jesus during his last week in Jerusalem before he was crucified. It helps us understand his mission to Israel, the vineyard of God. But it also helps us understand his concern for us today. Jesus says, "You belong to me," and he demands our whole life. The transition from thinking in terms of "my life" to "his" is really difficult. It is a radical change of thinking about ourselves and the resources around us. Even in the way we become a Christian, we often talk about inviting the Lord into *our* life as if it belonged to us. We treat him as if he were an invited guest, and we give over to him the parts of our life where we're comfortable with his lordship. We hang onto all kinds of things we don't want to give over to him. But the Lord Jesus refuses to be a guest, and he won't take a place on the shelf next to our idols. He wouldn't do that with Israel, and he isn't going to do it with us. He demands ownership and authority over us. First Corinthians 6:19-20 says, "You are not your own; you are bought with a price." The price was his own life, offered up on the cross.

The consequences of straying from God's authority are summarized in verse 14:

"I will not punish your daughters when they play the harlot,
nor your brides when they commit adultery;
for the men themselves go aside with harlots,
and sacrifice with cult prostitutes,
and a people without understanding shall come to ruin."

This verse continues to expose Israel's persistent obsession with the Baal fertility cults. We saw in verse 13 that Israel as a nation under God was giving up their young women, married and single, to the worship of sex. Women who had been made in God's image were prostituting themselves. The great tragedy of prostitution, male or female, is that it violates the very stamp of the Creator, from whom we came and to whom we belong, who loves us, claims us, and owns us. And so we violate who we are as well.

Verses 13---14 are really a benchmark in biblical morality; any idea of a double standard for men and women is destroyed here. God does not castigate the wives and daughters who are involved in immorality. He points his finger at the men who led them into immorality because they had rejected the protective boundaries of the Ten Commandments. The prophet powerfully confronts the false idea that a man's sexual sins ought to be taken less seriously than a woman's.

The verse also says that the failure of the moral leadership of the men in that nation resulted in the women's following them into immorality. Then in the last phrase of the verse Hosea ties this directly to the ultimate destruction of the nation in God's judgment through the Assyrian invasion and exile.

"...And a people without understanding shall come to ruin."

The phrase "come to ruin" has the same root as the term that we saw in verse 12, to be led astray. Ruin is where you end up when you stray. The failure of husbands and fathers to be spiritual leaders begins the downward spiral of social deterioration in any nation, any society, or any time.

Edward Gibbon wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* about two hundred years ago. In it he listed five reasons why that civilization was destroyed. Two of the five had to do with faith and family. He said one was, "the decay of religion as it faded into mere form, losing touch with life and becoming impotent to guide the people." And he said the other was, "the rapid increase in divorce, undermining the dignity and sanctity of the home, which is the basis of human society."

Divorce in the Roman Empire and in Israel always benefited men, by and large, in terms of freedom to live life the way they wanted to, and this is true even in our culture today. We men live in a dangerous time. We have to be willing to stand up to the forces at work in our society that promote pornography, or the worship of sex and dehumanize women in the process. In every magazine we get we see it. This is not so different from what was going on in Israel when men were willing to let their women be exploited and victimized. We have to be committed to being faithful husbands who live out fidelity to the Lord and to our wives so that our kids grow up seeing a healthy view of sexuality. And we have to teach our children the value of moral purity as they grow up. If we don't do it, our nation is going to be as lost as Israel was. Verse 14 shows the logical conclusion.

I am grateful for the new emphasis in ministry on men's being spiritual leaders in the home. The "Dad the Family Shepherd" conferences are wonderful affirmations of that. There are fifty thousand men in Anaheim Stadium this weekend attending a Promise-Keepers conference, which challenges men to be godly leaders in their communities and in their homes before their wives and children. Now verses 15-19 deal with the issue of stubbornness:

Though you play the harlot, O Israel,
let not Judah become guilty.
Enter not into Gilgal,
nor go up to Beth-aven,
and swear not, "As the LORD lives."

Like a stubborn heifer,
Israel is stubborn;
can the LORD now feed them
like a lamb in a broad pasture?

Ephraim is joined to idols,
let him alone.
A band of drunkards, they give themselves to harlotry;
they love shame more than their glory.
A wind has wrapped them in its wings,
and they shall be ashamed because of their altars.

Beth-aven is a distortion of the name Bethel. Both Gilgal and Bethel were places of worship in the life of the nation Israel, but they had both been corrupted by Canaanite worship. Bethel means House of God, but Hosea calls it Beth-aven, House of Wickedness.

Hosea uses the southern kingdom of Judah to stir up competitive consternation on the part of Israel. He is saying, "Though Israel is playing the harlot, I pray that Judah won't sink to that level." The people in Israel would be startled at that and would respond, "Listen, Judah is just as guilty as we are. Are you saying they're better off?" And the prophet says, "Yes, you *are* guilty, aren't you? That's the point!"

Before the people entered the sanctuaries of Canaanite worship at Gilgal and Beth-aven, they would say, "As *Yahweh* lives!"---and then go in to embrace idolatry. What Hosea is warning about is dishonesty; saying one thing with our mouth in public worship, but being committed to something else in the innermost secrets of our heart or in our lifestyle. The Hebrew phrase "As the Lord lives!" means, "God is in charge. By God's sovereignty I live and move and have my being. He owns me." We often sing these phrases: "Lord, I lift Your name on high...." "The greatest thing in all my life is knowing You...loving You...serving You." "With all my heart I want to love You...all that is in me is Yours completely...." "We lift our lives up to You, we are an offering...All that we have, all that we are, all that we hope to be, we give to You." It's very dangerous to affirm those things as if we mean them if we secretly have stubborn rebellion at work in us.

For many years I led worship music in this church and other places. I made great confessions of my submission to God's absolute authority over my life. But I lived with secret unconfessed sin that I didn't want to deal with. For years I would call what was really stubborn arrogance a strong self-image or healthy confidence. And I would call stubborn impatience with people having high standards. Deep inside through those years I knew it was sin, but I allowed it to remain unjudged and unconfessed. I justified and rationalized and hung on to those things very stubbornly. Many people around me in my family and in other relationships suffered because of that.

Verses 16-19 say that the main point is that there are dangerous consequences if we choose to allow stubborn resistance to God to stay in our lives. The opening picture in verse 16, which we already looked at, is of a stubborn heifer; a willful, resistant young cow. The word stubborn is always used in the Old Testament to connote rebellion. My dictionary defines it as, "hard to deal with, unruly, obstinate, hard to manage, or ungovernable." Resistance to authority is implied.

When my younger brother Mike and I were seven and nine, our dad allowed us to have a Holstein calf. Dad had grown up on farms and thought it would be good for us. I have vivid memories of that willful calf dragging us around. A nine-year-old and a seven-year-old could not handle him; he was really tough and strong. We were supposed to be his owners, but he rarely wanted to go where we wanted him to go.

The King James Bible uses an old-fashioned word that we hardly use anymore in verse 16: "For Israel slideth back as a backsliding heifer...." Every fall my grandfather would buy some beef cattle and fatten them up over the winter to sell in the spring. I remember a couple of times watching Granddad and the cattle-buyer trying to get year-old calves up a ramp into a truck. One of them would be pushing and one would be pulling with a rope. These calves would stiffen their legs and resist, and the moment the pressure was taken off they would immediately slide back down the ramp. They refused to be led or pushed. That is a pretty good picture of Israel's refusing to be led by God. Do you see yourself in this picture? Is it clear where you are stubbornly resisting what God wants for you?

There is a clear consequence of living with stubbornness in the second half of verse 16:

"Can the LORD feed them
like a lamb in a broad pasture?"

No, he couldn't feed Israel like a lamb, because they didn't want to be a lamb, and didn't want to allow him to be their Shepherd God. They were going to be stubborn, resistant, rebellious cows! So God says he is going to let them wander off where they want to go. And it is very dangerous for a domesticated animal to get out in the wilds; their life can be short-lived. God can essentially say to us as well, "I'm not going to push or pull you anymore. Wander off on your own, be stubborn."

This choice by God is reinforced in verse 17:

"Ephraim is joined to idols,
let him alone."

This is an anguished cry on God's part, because Ephraim is his term of endearment for his people in the northern kingdom, the name that speaks of his love for them. But he is making a choice to let them have what they want. And historically they would live with the consequences of that. The result was being cut off from God. If we today stubbornly refuse to listen to the Lord and continue to rebel against what we know is true, a time will come when God stops speaking to us, too. He will leave us alone for a season and let us have what we want.

Verses 18 and 19 a final summary of this whole section in which they are called a band of drunkards, giving themselves to harlotry and loving shame more than their glory. This is a people locked in compulsive patterns and the intoxication of idolatry. I said earlier that idol worship can become obsessive; we won't be able to stop and it will totally own us. The implication is that stubborn resistance to God can become a compulsion. Glory won't even matter anymore. Glory is a beautiful word that speaks of our value, the weight or importance we have to God and to other people. But we won't care anymore that God sees us as people who are incredibly valuable and worthwhile. We will care more about making sure we have our own way. The result is that a whirlwind, the spirit of harlotry that was described in verse 12, will totally wrap its arms around us so we can't get out, and sweep us away. That is what happened to Israel. They were swept into exile in captivity to the Assyrians.

There is a small glimmer of hope in the last sentence in verse 19:

"...and they shall be ashamed because of their altars [sacrifices]."

The nation did come to a place of brokenness and repentance. They ended up being thoroughly ashamed before God and confessing their racing after life everywhere else except in the Lord. But it came because of the judgment of exile, because they were swept out of their own land and left alone for a season in Assyria apart from the Lord.

Let me ask you this morning: What is it going to take in our lives to break the pattern of being led astray by idolatrous loyalties, whether to a person, relationship, career, or resources? What is it going to take to stop our habitual wandering out from under God's authority over us? What is it going to take to break our stubborn rebellion against God's desire to lead us and really be in charge of everything? Maybe it will take sickness or broken relationships; tragedy seems to arrest our attention. C.S. Lewis said that pain can be the megaphone through which God speaks. But although that can get our attention, it can't solve the problem.

God's grace in Jesus Christ is the only lasting cure. He knows that a wandering heart can be captured only by his love. We are imperious in our control of the vineyard of our lives, refusing to say, "It's yours," because we haven't fully understood how and why he wants to control and lead us, and what he wants to do in his loving care for us. There is a great old hymn by Robert Robinson, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*, that confesses our propensity toward stubbornness and resistance:

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee:
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it;
Seal it for Thy courts above.

If you go back and read this whole chapter again, you will see in bold contrast the intimacy of knowing God in a secure love relationship in the first half, and the loneliness of stubbornness in this second half. Sometimes God allows our lives to fall apart so that we can see what our stubbornness is doing to us and other people around us. When that happens he is saying to us, "Why are you rebelling against me? I love you! Whatever I take away is only to draw you back to me. Give me your life. Give me your stubborn isolation. I will claim you and restore you to wholeness. I will lovingly lead you."

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