

# DOES GOD PLAY FAVORITES?

*Hosea: Unbroken Love From A Broken Heart*

by Doug Goins

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Have you ever felt that you were judged unfairly, perhaps at work, at school, or on a sports team? Did your supervisor, teacher, or coach seem to have higher standards for you than for others? At my first job out of high school, a summer job at a printing company, the owner instantly took a dislike to me and treated me much differently than the other employees. He told me he was going to try to drive me out of the business, and he did after about a month. It didn't make much sense to me.

Or perhaps you have enjoyed the opposite type of relationship, in which you were the boss' favorite, the teacher's pet, or the coach's nephew. You never had to run laps and you got to pick up the equipment after practice. You always seemed to get the good breaks and the benefit of the doubt. Maybe your grade-C work in school always seemed to get a B- from a certain teacher. That happened to me too; my high school English teacher in my junior and senior year loved me.

But when I got to my freshman English composition class in college, it was very different---the professor didn't play favorites. He didn't care about my wonderful personality or the A's that I had gotten in high school. Within six months the A's had become C's and D's. He viewed me in a way that neither my printing company boss nor my high school English teacher had: He was completely objective (and it drove me nuts). His goal was clear, his commitment to me was consistent, and he fairly judged my efforts as a writer. He required that I submit to all the rules of spelling and grammar. When I failed he critiqued me or even chastised me, but not out of pique or perversity or because he had it in for me.

This professor loved students and the English language. He loved seeing students grow into clear communicators. He wanted us to be confident of our skills and abilities. So his tough objective grading was for our good. One time our class was moaning and groaning over newly returned papers that were mostly covered with C's and D's and lots of red ink. He said, "All you care about is the time you spent last night writing. I care about the rest of your lives."

Our passage in Hosea 5 opens with similar language. Speaking through the prophet Hosea, God says to the nation of Israel, "...The judgment pertains to you...." And he says further, "...I will chastise all of them." God is a judge who chastises or rebukes. Do you think God's evaluation of our lives, motives, and behavior is impartial? Or is he out to get certain people? And does he play favorites?

Hosea 5 answers these questions. It also continues the themes that we studied in chapter 4 regarding the nation's prideful stubbornness, the misguidance of the spiritual leaders in the nation, and stumbling as a consequence of sin and the apostate worship of the Baals. Verses 1-7:

Hear this, O priests!  
Give heed, O house of Israel!  
Hearken, O house of the king!  
For the judgment pertains to you;  
for you have been a snare at Mizpah,  
and a net spread upon Tabor.  
And they have made deep the pit of Shittim;  
but I will chastise all of them.

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

Their deeds do not permit them  
to return to their God.  
For the spirit of harlotry is within them,  
and they know not the LORD.

The pride of Israel testifies to his face;  
Ephraim shall stumble in his guilt;  
Judah also shall stumble with them.

With their flocks and herds they shall go  
to seek the LORD,  
but they will not find him;  
he has withdrawn from them.

They have dealt faithlessly with the LORD;  
for they have borne alien children.  
Now the new moon shall devour them with their fields.

I had two unsettling thoughts when I initially read this passage. The first was the possibility that our lives could become a snare or a trap for other people. The second was the frightening possibility that I could raise children in my own home who end up not knowing God.

Have you taken seriously the fact that people evaluate Christ and the Christian faith you embrace by what they see in you? Would someone want to become a Christian because of what they see in your relationship to Christ? Would they want to seek the Lord's help with problems because of the way you deal with your own problems? In a world of anxiety, what kind of a witness to the peace of Christ have you been? Or in a society filled with physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering, how have you exemplified the compassion of the Savior? It is helpful for me to ask myself questions like these. In the light of the verses above from Hosea, we could be a snare for others in our attitudes, words, and behavior because of the lack of godly authenticity in our lives. I thought of Emerson's famous statement: "Don't *say* things. What you are stands over you the while, and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary." It reminds us that our actions depict the real intent of our discipleship.

I remember being startled when my son Micah at about age eight sat down on the bed beside me, put his arm around me, and said, "Dad, I want to be just like you." That was unsettling! My kids are moving into adulthood---Trevor is almost twenty-four, Kathryn is fifteen, Micah is entering adolescence as a thirteen-year-old, and Alayna is eleven. I look at them with a mixture of delight and alarm; I see both my character strengths and also my sinful hang-ups ingrained in the personalities of this next generation.

## **Discipline for renewed obedience**

Let's examine our text. In the first three verses God speaks immediately of the evenhandedness of his evaluation of our lives. Verse 1 begins by summoning for judgment three groups: the priesthood, the whole population of Israel, and the kings with their royal court. As we saw in our discussion of the failure of the priesthood in chapter 4, spiritual leadership is a privilege with great responsibility. The statement, "...the judgment pertains to you," is addressed to the spiritual and political leadership of the nation, but also to the people themselves, who were naively following them. Biblical truth was not being taught and justice was not being administered in the nation. Hosea warns both the leaders and the citizens alike that what God was judging was the dilution of righteousness or justice. He says his judgment is impartial, for he will chastise all of them equally.

Hosea uses the images of a snare, a net, and a pit. Those are the tools and work of hunters, not of caring protectors of people. The accusation is that the nation hadn't lived up to their responsibility for maintaining God's law in their own lives. They had no witness to the nations around them. Hosea is saying that their disobedience had made them dangerous to themselves and other people. The leaders were responsible for trapping Israel in apostasy, but the men of the nation, the fathers and husbands, were equally responsible, as

we saw clearly in chapter 4 verse 14:

"...For the men themselves go aside with harlots,  
and sacrifice with cult prostitutes,  
and a people without understanding shall come to ruin."

Men were leading their wives and daughters into pornography and sexual immorality. Remember Jesus' words that it is probably better to die than to cause somebody who is young in faith to stumble in their walk with the Lord (see Matthew 18:6).

There are three places mentioned: Mizpah, Tabor, and Shittim. Those were sites of syncretistic Canaanite cult worship. The point here is that disobedience in the land was pervasive. God says in the last phrase in verse 2,

"...I will chastise all of them."

Literally this says, "I am your instructor." (If your Bible says punish, that is a bad translation, because this is not about punishment but about discipline.) The root of the word chastisement means instruction by the father of a family. Chastisement was meted out by fathers who had a responsibility to care for, guard, guide, and protect their children. *Yahweh* as the father of Israel had established rules for his spiritual family's life and relationships. And the purpose of his chastisement was to discipline them for a new obedience; his judgment was remedial. He wants to teach us and restore us to a life of healthy submission to his will. So he will "get in our way" if he needs to.

Verse 3 says that even though the leaders were deceiving the people and the people were guilty of self-deception, the Lord wasn't deceived at all. He knew Ephraim, or Israel, intimately and accurately. The New English Bible gives these words a warm, affectionate tone:

"I have cared for Ephraim,  
and I have not neglected Israel...."

That affection heightens the impact of the chastisement to come. This is a soul-wrenching expression of unbroken care from a broken heart.

An even more vivid contrast in verse 3 is that God knew all about Israel's unresponsiveness and the harlotry that had defiled her. And yet he continued to pursue her in love. It is amazing to think that God knows everything about us, inside out, and still cares for us. It should be a wonderful motivation for cleansing confession of sin in our lives. In conversation with people, I have often heard tragic stories of sinful rebellion and moral failure, and then had the delight of saying, "You know, God knows all about that and he loves you in spite of what you've done! He will forgive you and let you start all over." Some people were astonished that God knew all about them even before they confessed their sin. His omniscience and omnipresence with them were jarring, even shocking. Some asked, "How could he care for me, knowing what I've done?" All I could say was, "He is God, and that is his nature. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....'"

### **Gradually hardening pride**

Of greater concern for Hosea are the people who will not come to God because of what they have done. Verses 4 and 5 expose that disturbing reality:

"Their deeds do not permit them  
to return to their God.  
For the spirit of harlotry is within them,  
and they know not the Lord.  
The pride of Israel testifies to his face...."

First the behavior or the lifestyle of the people contradicted who God was as he had revealed himself to them. Then their behavior became an obsession with them, keeping them from returning to God. Remember, the people originally wanted *both* *Ya hweh* and the Baals; they wanted to play both ends against the middle. But ultimately they ended up having no desire at all to enjoy intimacy with the Lord.

When the Israelites *denied* *Ya hweh's* lordship, they made themselves vulnerable to an evil spirit of harlotry. As we saw in Hosea 4:12,

"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."

Compulsive behavior set into their lives because of demonic influence. But that influence always acts in cooperation with our own fleshly choices to rebel; to be self-indulgent, arrogant, and self-sufficient. And so the behavior gradually becomes ingrained.

"The pride of Israel testifies to his face...." literally means that they were sealed over with pride or hardened in it, and they wore it on their faces. They were proud of being proud. The way they lived their lives testified to that. Gradually hardening pride happened in Israel in the eighth century before Jesus. It happened during Jesus' ministry. And it happens to us today. We continually need to pray the prayer of King David in Psalm 139:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart!  
Try me and know my [anxious] thoughts!  
And see if there be any wicked way in me..."

That is a call for us to have a lifestyle of self-examination and awareness. It is critical. We must honestly evaluate our attitudes, relationships, behavior, possessions, habits, and other involvements. Honest evaluation looks for consistency with our obedience to God as he has revealed himself to us. When the Lord identifies sin, we have to agree with him, or confess it, and then renounce it, or turn around and repent.

I remember a visit I had from a Stanford student when I was involved in college ministry. I had taught on James 4, and he came to see me and said he was very concerned about verse 6: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." I had stressed with the students how pride gradually hardens and forms a tough, resistant exterior that truth cannot penetrate. This young man looked me right in the eye and said, "You were talking about me in that message. The pride membrane has almost sealed up. I used to know God, but I seem to have drifted away from him. Something is wrong. Can you help me?"

I asked him to take a sheet of paper so he could take an inventory of how he was living his life, not for my benefit but for his. I asked him, "Is there any issue in your life right now where you know you are resisting truth and living in violation of God's desires?" He said, "How did you know?" Then he wrote down an admission of sinful rebellion in his life that had to do with sexual sin. I asked him next, "Is there any crisis in your life right now that requires power and resources that you know you don't have?" He smiled and said, "You know me pretty well." Then he wrote down an area of anxious concern that had to do with graduate school admission. I asked him if there were any broken relationships in which he needed to express forgiveness, caring, or deeper love. He choked up and talked about estrangement from his family, the responsibility for which lay primarily with him. He also confessed that his prayer life was non-existent, and that he was doing nothing for spiritual nourishment or fellowship. His list got longer and longer.

He finally threw up his hands and said, "Okay, I'm guilty as charged. Now what can we do about it?" I told him how fortunate he was that God had given him the desire to return to him before the way became totally

blocked by pride. He had taken the first step to begin walking again in the light. We read 1 John 1:5-7: "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." We talked the obstacles that he had sinfully accumulated to walking in light in terms of attitudes and actions. Then we talked about grace, forgiveness, a solid new commitment to Jesus, and new priorities in his life. We prayed together. As he was leaving he held up the spiritual inventory sheet of the things that God had convicted him of and said, "Here's my new agenda--pray for me."

## **Losing the desire to know God**

Reflecting on that conversation, I have realized how important this particular portion of Hosea is for each of us. It reminds us of the danger of drifting so far away from God that we lose our desire to know him. Perhaps you are teetering on the brink of unconfessed sins that block the flow of God's power in your life and cause the kind of habitual stumbling that is described in the second half of verse 5:

"Ephraim shall stumble in his guilt;  
Judah also shall stumble with them."

It is dangerous to go on very long living with sin and not dealing with it. You come to the point where it is almost impossible to return to the Lord. That is what is described in verses 6 and 7:

"With their flocks and herds they shall go  
to seek the LORD,  
but they will not find him;  
he has withdrawn from them.

They have dealt faithlessly with the LORD;  
for they have borne alien children.

Now the new moon shall devour them with their fields."

This scene is graphic in its irony and sadness. The people couldn't find the Lord because they were looking in the wrong places! They were seeking him in the Baal shrines. We have seen over and over as Hosea has hammered away at it that they kept trying to blend worship of God and the idols they had built. No wonder they couldn't find him. There is a contrast here with verse 4, which talks about the spirit of harlotry in their midst; here Yahweh has withdrawn from them and he is no longer in their midst. Where and how we seek the Lord makes all the difference. He is not going to be found as one of our diminutive gods. He will not be found when our allegiance or even worship is given to anything else or anybody else.

But Yahweh is the one who has marked out the way back. There is a beautiful statement in Jeremiah 29:13: "You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, says the LORD." When we permit ourselves to be distracted by nothing else in our search for him, then we will find him.

Verse 7 describes the frightening results of the spirit of harlotry. The phrase "dealt faithlessly with the LORD" is always used in terms of marital infidelity, as when a husband deceives his wife and is unfaithful to her. That unfaithfulness to God resulted in illegitimate children born from the sexual rites of the fertility cult that we looked at in chapter 4. These children weren't Jewish or Canaanite, but of mixed race. But that was not the real tragedy--the tragedy was that they were children who would grow up confused, with no clear understanding of who God was.

The closing sentence of the verse introduces the judgment God would bring, which will be described in verses 8-15. Judgment on the nation would come through warfare and exile. These last verses will introduce an old

conflict: Israel and Judah had had ongoing battles over national boundaries. These verses introduce as well a dangerous new ally, Assyria, which both nations pursued to come to their rescue.

Blow the horn in Gibeah,  
the trumpet in Ramah.

Sound the alarm at Beth-aven;  
tremble, O Benjamin!

Ephraim shall become a desolation  
in the day of punishment [rebuke];  
among the tribes of Israel  
I declare what is sure.

The princes of Judah have become  
like those who remove the landmark;  
upon them I will pour out  
my wrath like water.

Ephraim is oppressed, crushed in judgment,  
because he was determined to go after vanity.  
Therefore I am like a moth to Ephraim,  
and like dry rot to the house of Judah.

When Ephraim saw his sickness,  
and Judah his wound,  
then Ephraim went to Assyria,  
and sent to the great king.

But he is not able to cure you  
or heal your wound.

For I will be like a lion to Ephraim,  
and like a young lion to the house of Judah.  
I, even I, will rend and go away,  
I will carry off, and none shall rescue.

I will return again to my place,  
until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face....

## **War is God's Judgment**

Hosea predicts judgment on Israel, the northern kingdom, and Judah, the southern kingdom. It would begin with this border war between the two nations in which the leaders of Judah were moving boundary markers (verse 10). Apparently Judah would invade Israel, and Israel would appeal to Assyria for help (verse 13). It would finally culminate with the great betrayal by the Assyrian lion, who would first enter into a treaty relationship with Israel, and then finally invade and crush the nation (verse 11). In verse 14 God says,

"...I will be like a lion to Ephraim...."

He means the lion of Assyria. The last phrase in verse 14,

"...I will carry [them] off...."

This speaks of the deportation and exile of the population. That prophesy was fulfilled with the fall of Samaria in 722 BC to the Assyrian king *Shalmaneser V*.

In these events we see Yahweh at work as the Lord of all nations, even though they did not recognize him. Israelites, Judahites, Assyrians---God would use them all for his purposes of judging and rebuking through the battles that they had with each other. Eventually all the self-protective alliances would backfire. There is a universal spiritual principle here that is important to see. Divine justice is executed through political and military conflict between nations. War is always God's judgment on both sides; it doesn't matter if you're the aggressor or the victim. Israel and Judah each appealed to Assyria for help against the other, but eventually God used Assyria to judge both of them. Verse 12 makes it clear that God himself was the source of judgment; Assyria was just a tool in his hand. God would be like a moth eating the weakened fabric of Israel's military strength. He would be like dry rot eroding Judah's prideful self-satisfaction. And all the appeals for help from the outside would heal nothing; they would just create more problems.

Hosea says God would be like a young lion to the house of Judah. Assyria did invade the southern kingdom and actually camped around Jerusalem, but Judah was saved by a hair's breadth by God's intervention. But 115 years later a grown-up, powerful lion in the form of Babylon would wipe out the southern kingdom as well.

There are two views of history here, the physical and the spiritual, that capture the full impact of this section of Hosea. We must see what God was doing behind the scenes of human history. Historically, we see warfare, aggression, greed, destruction, occupation, displacement of captive people, the spoils of war---all the things that have always been there. But spiritually we see God at work chastising arrogant people who wouldn't renounce pride and apostasy. Through it all his intention was that judgment would lead to repentance. He passionately desired for his people to return to him.

### **The distress that brings repentance**

Verse 15 provides the solution to the problem in verse 4. Verse 4 said,

"Their deeds do not permit them  
to return to their God...."

But God says in verse 15,

"I will return again to my place,  
until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face,  
and in their distress they seek me...."

This clearly portrays the redemptive purpose in his hand of judgment. When we read these words we again feel the heartbeat of God's grace and love. I read a statement this week in *Christianity Today* by Philip Yancy, who was describing a father waiting for his son to come back. It captured for me the broken-hearted love of God, waiting and waiting for the nation to come back to him:

I remember one afternoon in Chicago, sitting in an outdoor restaurant and listening to a broken man tell the story of his prodigal son. Jake, the son, couldn't keep a job. He wasted all his money on drugs and alcohol. He rarely called home, and brought little joy and much grief to both parents. My friend, Jake's father, felt helpless. "If only I could bring him back and shelter him and try to show how much I love him," he said. He paused to gain control of his voice, and then added, "The strange thing is, even though he rejects me, Jake's love means more to me than my other three responsible children. Odd, isn't it? That's how love is."

Like Jake's father, God wouldn't give up on his beloved Ephraim. But he is different from a human father. He has resources we don't have. Out of grace he expresses wrath, and simultaneously he is patiently waiting for his people to repent and seek him.

Verse 15 describes three parts to the process of repenting and seeking him. First of all, they had to accept the consequences of sin and recognize their own personal guilt and responsibility, so repentance was paramount. The language here implies public acknowledgment, saying out loud, "I am responsible, and nobody else." We see that necessity in 1 John 1:8-9: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just [righteous], and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

The second part of the process is that they had to be willing to seek his face. The word seek means to intensely look for something that is not close at hand. The objective is to satisfy a deep desire. It means that they would come to a place of knowing what the real need was, the only one who could satisfy---not alliances with Assyria for material security and protection, and nothing that could come by trying to get an edge on their brothers in the other kingdom, but only the Lord.

Finally, it was in their distress that they would seek the Lord. That represents a direct, personal turning to the Lord out of deep trouble, a state of helplessness and deep affliction.

Sadly enough, the Assyrian-Babylonian captivity of Israel and Judah witnessed little of that kind of change of heart in the people. We saw back in Hosea 3:5 that it would come for Israel, although it is still unfulfilled: "Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king; and they shall come in fear to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days." The hope reaches into the millennium when Israel really will repent before the Lord and seek intimacy with him once again.

But the good news for us today is that we can return to the Lord through Jesus in brokenness, humility, and repentance. We can rejoice and be thankful for the way God uses people and events to break our pride. He allows adversity in our lives to get our attention. We can be confident that his assessment of us is absolutely objective and fair. No, God does not play favorites. He sees all of us exactly the same, through eyes of redeeming love, through the cross of Christ. He sees what he can make of us.

God's purpose in judgment is to arrest our attention and confront us with our sinful rebellion. He is calling, "Come back! Just turn around and return to me. Learn again to trust me as the Lord of your life and to submit to me." If in fact the spirit of conviction is at work in you, don't resist it. Ask God to break up the pride that is hardening around you, and to soften you to him.

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