

THE FORGOTTEN FATHER

Hosea: Unbroken Love From A Broken Heart

by Doug Goins

Most of our family's vacations have been spent camping all over the western states: Oregon, Washington, Idaho; even Canada. This summer we camped in the San Juan Islands in the state of Washington for a week, and then we came back to California to PBC's week-long family camp at Lake Siskiyou at the foot of Mount Shasta.

One of the problems I faced in preparing to go camping this year was that a whole year had passed since I had taken all our camping gear and thrown it into the "black hole" of our garage and forgotten about it after our last camping trip. I'm sure you understand that dynamic: At the time you put something away, you're pretty sure what it is and what it's for; but as they say, "out of sight, out of mind." So I had to spend an entire day cleaning our garage just to find the camping equipment. And organizing all of that equipment turned out to be a pretty amazing effort.

I realized as I was studying through Hosea 8 this week that often that is exactly what we do with God, even as people who know him and love him. We file him away and forget where we put him, and eventually we can even lose any conscious awareness of his presence. It isn't that he removed himself from us; rather, we removed ourselves from him. In Hosea 8 this Old Testament prophet charges Israel and Judah with that sort of forgetfulness. Verse 14 summarizes the chapter:

**"For Israel has forgotten his Maker,
and built palaces;
and Judah has multiplied fortified cities;
but I will send a fire upon his cities,
and it shall devour his strongholds."**

Allan Redpath talks about this dynamic of forgetting God in his wonderful book *Learning to Live*:

Do we understand what it means to forget God? I'm not sure we do. It does not mean that God was put into the realm of oblivion. You cannot forget God like that! Even in denying God you are remembering Him. Intellectually we do not forget God. The word "forgot" here means, "Israel hath mislaid his Maker." If you forget something, it is out of your memory altogether. If you mislay something you are completely aware of its existence, but as far as you are concerned, it is out of use, out of circulation.

But God didn't create us to misplace him, forget him, or put him on the shelf of our lives. God ordained that we should grow up through knowledge of him, through obedience to his word. Intimacy with God grows out of living a life that pleases and honors him. But we can't know him intimately if we give our allegiance to false gods, or replace him with anything else. If we place our ultimate security in people and not in him, then the flow of his power to us is lost. Soon God is misplaced among the many false gods in our lives. Few of us ever intend to misplace God. We just neglect to do what keeps a relationship with him vital.

The nation Israel provides a picture of that sort of neglect and misplacement. At the beginning of Hosea 8, God's word through Hosea sounds like a trumpet blast; a wake-up call to warn us of danger if we forget God and his power in our lives. My prayer is that we take this seriously and allow it to be a reveille to spiritual examination of ourselves. The first three verses talk about how the people have come to misunderstand God's authority over them. They confess knowledge of God, but they demonstrate no obedience to him:

**Set the trumpet to your lips,
for a vulture [or eagle] is over the house of the LORD,
because they have broken my covenant,
and transgressed my law.
To me they cry,
My God, we Israel know thee.
Israel has spurned the good;
the enemy shall pursue him.**

This passage begins with a command to sound the trumpet, to alert the people to danger. There is an enemy about to swoop down on the nation Israel like a vulture or eagle, a metaphor for swiftness and superior power that the people can't escape. And it did happen historically; first Assyria and then Babylon swooped in on Israel like birds of prey that couldn't be escaped.

The reason for that is very clear in verse 1: Israel has broken covenant with God; they have rebelled against his Law. What is defined in the covenant is the essence of God's relationship with the nation. He chose them to belong to him, and he chose to commit himself to them unconditionally in a relationship of love. The Law was God's gracious gift to guide the people in their covenant responsibilities as a community of faith. The Law was God's absolute authority over his people, and he established and maintained it out of that covenant love. For God's people to break the covenant was to violate that ultimate obedience and to give their loyalty to another god. The Israelites' rebellion against the Law was faithlessness to everything that *Yahweh* had disclosed about his will for his people. The Law was more than just a written code or set of instructions. It represented God's promises, the obligations that he put himself under; and the obligations that he expected his people to put themselves under. It represented life-defining commands.

For us today, the Father's authority is clearly established in the entire Bible. We are adopted sons and daughters of the Father, and we have been made part of his eternal family; but we live under the authority of his word. We have been given a new nature and the power of a New-Covenant relationship to live out that word. The *Shemá* passage of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 says, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." And it is in Christ that we have been given the ability to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, might, and as Jesus adds, with all our mind (see Mark 12:29-30). The empowering love of God gives us the ability to live out that kind of consistent obedience. Love is at the center of God's authority over us, and the motivation for our faithfulness and obedience to him is his love poured into our hearts (see Romans 5:5).

But in verse 2 we see Israel's proud, defensive response to God's warning. They are saying, "What are you talking about? We know who you are. What is this claim of disobedience to you?" Israel's resistance to *Yahweh's* authority has hardened to the point that they refuse to accept God's word through Hosea. This helps us understand the insidious nature of sin at work in our lives. To live in sinful rebellion against God blocks the desire we have for reconciliation with him. It also distorts our perception of how needy we are. Human logic would say, the more we sin the more we know about sin; we become experts on it. But just the opposite is true: The more we sink into apostasy, the less we recognize it as sin and the more we rationalize it until we are thoroughly deluded. So misunderstanding God's authority over our lives results in this blindness and insensitivity to God that we see demonstrated in verse 2. His word doesn't disturb us or challenge us anymore. It doesn't make sense to us. We don't evaluate our lives any longer on the basis of his goals for us.

Verse 3 shows the sad results:

**"Israel has spurned the good;
and the enemy shall pursue him."**

The word good is a rich, comprehensive term. It includes knowing God, the gifts that he wants to give us, the commandments, and the promises that he has made to provide for us and protect us. It includes the gift of hope for the future; optimism and confidence. This verse says that Israel has made a choice. They have rejected not only the good, but the good One, as some translations say. In rejecting what God stands for, they reject him as well. Now as a consequence, Israel is going to be flooded by enemies that come in judgment of Israel's obstinacy toward truth.

It is easy to see why the incarnation and the cross were necessary. Humanity could never save itself. Only through the cross of Jesus could God break that cycle of pride and sin and reveal his forgiving love, mercy, and grace. Those who accept his grace become a new kind of person; we manifest a new quality of humanity. We can "live humble," in the words of the spiritual. We're willing to submit to the authority of the Father that is exercised by the reigning presence of Christ in our lives.

But the tragedy is that, like eighth-century B.C. Israel, we can choose to wear the armor of proud, stubborn resistance to truth. The danger in wearing that armor is that it can become so familiar that we no longer realize that it has kept us from receiving the Father's authority and correction. But the grace of God is powerful motivation to take off the armor. And when we begin to submit to his authority, with even the least bit of willingness, we begin to experience what the apostle Paul describes so beautifully in Galatians 4:6: "And because you are sons [and daughters], God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" That is a cry of submission to the Father's loving authority. It is Jesus Christ in us who controls our self-perception or our identity. It is Jesus who motivates our prayers of confession. It is he who assures us of forgiveness. We don't have to live misunderstanding the Lord's authority.

The second way that Israel has misplaced or forgotten their heavenly Father is defined in the first half of verse 4. They have misappropriated an autonomy for themselves to which they have no right:

**They made kings, but not through me.
They set up princes, but without my knowledge.**

God ordained this nation to be a theocracy, but they have become totally independent from God's purpose and his direction in the rule of the kings of the nation. As we saw in chapter 7, there was a whole succession of kings. Through assassination and intrigue and power struggles, one after another in the waning years of the northern kingdom took power to themselves without being anointed by God. They ruled in complete autonomy from God, making decisions as they wanted. So what Hosea summarizes in 8:4 is the final rebellious step: the people's publicly declaring, in essence, complete autonomy. They have taken God's authority over all of life and claimed it for their own.

The same thing can happen to us as individual believers, as families, as the church, and as ministries within the church. We are to view our lives and any unified enterprise that we attempt as a diminutive kingdom where God wants to reign through Jesus-the ultimate, absolute authority. Brian Jeffrey Leech has written a wonderful hymn that affirms that reality entitled, *Let God Be God*. In it he says this:

*Let God be God in this our present moment
 Let God be Master holding in control
 All parts of life as gifts of His bestowment
 For making men now broken whole.
 Let God be God, let Christ be king!
 Let God be God, or we shall never finish
 The task to which He calls us every day;
 Lest, erring, we in unbelief diminish
 The force He wishes to display.
 Let God be God, let Christ be King!*

The opposite of forgetting God and his authority is receiving his sovereign control and guidance, as Brian Leech says, in every moment and in every decision. God will not be a vice-president standing alongside us and helping us as we help ourselves. He will not become our advisor, supporting our endeavors. He requires absolute lordship over every aspect of our lives.

When God is deposed as Lord, when he no longer has our ultimate commitment, then we are going to have unmet needs that will drive us to lesser gods that we somehow think we can manipulate or control for our purposes. We still continue to be worshiping beings-that is our essential human nature-but we're going to go looking for other things to worship. So verses 4-6 come back to a very familiar theme in this book: idolatry. Here the context for this focus on idolatry comes out of the beginning of verse 4. It is a direct result of no longer seeking the Lord's guidance. If we misplace the Lord God of the Bible, then that adoration-shaped void in us is going to be filled by something else-ourselves, another person, a project or a plan, or a possession. Look at this misdirected adoration:

**With their silver and gold they made idols
 for their own destruction.
 I have spurned your calf, O Samaria.
 My anger burns against them.
 How long will it be
 till they are pure [holy or pure-hearted in motives] in Israel?
 A workman made it;
 it is not God.
 The calf of Samaria
 shall be broken to pieces [burned up in the flames].**

What God is doing here through the prophet is condemning any form of idolatry or misdirected adoration that you can imagine. He speaks of idols here in the plural. Throughout the northern kingdom there were all kinds of public and private sculpted cultic images. That is, people had little statues or plaques in their homes for private worship. So they have taken a gift of God, the natural resources of gold and silver, and formed them to compete with God as substitutes for him. The result, he says very bluntly, will be destruction. Idolatry is never safe!

In addition to condemning the making of idols from gold and silver, in verse 5 God expresses his anger at the worship of Baal. Baal was most often pictured as a bull. But the first king of the north, Jeroboam I, set up calves of worship in Bethel and Dan. The result was that the people got totally confused about who they were worshiping: Was it Baal? Was it God in the form of a calf? By Hosea's day, there is such confusion and degradation that God is almost beside himself with anger. Verses 5-6 are difficult to translate, and there are different options as to how the phrases are strung together. That is because there are no complete sentences; it is all broken phrases. It is as if God in his anguish over Ephraim, his beloved people, is stumbling over words. The creator God of the universe is having trouble expressing himself. He is grief-stricken, inarticulate.

He expresses shock that idol worship could even happen among his own people. Obviously the idols aren't gods; they are made by human hands. They can be destroyed, melted down, or burned. What more does Israel need to see? There is nothing divine about them. And he is outraged because the idols aren't just inconsequential, innocent aids to worship. They are really false gods in competition for Israel's adoration. Verse 6 says,

**"A workman made it;
 it is not God."**

That may be an observation that God is making in judgment. Or it may very well be something the people themselves are saying back to God: "We know this isn't God, we know it's just an idol. It's not that big a deal. It's not serious. What could it hurt to dabble a bit with idol worship? We'll still worship you."

Verses 4-6 apply equally well to our problem with idols and false gods today. I hope that out of these verses you can sense God's anguish over our divided loyalties. He is not thundering objectively in denunciation-there is pathos and almost disbelief on his part. He is asking of us, "How long will it be before my church attains to innocence and purity of life and motives? Even among my people there is a lack of trust and dependence on me. Where is the holiness, the cleanliness, the loyalty, the single-minded adoration that I desire?" Too often we are like Israel, agreeing that the idols in our lives are not God. We point to our homes, cars, career achievements, and material accomplishments and say, "Oh yes, a workman made it. It's not a god." But the truth is, we're the workmen, and pride of ownership and pride of creation replace delight in the Lord and gratitude for his provision. So syncretism tightens its grip because we're denying idols on the one hand yet embracing them on the other. That is what James calls double-mindedness (see 4:8).

But God challenges us through these verses: Either we break the hold of our idols, or he is going to do it for us. He won't let them stay. He loves us too much, and he will disrupt and ultimately destroy the idolatry to which we have sworn loyalty. That even includes all the legitimate things in our lives that creep into first place and displace God as the Lord of our lives. When what we do for God becomes more important than God, it is an idol, whether it be a ministry to which we commit ourselves or the wonderful gift of family life and responsibility.

Our biggest problem in facing our idols is that we try to use God to prop them up! When difficulties or reversals or failures hit us and threaten our idols, we want God to somehow fix things for us. And sometimes God blesses us by ignoring the panic prayers that we send up. Then finally we are driven back to him, and we see that the confidence we placed in the idols is misdirected, throw ourselves on him once again, and rediscover that above anything else, it is God and his goodness and faithfulness on which we have to build our lives. So whatever God chooses to withhold that we think we can't live without, he is doing it to bring us to him as the only God in our lives.

Verses 7-13 deal with the miscalculated assumptions of Israel. The people assume that the fertility rites of Baal worship are going to produce good crops. They assume that the alliance with foreign powers will bring security and safety. And they assume that they can evade God's judgment by enthusiastically embracing true, healthy worship of *Yahweh* in the Mosaic sacrificial system. But the reality underlying these verses is that without the Lord at the center of it, nothing is going to work right, no matter how hard we try. Verses 7-8 summarize the wrong assumptions about the fertility rites of Baal worship:

**For they sow the wind,
and they shall reap the whirlwind.
The standing grain has no heads,
it shall yield no meal;
if it were to yield,
aliens would devour it.
Israel is swallowed up;
already they are among the nations
as a useless vessel.**

This is a proverb from agriculture, and it establishes the absolute connection between the present actions of the people and the future judgment that God is going to send. God's order in the world is demonstrated by Israel's farmer at harvest. The wind here is a catchword in wisdom literature in the Old Testament for vanity or unstable, helpless effort. And the whirlwind is like a destructive hurricane that just sweeps away everything in its path. So with the wind or vanity of idol worship, Israel brings upon itself a hurricane of disaster. The destruction that was prophesied in verse 4 is pictured here as the scattering of the heads of grain, and whatever bit of grain might be left, the invading Assyrians come through and eat for their own advantage. The people of Israel end up with nothing. The nation ends up like a vessel that has lost its value to anyone. J.B. Phillips paraphrases it this way: "They are like a crock that nobody wants."

The application for us isn't very difficult. When we squander our devotion on false gods, eventually God has to withdraw his glory and his power from our lives. Our distinctive quality is that we belong first and only to him. We have been chosen and called and redeemed, set apart to be vessels of the living Christ, with His spirit indwelling us. When we depend on our own intellect rather than spiritual wisdom and insight, and when our security is rooted in our own abilities and not the Spirit's life, then in reality we do have our own idols in the fields as we sow the wind; and we will reap the whirlwind. The first sign of God's judgment on us is usually a bland, lackluster quality of our life. It's not attractive anymore; people aren't drawn to it. Our witness isn't very compelling.

Verses 9-10 expose Israel's miscalculated assumptions about alliances with foreign powers:

**For they have gone up to Assyria,
a wild ass wandering alone;
Ephraim has hired lovers.
Though they hire allies among the nations,
I will soon gather them up.
And they shall cease for a little while
from anointing king and princes.**

Donkeys were designed to live together in herds and to mate in the context of the herd. But Hosea says Ephraim is like a wild donkey who does something stupid and unnatural-she wanders off into the wilderness where it is very dangerous, looking for a mate. And the mate she

will find is Assyria, who will end up destroying her. Then Hosea changes the figure again and says the nation is like a pitiful prostitute who has sunk so low that she has to pay her lovers; she can't even support herself with that occupation anymore. It is all summarized in verse 10 with the nation's vacillating foreign policy that we talked about in chapter 7. The result is that the people will be gathered up in judgment like ripe fruit that is going to be placed in a container. And they are going to waste away under the rule of the Assyrian king.

One more miscalculated assumption and the final reason for judgment are found in verses 11-13. This is a new theme that Hosea introduces in this chapter-orthodox Jewish worship that ends up being empty religious enthusiasm:

**Because Ephraim has multiplied altars for sin [offerings],
they have become to him altars for sinning.
Were I to write for him my laws by ten thousands,
they would be regarded as a strange thing.
They love sacrifice;
they sacrifice flesh and eat it;
but the Lord has no delight in them.
Now he will remember their iniquity,
and punish their sins;
they shall return to Egypt.**

The sin offerings that are mentioned here were prescribed by God in Leviticus 4-5. They were offerings for the forgiveness of sins that were committed unwittingly, in ignorance. So Hosea's prophecy from the Lord here is against all the Jewish altars at which the people go through this sacrificial ritual of asking God to forgive sins of ignorance while at the same time with full knowledge sinking deeper and deeper into syncretistic pagan worship of the Baals. Verse 12 echoes the reality that we saw in verse 1; they have truth in the Law, but it seems strange to them, unfamiliar and uninteresting. The problem isn't that Israel lacks God's written revelation-it just doesn't mean anything anymore. They offer sacrifices for sin, but they are an unrepentant people who will not agree with God about the need in their life. It shows the arrogance of the people against *Yahweh*.

Verse 13 shows how the sacrifices have been distorted, at least in terms of how people have understood them. It was acceptable in the Law for some of the sacrificial animals to be eaten in a common meal after the offering had been made before the altar. But the problem here is that the people end up loving to eat the food more than they love the God who is offering them forgiveness. And Hosea says that God is repulsed by it; the ceremony means nothing. So instead of forgiving sin from the sin offering, he promises to punish the sin.

There is a powerful implication for us in these three verses. They show us how far the worship of God can be separated from obedience to God. Whenever our activity of worship is not consistent with what God desires for us as a lifestyle, God hates the activity. When we consciously disobey the Bible, the most zealous expressions of praise and worship that we can muster will not delight the Lord. If we love our worship activity more than the God who calls us to worship him, then in Paul's words, what we build is going to be wood, hay, and stubble (see 1 Corinthians 3:12).

Verse 14 serves as a conclusion and brings us back full circle. It reminds us again of the reason for the misunderstood authority; the misappropriated autonomy; the misdirected adoration of the people; and all the miscalculated assumptions about Baal worship, alliances with foreign powers, and this empty enthusiasm about right worship of *Yahweh*:

**For Israel has forgotten his Maker,
and built palaces;
and Judah has multiplied fortified cities;
but I will send a fire upon his cities,
and it shall devour his strongholds.**

Both the northern and southern kingdoms had lost conscious accountability. They had lost constant attention to their Creator, Sustainer, and absolutely sovereign Lord. The problem with the buildings and the fortified cities is that they were built to the people's glory and not to God's glory. The kings of Samaria built a succession of opulent royal palaces from the revenues of unjust and excessive taxation. In the south, Judah's misplaced trust was placed in forty-six fortified cities, including extra fortifications in the capital, Jerusalem.

This chapter and especially this verse stands in direct contrast to the heart of the royal psalmist in Psalm 100:3, 5. He says,

**"Know that the Lord Himself is God!
It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves....
His lovingkindness is everlasting,
And His faithfulness to all generations."**

In contrast to the people of Israel, the psalmist knew that he was not self-made or self-sustained. He knew that he belonged to the Shepherd God absolutely. He expressed gratitude to the Lord for everything he had. The people of Hosea's Israel were self-defined, self-directed, and self-confident in their material wealth and their military defense. But the Assyrians and Babylonians swept away the royal palaces and the fortified cities alike.

We have been confronted throughout chapter 8 with a theme that Hosea stresses over and over again. You may be getting a little impatient with his hammering on the same message again! But he does it because God knows how hard it is to get through to us, how resistant we are to truth. So he keeps coming at it from different angles and hitting it repeatedly. When we forget God, when we misplace our loyalty to him, by the very nature of our covenant relationship with him, he must use whatever means necessary to get our attention and bring us back to a vital relationship with him. Our only alternative to the heart-breaking measures of judgment that have been referred to in this chapter is a softened heart that is lovingly sensitive to his guidance and obedient to him.

For me this chapter is helpful. It reveals fleshly opposition at work in me to the work of the Spirit. It shows me the wrong path I take whenever, instead of placing my life in the hands of the loving heavenly Father, my Creator, Sustainer, and absolutely sovereign Lord; I place false authority over me, succumb to the idolatry of my own accomplishments, trust in my own works or my own ministry activity, give in to unbelief, take more delight in my worship activity than in hearing and obeying the will of God, or delude myself with self-glorification or false self-confidence.

I got a letter in the mail on Friday that was a beautiful example of a softened heart of loving sensitivity to God's guidance and obedience to him. Marie Burgess, one of our PBC missionaries who is a nurse, is now in Rwanda for two months working in a refugee camp. She talks about the prayer diary that she has been keeping for several months. She says it was out of the prayer diary that God directed her to go to Rwanda. Listen to her amazing softness and sensitivity and submission to the God we have been talking about in this chapter:

Help me, Lord, not to get wrapped up in my own affairs. Help me make your word first and not second in my life. Help me not to compare my work with others, but to know that you do things new and differently. Help me present my body a living sacrifice to you instead of taking what you have blessed me with and using it toward my own advancement. I pray that your healing touch would be upon my family and others in my life wherever I might go for your glory. Thank you for your creative power, for how it counters the forces of evil, destruction, pain, suffering, death, and sorrow. May you work through me in my life in this way. Lord, help me to hunger and thirst after righteousness. May I be worthy to suffer for your name's sake. Help me to be clean in my heart and not only my actions. May I love you for your sake and have as my supreme desire and concern that your name and your glory be magnified and spread to the whole world. May I be sympathetic in relation to the sorrow and sufferings of others, and actually do something myself to relieve their sufferings.

Catalog No. 4398
Hosea 8:1-14
Tenth Message
Doug Goins
September 11, 1994
Updated October 21, 2000

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