

## THE REJECTED HELP OF GOD

*Hosea: Unbroken Love From A Broken Heart*

by Doug Goins

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The Scriptures are full of profound truths about the greatness, holiness, righteousness, and steadfast love of our God. They tell us that he is the rock of our salvation and the strength of our life; and that through the ages he has been the helper, fortress, and shelter of his people. But the tragedy is that through the first twelve chapters of Hosea, this prophet has recorded how the nation Israel consistently rejected that kind of truth. They were unwilling to build their national life and identity on the foundation that God wanted to be for them, or even to accept his defense and protection. Instead, what we have been exposed to in this book is a national history of prideful rebellion against God; arrogant rejection of his role in their lives as helper, protector, defender, and sure foundation. And the final stage of the sin of pride or arrogance is to be helpless yet unwilling to cry out for God's help.

Throughout the nation's history God identified himself to them as *azar*, the Hebrew word for help. King David claimed that reality in Psalm 54. David had been anointed the king of the land, but he spent fourteen years running for his life from King Saul. Yet confident of God's presence and activity, David said,

**"Behold, God is my helper;  
the Lord is the upholder of my life."**

The nation Israel wouldn't say that. Their darkest days came when the people sank to the lowest levels of willful independence from their Helper, when they could no longer honestly admit their helplessness, when their stubbornness wouldn't allow them to call out to him. What we see now near the end of Hosea's prophecy in chapter 13 is that life is caving in on them; destruction is imminent. Human help has failed. It is as if the people are even helpless to confess helplessness. Their persistent refusal of God's help has become habitual, and they don't know any other way to act. They can't sing the great hymns of deliverance anymore, such as Psalm 46:

**God is our refuge and strength,  
A very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear....**

**There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
The holy dwelling places of the Most High.  
God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved;  
God will help her when morning dawns....**

**Cease striving and know that I am God....**

**The LORD of hosts is with us;  
The God of Jacob is our stronghold.**

In chapter 13, what Hosea has predicted is happening: The noose of the Assyrian invasion is closing on the capital, Samaria. Village after village, fortified city after fortified city are falling. The people haven't listened to Hosea. Remember, he has prophesied for forty years to this nation. The repeated opportunities that he has offered them to realize their helplessness without God haven't broken the bonds of self-sufficiency—they have actually tightened them. With each narrow escape from calamity, the people's arrogance is reinforced. It leads them farther away from the Lord and farther into sin.

And in chapter 13 God, the rejected Helper, continues to offer help. Hosea again allows us to feel God's anguish over a helpless people who are addicted to independence from him. The heart of chapter 13 is in verse 9, where God cries out to the nation, "O Israel, you are destroyed; but your help is from me" (New King James Version).

We live today with contemporary manifestations of Israel's malady, a helplessness in people that is intensified by their inability to cry out. It is true that some today live on the edge of addiction to self-help, to cleaning up the mess in their lives. But some people have resisted God's help for so long that they have fallen into the greatest need of all—not even knowing that they have a need. I'm sure all of us know people whose helplessness has reached the stage of refusing to ask God for help.

The first two verses of Hosea 13 review Israel's progressive dependence on substitute help rather than on God, or how they ended up addicted to independence from him:

**When Ephraim spoke, men trembled;  
 he was exalted in Israel;  
 but he incurred guilt through Baal and died.  
 And now they sin more and more,  
 and make for themselves molten images,  
 idols skilfully made of their silver,  
 all of them the work of craftsmen.  
 Sacrifice to these, they say.  
 Men kiss calves!**

Verse 1 in a single sentence describes the shift of loyalty from God to Baal. When Ephraim, the largest and the most influential tribe in Israel, walked with the Lord in obedience, their leadership in the tribal league was positive. Great influence and honor were accorded them. But Old Testament history makes it clear that Ephraim led the nation in turning from the Lord for their source of strength and security and success, to the Baals. It was from the tribe of Ephraim that the move came to set up places of worship in the north in competition with Jerusalem. A separate kingship was established. The syncretism of worshiping the Lord and Baal eventually descended into a singular loyalty to Baal. Israel couldn't untangle themselves from dependence on that cult, and the people no longer called to the Lord for help.

The beginning of verse 2 talks about what happened to them: They sinned more and more, caught up in a whirlwind of defection and idolatry. They consistently broke the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Then verse 2 goes on to tell us that immediately they broke the second commandment by making images of God. God-given talents in craftsmanship were being used to create substitutes for God himself.

That describes a universal dynamic at work in human nature. When we are separated from our true help, the Lord himself, we produce facsimiles to worship: We chop trees and build houses, shape metal and make cars, mine ore and fashion weapons, split atoms and create bombs. And then we place our security in all of those rather than in our Maker. We speak glibly of our love of our possessions as if they were animate and they satisfied our deepest needs. Sometimes our worship of the accouterments of power is as unconstrained as the orgies that are described at the end of verse 2, which included simulated copulation with the bull calf. The people would kiss the calf in devotion to show their loyalty to and adoration of it.

Today we tend to worship what gives us security. So we put our trust in a person or group of people, or in certain material possessions. And they become our idols, because we require that they give us what only God can give us. We were created to trust God and to love people and then to use things as a gift from him. But when our trust in God as our help diminishes, we end up using people and loving things, and what gets sacrificed is our true selves.

When we stubbornly deny the Lord's help, the result is living death. That is what Hosea describes at the end of verse 1: "...But he incurred guilt through Baal and died." They kept sinning more and more, and they were like walking dead men at the end of the history of the northern kingdom. Self-reliance and dependence on substitute helpers was the poison that brought Ephraim's death. And even though the nation was terminally ill, they stubbornly went on drinking the poison of idolatry that would kill them.

I saw an article in the *Mercury News* the other day that illustrated this graphically. It was about Greg Morris, the star of the TV series *Mission Impossible* in the sixties and seventies. He has been battling brain cancer for about five years. And his son was quoted as saying that the disease is in remission, but Morris isn't doing everything he can to regain health. His son said, "'This is the thing about my dad, he's very stubborn and he's very much his own person.' [He] continues to smoke although the cancer originated in his left lung. An operation around the end of 1990 removed the lung cancer, but the disease was later found to have spread to his brain....'My dad is a hard liver, a hard charger....He lived large; he's a large personality.'" Morris is going to die the way he lived. He won't quit taking the poison the doctors have said is killing him. That is the kind of stubbornness and toughness Ephraim had at the end of their life.

Verse 3 describes the final stage of the helplessness of the nation:

**Therefore they shall be like the morning mist  
 or like the dew that goes early away,  
 like the chaff that swirls from the threshing floor  
 or like smoke from a window.**

That describes the fate of people who don't want God's help and refuse to put their ultimate trust in him. These are similes for something ethereal that vanishes. And it describes the immediate future of the nation, because they will vanish as a national entity from the Promised Land. They will disappear like a morning mist or dew on the grass when the sun comes out and dries it up, like chaff from the grain being harvested that gets blown away in the wind, and like smoke rising from a chimney that dissipates into the atmosphere.

The stark reality is that those who persistently refuse the Lord's help are given what they want-no help. Let's jump to the end of the chapter for a moment. In verses 15-16 Hosea speaks about the fall of the northern kingdom as a result of not wanting the Lord's help. It talks about consequences of sin that come through warfare:

**Though he may flourish as the reed plant,**

**the east wind, the wind of the Lord, shall come,  
 rising from the wilderness;  
 and his fountain shall dry up,  
 his spring shall be parched;  
 it shall strip his treasury  
 of every precious thing.  
 Samaria shall bear her guilt,  
 because she has rebelled against her God;  
 they shall fall by the sword,  
 their little ones shall be dashed in pieces,  
 and their pregnant women ripped open.**

We have seen that terrifying picture of harsh judgment before. But as we're going to see in verses 4-11, these are not *Yahweh's* only words. And we will see in chapter 14 that they are not God's last words.

In verse 15 Hosea talks about how the nation flourished like a sea of lush, fertile reeds. That is a beautiful word play-in Hebrew Ephraim means, "You flourished." There was a time of great blessing and prosperity. But, as we have seen earlier in our studies, the nation didn't value the blessing of God. Their prosperity led to pride instead of praise, greed instead of goodness.

So the east wind will come off the desert. Here is a reference to Assyria, which will come as God's judgment. God will use that enemy like a wind that dries up everything in its path, even wells and natural springs (the Assyrian armies poisoned wells and springs). The land will be devastated.

At the heart of the paragraph Samaria is mentioned, which as the capital was influential spiritually, politically, and economically. It will be a final focus of the Assyrian assault. The national treasury will be looted and carried off to Assyria.

And then in the second line of verse 16 is the verdict. It is like a summary of Hosea's entire prophecy. The nation is guilty of rebellion; Ephraim bears full and complete responsibility. And there are the horrifying images of innocent women and children being slaughtered by Assyrian invaders. So the picture of desolation and death comes to a close.

Chapter 13 begins with Hosea's descriptions of the nation's helplessness in the first three verses and closes with these tragic consequences of their rejection of God's help in the last two verses. But centered in between stands God's own personal description of their condition of helplessness, and his commitment to being available to help even though they don't want help. The opening phrase of verse 4 is, "I am the LORD...." The New International Version says, "But I am the LORD...." with the conjunction added. The New King James Version also says, "Yet I am the LORD...." And that "but God" splits the darkness of judgment with the same bright conjunctive force as another "but God" in Ephesians 2. The apostle Paul talks about the darkness in which we lived before Christ came. He says we were dead in trespasses and sins; we were controlled by the influence of the world system, our own sinful, rebellious flesh, and satanic evil. By nature, he said, we were children of wrath. It is a picture of hopelessness. And then these words come in Ephesians 2:4-5: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ...." Here in Hosea 13:4, "Yet *Yahweh*" is a first-person statement of hope. God is saying that in spite of everything Israel has done, he is still committed to them.

What follows in the next ten verses is an expression of the quality of tough love we saw last week in chapters 11 and 12. Yes, the Helper was rejected, but he still longs to help. There are three roles to which he is committed in the life of this nation and in our lives today: savior, redeemer, and *azar*-supernatural help. Look at verses 4-8, where he speaks as the God of our salvation:

**I am the Lord your God  
 from the land of Egypt;  
 you know no God but me,  
 and besides me there is no savior.  
 It was I who knew you in the wilderness,  
 in the land of drought;  
 but when they had fed to the full,  
 they were filled, and their heart was lifted up;  
 therefore they forgot me.  
 So I will be to them like a lion,  
 like a leopard I will lurk beside the way,  
 I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs,  
 I will tear open their breast,  
 and there I will devour them like a lion,  
 as a wild beast would rend them.**

Don't miss the emphasis on savior. In this context the word means deliverer, provider, and protector. That is exactly what the people of Israel denied in searching for saviors among the Baals, in human strength, and in other national alliances. Verses 4-6 contrast the history of God's committed faithfulness and Israel's pursuit of false saviors. And if, before the final fall of Samaria in 723 BC, the people of Israel had really heard God's incisive diagnosis of their spiritual illness, the prognosis of his judgment, and his reminders of his help as their only

Savior in the past; and if repentance had swept through that little nation and their rebellious hearts had been broken open to the Lord-then all those innocent babies and mothers would not have had to die. That was not ultimately God's desire for those people.

Verse 6 defines the historical reality: The nation not only forgot that salvation comes from the Lord, but they rejected his deliverance, provision, and protection. As a consequence, in verses 7-8, God is depicted as coming against the nation like a lion, a leopard, and a mother bear protecting her cubs. These same three figures are used in Daniel's vision (Daniel 7) of how God is going to use empires to judge the nation Israel. God is going to come against the nation as the lion of Babylon, as the leopard of Greece under Alexander the Great (much later in their history), and as the bear of Medio-Persia (which at the time of Hosea's writing and preaching was being dominated by the Assyrian empire; the Persians later conquered the Babylonians). But through it all God's desire was to be a savior, protector, deliverer, and provider.

In verses 9-11 God speaks as the God of all help:

**I will destroy you, O Israel;  
who can help you?  
Where now is your king, to save you;  
where are all your princes, to defend you**  
[or where are your fortified cities to protect you,  
and where are the judges]-  
**those of whom you said,  
"Give me a king and princes"?  
I have given you kings in my anger,  
and I have taken them away in my wrath.**

Verse 9 is very difficult to translate because it is a partial sentence in Hebrew. The most accurate translation in terms of the logic of these three verses is the New King James Version, which we read earlier: "O Israel, you are destroyed; but your help is from me." The covenant promise that God had made to Israel under Moses was that he would be *azar*, help. A number of times in Deuteronomy, Moses prays for God to be help to the nation as in Deuteronomy 33:7.

**"Hear, O LORD, the voice of Judah,  
and bring him in to his people.  
With thy hands contend for him,  
and be a help against his adversaries."**

But the nation doesn't want the help. And however you translate verse 9, the point it makes very clearly is that looking for help apart from the Lord is going to result in destruction one way or another.

Verses 10-11 expand that theme, and it is as if the Lord is pressing the point. His anger is rising, and there is an emotional tone in the questions he asks: "Without me, who is going to protect you in your cities, even the fortified cities into which you have poured so much energy and resources to build up? Where are the judges you came to and said, 'Give us a king like all the other civilized nations around us?'" For more than three centuries, from 1031 BC to 725 BC, the people demanded a king to rule over them. So God in his permissive will gave them what they wanted in King Saul, the first king who was anointed, all the way down through Hoshea who is on the throne now, the last ruler of the northern kingdom before the Assyrian invasion. In three hundred years, twenty-three kings were given. The people rejected *Yahweh* as their divine sovereign and replaced his authority with human rulers. Now when Hoshea is removed from the throne, the whole line of kings will be wiped out with the fall of the northern kingdom. But even in facing that calamity, the people won't turn to *Yahweh* for help. They can't sing Psalm 121, the Song of Ascent, anymore:

**From whence does my help come?  
My help comes from the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.**

Verses 12-14 tell us what brought them to this point. It is bad news, but there is also good news in this paragraph, because *Yahweh* speaks as the God of redemption:

**The iniquity of Ephraim is bound up,  
his sin is kept in store.  
The pangs of childbirth come from him,  
but he is an unwise son;  
for now he does not present himself  
at the mouth of the womb.**

**Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol?  
Shall I redeem them from Death?  
O Death, where are your plagues?  
O Sheol, where is your destruction?  
Compassion is hid from my eyes.**

Verse 12 explains why the people can't call out, why they are unwilling to sing a hymn of deliverance. It is as if they have entered a self-made prison of their own sin. They have come to a state of immobility. They couldn't cry out to God even if they wanted to. This is the result of sowing years of rebellion. Apostasy and polytheism have reaped a national character totally incapable of repentance.

In verse 13 the metaphor changes. It is an unnatural image that again is frightening as we understand it. The tragic consequences of not wanting God's help are explained in the picture of a nation refusing to be born; in the lack of spiritual wisdom that makes them resist moving down the birth canal. They are pictured as a stubborn little baby who digs in his heels and says, "I'm not being born. I'm not going to see the light of day. I don't care about the new beginnings God claims to have. I'm going to do it my way." The tragic consequences are that he is going to die and his mother is going to die with him. His own arrogance or haughtiness results in death in other people's lives as well. The text says it is because he is an unwise son; he is unwilling to make a right decision to trust God and call out for his help.

In verse 14 there is another shift in tone that we have seen over and over again in Hosea—from judgment to hope. It comes like a piercing ray of light in the darkness. Our eyes have trouble with the brilliance of this promise of hope! The New American Standard Bible follows the Septuagint and takes this from a rhetorical question, which needs an answer, to a strong affirmation in which God says,

**I will ransom them from the power of Sheol;  
I will redeem them from death.  
O Death, where are your thorns?  
O Sheol, where is your sting?  
Compassion will be hidden from My sight.**

That word compassion can be translated repentance. It literally means to relent or change one's mind, and it has strong emotional overtones. It speaks of struggling emotionally, wrestling about keeping or changing a decision. Here it denies the possibility of God's changing his mind about the affirmations of hope in the preceding lines. Literally he says, "Relenting is hidden from my eyes." This startling flash of hope following the grim reality of judgment reminds us of God's cry in Hosea 11:8: "How can I give you up, O Ephraim!"

God is saying, "How can I let death reign, even though you have chosen death?" Here in verse 14 God promises the nation Israel life beyond the death of the Assyrian invasion and the destruction of exile and suffering. God has plans for his people. There will be a new beginning beyond their deserved death and burial. Implicit here is the astounding promise that death, that last great enemy, is ultimately going to be defeated. It has a ring of prophetic messianic hope. The apostle Paul, writing on this side of the death and resurrection of Jesus, claims that this verse was fulfilled in Messiah's victory over death (1 Corinthians 15:54-57):

Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Along with the prophet Hosea and the apostle Paul, we today are convinced that the tyrant of death has been stripped of its power over us. We live in the assurance of Revelation 20:14: "And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire." We can personally claim the promise of Hosea 13:14, that God our Help has freed us:

**I will ransom them from the power of Sheol;  
I will redeem them from death.**

Because of God's commitment to us as a helper, we can live this physical human life to the fullest without fear, knowing that it is the beginning of our eternal life.

The heart of the passage, as I have said, is verse 9, God's loving reminder, "O Israel, you are destroyed; but your help is from me." Each week here at PBC many saints among us including elders, pastors, deacons, ministers, and pastoral counselors, pray with people who have been brought to a realization of their abject helplessness. Some are visitors to this place, but others would call this their spiritual home and are part of this spiritual family. The thing they have in common is that life has brought them to the end of their confidence in their own ability, or any other human resources, to help themselves. Over and over again we hear three words in prayer, expressed in many different ways but always coming down to the same thing: "Lord, help me." And God does. I have seen transformed lives result because of that simple confession of helplessness and need for God's help. I have seen him give new power to people who felt powerless and fresh guidance when they were confused about what to do. I have seen him give supernatural strength to forgive someone, to love someone who seemed totally unlovable.

But any effectiveness in entering into people's lives in that kind of prayer ministry comes from praying the very same prayer: "Lord, help me." That is a prayer we never outgrow. We know that we can't preach, teach, counsel, disciple, or pray to meet the unrealized needs of those addicted to self-help without constantly confessing our own helplessness. The Lord chooses to stretch spiritual leadership beyond human talents, training, or any sense of preparedness. I'm learning in my own life and ministry that it is not skillfully employed techniques, interpersonal methodology, or group dynamics, but the Lord's grace that convinces people of their helplessness. It is his very present help that brings repentance, response, and spiritual results in people's lives.

There is a prayer that often shows up on religious calendars, coffee mugs and cards. It was attributed to some famous British general before a big battle for God and Queen. It goes, "O Lord, thou knowest how busy I must be this day. If I forget thee, do not forget me." Hosea would be appalled at that prayer! We don't have to ask the Lord to remember us; we are never off his mind. And because that is true we are led to pray instead, "Lord, you know the pressure I feel today. Help me to never forget you. Help me to never forget that I belong to you, and that my only help is you, no matter what is put before me or what I'm called to."

To close, let me ask you some questions to stimulate your thinking on how you experience the help of God in your life:

Do your past experiences of God as a very present help in trouble now lead you to seek his help daily?

Can you remember times when you blundered on without asking for help? Have you ever known a long period when you lived on your own strength and when running your own life became a pattern?

Have you, like Israel, persisted in some habit or activity you knew was wrong, but refused to ask for God's help because you feared what he might do to change you?

Do you fear losing control of your life by seeking God's help?

Can you admit your addiction to trying to appear adequate?

Are you willing to allow others to know that you are utterly helpless without the help of God? If not, on whom or what do you often depend for help instead of God?

My study of this message of Hosea, reminded me of Isaac Watt's hymn of trust in God the Helper. It should be a daily prayer for all of us, a conscious declaration of dependence:

*O God, our help in ages past,  
our hope for years to come,  
Be thou our guide while life shall last,  
and our eternal home.*

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