

HOW TO RETURN TO THE LORD

Hosea: Unbroken Love From A Broken Heart

by Doug Goins

The apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17-6:2,

"Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation."

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain-for He says,

**'At the acceptable time I listened to you,
And on the day of salvation I helped you';
behold, now is 'the acceptable time,' behold,
now is 'the day of salvation....''**

The need for reconciliation implies that a relationship has been abandoned. Paul's appeal above was written to the Corinthian church because many in that church had wandered away from their original and primary relationship with God. And throughout our study of the book of Hosea, we have heard an identical appeal from this prophet of God to the nation Israel to be reconciled to God, to allow that relationship to be re-established.

I must tell you that I know what it's like to wander away from God. It still happens to me, even though I'm fifty years old and a pastor in a good church. At times unconsciously, I drift away through busyness or inattention to him. It is possible to do religious work, even teach the Bible and preach, on "autopilot." So I end up neglecting prayer (which is incredibly arrogant), and I ratchet up the hard-work index or the common-sense quotient. Then finally I'm jarred into the reality that I've been leaning on my own understanding and not the Lord's. On the other hand, sometimes I wander away very consciously as I indulge in the brasher sins of manipulating people and circumstances. Then the result, at least in my pastoral ministry, is a perversion of spiritual leadership. I end up trusting my own political instincts, trying to build some humanly achieved consensus or working the crowd rather than committing the way of our body to the Lord.

As I studied the final beautiful words of Hosea in chapter 14, I felt a tug in my own soul. There are two themes intertwined throughout the entire prophecy that reach a triumphant crescendo in this chapter: One theme is the grace of God, and the other is the need of human beings to repent of sin. I was reminded of the prophet Isaiah's honest admission of his own spiritual condition when, as part of his calling to tell the nation the truth from God, he was in the temple and saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and he saw himself in relationship to that transcendent God. He said, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5). Hosea 14 calls us to that same awareness, and it calls us to repent, but it also gives us God's gracious promise of restoration. Hosea calls all of us, pastors included, to return to the Lord and receive his grace. I don't want to take anyone for granted today. Perhaps you know that you have wandered away from God, and the Spirit of God may stir within you a longing to return to him in a new way. My desire is for us to join together in returning to the Lord.

There is nothing explicit in this last sermon to tell us when Hosea may have preached it. It was probably during the final days of the siege of Samaria, or perhaps soon after the Assyrians had conquered the capital of the nation. The thing that struck me initially as I read through this is that there is no tone of vindictiveness. He never says, "I told you this would happen! You should have listened." No, it is a message of lasting hope. God will not abandon his people. He is going to restore them even from exile.

Accept Personal Responsibility For Sin

In this chapter Hosea describes the process of returning to the Lord, both for Israel and for us. Look at verse 1:

**Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God,
for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.**

Here is the first step in returning to God: accepting personal responsibility for departing from him. Usually when we have stumbled-when circumstances and our choices have entangled us and we have fallen on our faces, humiliated and unable to move or do anything-it is not natural for us to say, "It's my fault." Our tendency is to blame other people or circumstances for tripping us. We end up rationalizing what God calls iniquity. But he wants us to acknowledge it, to agree with him. Hosea is very direct in confronting Israel with the undeniable truth: "...You have stumbled because of your iniquity." The word iniquity means habit patterns of sin that get ingrained into someone's life and that may go on for years and years. The Lord's repeated overtures to love Israel, guide them, and bless them were consistently resisted.

We all know what it's like to sense a growing distance between us and the Lord because of sin. Prayer becomes strained, life becomes increasingly stressful, and our hearts become restless. The danger is that we will get comfortable with that state. We will settle for a spiritual mediocrity. We will feel the emptiness, but seek to forget it by filling our lives with the distractions of activity-even religious activity. Then finally life crumbles or a crisis strikes, and we are brought face-to-face with the person we have become. At that point Hosea's words come home: We stumble and fall because we have wandered away from a trusting relationship with God. He never moved, we did.

Our family was talking at the dinner table last week, and I was telling them about my sermon. I asked them to help me with examples from our family history to illustrate some of the principles. I brought up this issue of accepting personal responsibility for departing from God, and Kathryn, our fifteen-year-old, vividly remembered a time when she was five. Her best friend in kindergarten was the daughter of divorced parents who indulged her tremendously, competing for her affection. So this little girl had lots of toys and clothes. Kathryn, feeling jealous and rather deprived, stole from her a little bell with an angel on top, the kind of delicate thing she loves. She said to herself, "She'll never miss it, she has so much stuff. And I don't have many toys compared to her; I deserve this." But when she finally came to her mother and told her what she had done, her words were, "Mother, I stole this." Although she did talk about some of the rationalization that drove her to it, years later she still remembers coming to the point before the Lord of saying, "It really is my fault. It's not that I'm a deprived kid and she has so much stuff that I can't resist the temptation. I take personal responsibility." And she felt the estrangement from God very keenly in her five-year-old heart.

Make An Honest Confession

The second step home to God, in verse 2, is to make an honest confession of our sin to him, to verbally agree with him:

**Take with you words
and return to the Lord;
say to him,
"Take away all iniquity;
accept that which is good
and we will render
the fruit of our lips."**

Hosea calls the people to tell God the truth. He wants them to have a personal encounter with the Lord, not through the offerings and formal rites of the sacrificial system, but with conversation, words that will expose the true condition of their hearts. Remember, the people have a long history of trying to substitute the sacrifices for that sort of honesty. In chapter 5 verse 6 Hosea indicted them:

**With their flocks and herds they shall go
to seek the Lord,
but they will not find him....**

No impersonal ritual will do. The people have to take words that express their deepest selves. The heart of it is that God wants a relationship, not religious activity. It is an awesome experience to tell God what we have done to cause us to drift away from him. When we finally can't hide from God what we have tried to hide from other people and even from ourselves, when we verbally express what we are, it prepares us for a life-changing encounter with him.

There is a sense in which the gospel is really bad news about our sinful condition before it is good news about God's forgiving love in Jesus Christ. I thought about the words of an old hymn I grew up singing. "Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling." When we have nothing to offer God but our stuttered confession from a broken heart, that is when we offer the fruit, or the sacrifice, of our lips. And that is the sacrifice God is waiting for. There is nothing else to offer him. We can't barter our good works to justify ourselves or rationalize our behavior. We simply have to trust God's grace. We come to the same place that King David did after he had been confronted with his sin against the nation and ultimately against God, of adultery with Bathsheba and of arranging for the murder of her husband on the front lines of battle. David finally says in his own prayer of confession (Psalm 51:17),

**The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.**

Yesterday my wife Candy and I were at a conference by Dr. Lawrence Crabb. We were talking about struggles in our relationship over the years. I was reminded of coming to a place of brokenness before the Lord three months ago, having to confess a habitual pattern of sin in

my life toward Candy. It was an issue of trying to manipulate her and control her in one area of our marriage, and we had fought about it for seventeen years. It was a pattern that I had always rationalized and justified, fully convinced that I was right and she was wrong. But God used a men's discipleship group here at PBC to speak to me. One brother in the group confessed this sin before the rest of us and asked us to pray for him, and it was like a bolt through my heart. God decided, "Doug, it's time to face your own sin." When I left the group that night I drove around before I went home, wrestling with God and finally, grudgingly, giving in. I remember the initial pain of going to my wife and confessing sin-not justifying, not rationalizing, but confessing that it was iniquity, a habitual pattern in me that I finally saw as wrong. But there was great joy in her forgiveness.

Renounce Every False God

The third crucial step back to the Lord is turning away from the old ways of living that led us away from him. Verse 3:

**"Assyria shall not save us,
we will not ride upon horses;
and we will say no more, 'Our God,'
to the work of our hands.
In thee the orphan finds mercy."**

Hosea calls the people to tell God that they have heard his judgment of their false and futile beliefs and practices that they have embraced for years and years. Each of the things that lured them away from God has to be relinquished in a specific prayer of commitment. As we saw in our study of chapter 6, repentance without relinquishment isn't going to change us.

Last week our pastoral staff saw a powerful movie on domestic violence about men who abuse women emotionally, verbally, and sexually. It was done by an interfaith religious group. One of the common themes that crossed cultures and religious communities was the way husbands would cry in remorse and say they were sorry and that they would never do it again-yet the pattern never changed. There was no change of heart that triggered actual changes in belief, behavior, and attitude.

That is what Hosea is warning against. Not only do the people of Israel have to agree with God's indictment of their false helpers, saviors, and redeemers; but they have to put them aside. They mention Assyria one last time: "Assyria shall not save us." They have looked to Assyria for generations, yet Assyria hasn't meant salvation to them, but destruction. They promise that they won't try to defend themselves by trusting in their horses and chariots. If you have ever been to Megiddo in Israel, you know that it was a chariot city, one of the fortified cities that Solomon built up. You can see in the ruins of Megiddo the stables that housed all the chariot horses. But here the nation has to come to a place of saying, "We won't trust our financial and military resources any more." The shrines of Baal have to be torn down. The idolatrous creations of their own hands have to be destroyed. Every previous object of trust has to be disavowed. And the result can be a renewal of the covenant trust in *Yahweh*: "In thee the orphan finds mercy." Hosea tells them to say, "I'm like an orphan, helpless and defenseless. I need mercy, salvation, and protection. Nothing else will meet my needs. I'm totally dependent on God's resources and his mercy and love in my life."

The application for us comes with an honest analysis of what lures us away from an intimate, trusting relationship with God. We have been asked repeatedly throughout our study of Hosea, Who or what has the potential of becoming our false god? What in our lives do we use to get security and assurance that only God should provide? An important step on the way back to God is to be as specific about renouncing our false gods as Hosea challenged the people of Israel to be.

I remember talking at length with a young man a few years ago who had come to faith through the Careers Alive ministry. But after a few years of walking with the Lord, he confessed that he had lost the relationship that he had originally enjoyed with God. He said, "Please help me find my way back to him." The first joy I had was telling him that even the fact that he felt that deep need in his life meant that God was at work, and God wasn't going to let him get away. God was the one who had created that desire to come back in him. We went back and talked specifically about what took God's central place in his life, and when he thought the drift might have begun. Then we focused on what he thought might have become false gods in his life. When we finished that painful search, I said to him, "Telling me about this pattern of drifting and of rebellious, sinful choices isn't enough. You have to tell God-he wants to hear it from you! He is delighted to receive it. He loves you and wants to forgive you." We ended up praying together. This dear young man poured out his heart to God. It was a profound time of deep confession, of relinquishing the idolatrous areas of his life. It was a real turning point for him.

I was blessed to be part of that, because I saw change in terms of how he lived his life-a new direction, new priorities. We stayed in touch, and I had the joy of marrying him to his wife a few years ago. He is living in Southern California, where he is involved in an accountability group with other young executives who are tempted by the same gods he is: money, sex, power, and the control of their own lives. These men share the battle weekly, keeping each other honest before God.

Claim God's Promise To Restore You

The fourth step of returning to God and remaining in fellowship with him is to claim his promises for future restoration. The good news is

that true repentance will be followed by healing and restoration. We have to know going in that God will accept our brokenheartedness. God wants to give us new life, and the hope of the restoration of Israel is the focus of verses 4-8. God now speaks a word of grace directly to the nation. He uses the word *hesed*-his unqualified, undeserved, merciful, and gracious love.

In verses 1-3 God called us to pray very specific prayers of repentance, and here he is just as specific in his promises of restoration. He is not vague about what he wants to do for us. Look at verse 4:

**I will heal their faithlessness;
I will love them freely,
for my anger has turned from them.**

This is beautiful poetry in the Hebrew language. It is full of promise. The broken covenant relationship that brought Israel's punishment will be healed. God's covenant love will be restored. He even promises to build into them what they can't build into themselves: loyalty and faithfulness to him and to one another. His love will be given generously, freely, voluntarily. And his justified anger against sin and rebellion will be turned aside from them.

That same redeeming love was fully poured out in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In him, in the words of Hosea, we have been freely loved. The Mediator took the penalty of our sins; he turned aside God's wrath and reconciled us to God. So we know very personally and intimately that ultimate fulfillment of this promise in verse 4. As we read at the beginning of this message, Paul says, "Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come...He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

In verses 5-7 the blessings to the restored Israel are graciously described. This is magnificent imagery drawn from the world of nature. As the bottom line, God promises to be the source of new life, abundance, and fruitfulness:

**I will be as the dew to Israel;
he shall blossom as the lily,
he shall strike root as the poplar;
his shoots shall spread out;
his beauty shall be like the olive,
and his fragrance like Lebanon.
They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow,
they shall flourish as a garden;
they shall blossom as the vine,
their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.**

The picture in the first line is of the dew or sea mist that rolls in off the Mediterranean Sea over the coastal plain, the most fertile growing area in Israel; drenching the vegetation with moisture. That is how God is going to come to his people to bring spiritual refreshment, nourishment, and life. And as a consequence in all the beautiful pictures that unfold, Israel will be like a beautiful, rapidly growing field of lilies of the valley, exploding with life and color and beauty. They will be like stately poplar trees; like the incense cedars of Lebanon; like healthy, productive olive trees; like fertile grape vines that produce the finest wines having a wonderful bouquet. And all of this will take place because of God's protective covering. These are lovely pictures of how God's gracious presence will bring to Israel spiritual abundance, beauty, growth, stability, and the fragrance of holiness.

In verse 8 God reminds the people one last time that intimacy with him means distance from idolatry in any form:

**O Ephraim, what have I [or you] to do with idols?
It is I who answer and look after you.
I am like an evergreen cypress,
from me comes your fruit.**

In the last two lines he summarizes all the pictures in verses 5-7 above. He is the only trustworthy covering. Like a giant tree, he protects them from sun and wind and rain and storm. He is the only source of fruitfulness in life.

The apostle Paul makes it very clear in Galatians 3 that because we belong to Christ, "we are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." All these spiritual promises are ours as well. We are called to renounce all previous dependencies for fruitfulness, to trust only in the Lord for sustenance and prosperity and strength. We are called to be dependent people that God has chosen to experience life the way he intended it to be lived, relying totally on God's gracious promise to provide for our future.

When your life is broken up, when you feel like Humpty Dumpty and the pieces are scattered all over the place, you do feel like all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put you back together again. It is hard to take these beautiful images in verses 5-8 and put yourself in the picture, to claim these promises of healing and restoration.

I identify with that struggle. It was my struggle eighteen years ago after the devastation of God's judgment of losing my first marriage. I

went through a six-month process of accepting my own responsibility before the Lord, confessing sinful failure and accepting forgiveness, starting to experience a new life as I renounced the old patterns of believing and behaving, and beginning to be broken. But I remember my deep struggle to accept this great picture of restoration to fruitfulness. It was difficult to believe that God could give a future and a hope to me as a divorced, single parent. God worked mercifully and graciously through several people to help me put myself in the picture. Ray Stedman was one God used directly in my life. He also used my wife Candy. And probably most pointedly and forcefully, God used Ron Ritchie, who confronted me one day to help me catch a vision of what God could do to give me back my life, to give me fruitfulness and effectiveness. I'm grateful to those people for helping me claim God's promises for continued healing, restoration, and spiritual fruitfulness. That is a consistent theme throughout the Scriptures. *Yahweh* is the God of second chances. He does accept our broken hearts and he is committed to giving us new life.

Surrender Your Will To God

Verse 9 is an epilogue that serves as a conclusion to the entire prophecy of Hosea. It also provides the final step of returning to the Lord and remaining in fellowship with him: surrendering our will to him.

**Whoever is wise, let him understand these things;
whoever is discerning, let him know them;
for the ways of the Lord are right,
and the upright walk in them,
but transgressors stumble in them.**

The wise, spiritually discerning, upright person has discovered the main thing in life. In the movie *City Slickers*, the character Curly says, "There's one thing in life, and you have to figure out what it is." Thank God we don't have to see *City Slickers II* to figure out what it is! The prophet Hosea, guided by the Spirit, tells us what the one main thing in life is: that the ways of the Lord are right. Very simply, there are only two ways in life: Either walk in obedience to God's revelation in the Scriptures, or stumble over it and fall. That phrase "stumble" at the beginning and end of this chapter doesn't mean to just stub your toe. It means to fall to destruction or death. There is hell to pay in the life of transgressors who stumble. We can choose to relativize the word of God, trivialize it, try to manage it like we do everything else in life, and make it mean what we want it to mean. Or we can learn to walk obediently in the Lord's ways, to surrender our will to him.

It struck me forcefully this week that Hosea chose to end this passionate book with an appeal not to our emotions or even to our intellect, but to our wills. There is a very simple choice before us, but just because it's simple doesn't mean it's easy. It's very difficult. G.K. Chesterton once acknowledged how hard it is to return to the Lord, remarking about Christianity, "It has not been tried and found wanting-but found difficult and not tried." I am reminded of Joshua's appeal to the national will of Israel and to the personal will of each individual just before they were going to cross the Jordan and begin the conquest of the Promised Land. He thundered, "...Choose this day whom you will serve...." (Joshua 24:17). Oswald Chambers in his book *My Utmost for His Highest* talks about the act of the will involved: "Surrender is not the surrender of the external life, but the will. When that is done, all is done. There are very few crises in life. The great crisis is the surrender of the will."

When I was a student at Fuller Seminary, the president David Hubbard was asked in a public forum why so few scientists or philosophers come to faith in Jesus Christ. He replied, "The reason so few scientists and philosophers come to faith in Jesus Christ is the same reason that so few prize fighters or ditch-diggers come to faith. They don't want God to be in control of their lives." Giving up that control seems too difficult. It has nothing to do with intellect or emotional makeup.

Hosea's final sermon calls us to return to our holy God in repentance. It confronts us with the shallowness of Christian faith without personal surrender to truth. We have been lovingly confronted with the great cost of being chosen. I hope we have been brought to a place where we see ourselves clearly and honestly cry out for Calvary, to experience grace with greater healing than ever before.

I began this series with the question, "Is there any word from the Lord?" We have heard his word through the prophet Hosea: God will not let us go. His unbroken love from a broken heart will reach us in our sin, in our separation from him, in our idolatry. He will topple our false gods. He will break our pride. He will melt our cold hearts and woo us with his love. The one thing he will never do is give up on us or stop calling us to return to him.

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