

# **Studies in Hosea**

**by**

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# Contents

## Study

- 1 A Tragic Picture
- 2 Unconditional Love
- 3 A Remarkable Man
- 4 Home Truths
- 5 Ungrateful
- 6 Unfaithful
- 7 Unfruitful
- 8 Unholy
- 9 Undying Love
- 10 God's Perseverance
- 11 Judgement Day
- 12 Hope for the Backslider
- 13 There Is a Future

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## **Studies in Hosea**

### **1 - A Tragic Picture**

Amos and Hosea were the first prophets to commit their message to writing and Hosea has been called the tenderest of the prophets, perhaps because of the tragedy in his own personal life. He is the longest of the 12 minor prophets and he ministered from 760-720 BC. His words had a more compassionate ring than those of Amos. He addressed a nation in moral and spiritual decline. It made him weep to see how God was being treated.

Hosea's God-given assignment was to show the people their sin from 'God's perspective.' Hosea has an extraordinary insight into the love of God who is giving His people a last opportunity to repent before judgement breaks over the land.

2 Kings 17 is a commentary on the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in Hosea's day. "They worshipped idols, though the Lord had said, 'You shall not do this'" (verse 12). "But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their fathers, who did not trust in the Lord their God" (verse 14). "They practised divination and sorcery and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking Him to anger" (verse 17). Hosea was alarmed to see Israel so disloyal to God that they were courting the old Canaanite gods (the Baals) instead.

In the book of Hosea we shall find ourselves taken deep into the heart of God- into His loneliness, His pain and anger and longing, and the dangerous passion of His love. Of all the prophetic calls that of Hosea is surely the most peculiar and the least religious in form. Look at chapter 1:2. "When the Lord began to speak through Hosea" through his life, through what happened to him, not just through his mouth. "The Lord said to him, 'Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord.'" So he married Gomer.

Hosea was a man of sensitivity and God's command must have thrown him into terrible spiritual turmoil. He is to marry a prostitute. One commentary on the book of Hosea is entitled: The prophet and the prostitute. Hosea showed remarkable obedience and he personally became a sign to the nation of how God saw them. It's as if the Lord has said, "Go and marry a prostitute because this is exactly what I, the Lord, have married in pledging myself to all of you."

Hosea was to do, in miniature, what God had done in giving His love to a partner with a chequered history and a roving eye. He married a shallow, mercenary woman, Gomer, who might walk out on him at any moment. She bore him a son. Then she had two more children, apparently not his own, and then she left.

The three children were given ominous names. It was a clear announcement of judgement. The first born was called Jezreel. This was the site of a gruesome battle in the past. At Jezreel the royal house of Omri had been exterminated by Jehu in a terrible massacre (2 Kings 9 and 10). So the name Jezreel carried ominous overtones of a coming judgement to the royal house in Israel. Imagine the shock if a father named his first born “Twin Towers” or 9/11.

The girl was named Loruhamah which means ‘not loved’. Fancy going through life with such an appalling name. Her third child, another boy, was to be called Lo Ammi which means ‘not my people’. As we read in chapter 1 verse 9. Then the Lord said, ‘call him Lo-Ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God.’”

Can’t you sense the profound sadness of God in these words? Oracles like these are shouts of warning to a backslidden nation, rather than irreversible sentences.

In fact verse 10 introduces a promise of hope. As sin had marred both kingdoms and led Jehovah to withdraw His pity, so divine grace would triumph ultimately. The name of the first child, Jezreel, can mean “God will scatter”, for example, chaff, but it can also mean “God will scatter” seed in a ploughed field which suggests a bumper crop. It seems that judgement was not God’s last word to His people and that a word of grace was to follow.

Chapter 1 verses 10 and 11 read, “Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them ‘You are not my people’, they will be called ‘sons of the living God’. The people of Judah and the people of Israel will be reunited, and they will appoint one leader and will come up out of the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel.” Chapter 2 verse 1 underscores their future hope, “Say of your brothers ‘My people’ and of your sister ‘My loved one’”.

Behind the message of Hosea – that Israel was God’s unclean wife – lay the anguish of the prophet who was living through similar unrequited love and whose marriage was on the rocks. Hosea learned from experience, from the things he suffered in an unworkable marriage, a little of what God felt when His wife, Israel, was playing fast and loose.

Chapter 2 appears with a court scene. A deserted husband, Hosea, wants a divorce from his unfaithful wife. She has been persistently unfaithful. Where is she now? Who’s she with this time? Children, can you make her see sense? “Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband. Let her remove the adulterous look from her face” (verse 2).

In the divine court, Israel is arraigned. If He wanted it, God has grounds for divorce for Israel had found other lovers- the fertility gods of Canaan, the Baals. She had become fascinated in a fatal attraction to the forbidden and decadent. The poignancy and pathos of a suffering prophet teaches us volumes about the pain of a God whose people have played false with Him. And here's the wonder. God does not have divorce in mind, but reconciliation.

## Studies in Hosea

### 2 – Unconditional Love

In chapter 2 with three great 'therefores' God pronounces judgement on His unfaithful wife, Israel, but that judgement is not intended to reject her, but is meant to bring her to her senses and lead to a second honeymoon. Because Israel is intent on going after her other lovers (verse 5) God says "Therefore I will block her path with thorn bushes; I will wall her in so that she cannot find her way. She will chase after her lovers but not catch them; she will look for them, but not find them. Then she will say, 'I will go back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off than now'" (verses 6 - 7).

This divine tactic might be called judgement by frustration. God will block her wanton urges. Enforced chastity would lead her to change her mind. This is God's gracious purpose. It often takes thorns and a blank wall of famine and frustration to dispel our illusions. The prodigal son returned home for the same reason – not because of love, but because he was cornered. The love, initially, was all on his father's side.

Israel has been wilfully ignorant of the fact that it is God who has provided the grain, new wine and oil, not the pagan Baal. This provision was the covenant sign of God's love (Deuteronomy 7:13). This lavish provision will now be withdrawn so Israel may learn afresh that it is God alone who sustains true life. Here's the second 'therefore' in verse 9. "Therefore I will take away My grain when it ripens and My new wine when it is ready. I will take back My wool and My linen, intended to cover her nakedness. So now I will expose her lewdness before the eyes of her lovers; no one will take her out of My hands" (verses 9 - 10). Israel had forgotten God. God was like the jilted lover. Gomer has forgotten Hosea. She's an adulteress who has forgotten the bonds of marriage and the commitments of faithful love. She has pursued the Baals, the false gods.

In verse 14 God is declaring He wants His wife back. God and Israel first married at the Exodus. They were alone together in the desert. Here comes the third 'therefore' (verse 14). "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor (Trouble) a door of hope. There she will sing (or respond) as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt" (14 - 15).

Here's quite a surprise, we're unprepared for. Is God proposing a second honeymoon in the wilderness of the devastated land or in the desert of the exile? One thing is crystal clear – God and Israel will start all over again, for God isn't just in love, He is love.

Only God can make the Valley of Achor, where Achan was buried (Joshua 7:26) into a door of hope. God, through a later prophet, Jeremiah, sang of that original short-lived honeymoon. "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved Me and followed Me through the desert, through a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of His harvest" (Jeremiah 2:2 - 3).

There's a brighter prospect of a future hope (verse 16 - 23) as God speaks of a new covenant and utters wonderful marriage vows. "In that day," declares the Lord, "you will call Me 'My

husband” ---- “I will betroth you to Me for ever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord” (verses 19 - 20). If the marriage is renewed between God and Israel, peace with nature will follow.

The word translated ‘love’ in verse 19 is ‘chesed’, a special word in Hosea. It signifies real devotion or true love. It implies the love and loyalty which partners in marriage or in covenant owe to one another. Stern warnings are given to avert the very judgements they foretold. What has been lost in judgement can be restored in mercy. The ruined vines of verse 12 are answered by the vineyards of verse 15.

The expression of God’s love is certainly unconditional, but our enjoyment of that love is conditional and depends on our faith and obedience. God’s response will ultimately cancel those appalling names of the children that we saw in chapter 1, an act of pure grace. “I will plant her for Myself in the land; I will show My love to the one called ‘Not My loved one’. I will say to those called ‘Not My people’, ‘You are My people’, and they will say, ‘You are My God.’

Here’s the bottom line. God had grounds for divorce. Israel was playing the harlot. But reconciliation, not divorce was in His heart. God wants His wife back – she’s not for sharing.

Chapter 3 opens perhaps twenty years after Hosea’s first call. He’s an older man now, with grown up children. God tells Hosea to buy Gomer back – she’s one of the working girls doing business on the streets or, perhaps, she was a temple prostitute serving Baal. The sordid reality is she was still in adultery – this was no occasional lapse, but desertion -God urges his prophet to love one who is unlovely, unlovable and who loves others. This is God’s love in miniature – love to the loveless shown. It’s an enactment of the divine love which is constant in all circumstances, present even when a spirit of prostitution leads people astray and they are unfaithful to their God. “The Lord said to me, ‘Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods” (verse 1).

Remember, Gomer has left Hosea for one of her paramours. She’s a kept woman who’d made a fool of him, but he did not object to God’s command by saying “she’s not worth it”. He bought her back for fifteen shekels of silver.

## Studies in Hosea

### 3 - A Remarkable Man

The ministry of Hosea has been a comfort to millions. The break-up of his marriage and his broken heart were the very avenues through which God gave him a ministry. What happened to him enabled him to see into God's heart – and God was heartbroken too.

Hosea bought his wife back. He paid half price: fifteen shekels. She was shop soiled, damaged goods. Did her other lover tire of her? Hosea told her, "You are to live with me ... you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you" (3:3).

What a remarkable man! What an amazing reaction! He refused to divorce her, because he loved her. So too with God. His love was present even while His people were enmeshed in their idolatry and harlotry. The Lord had spoken so clearly in Deuteronomy 16:21 - 22. "Do not set up any wooden Asherah pole beside the altar you build to the Lord your God, and do not erect a sacred stone, for these the Lord your God hates." But that's not what was happening. Chapter 3 verse 4 is a clear reflection of the present state of Israel even in our day. They have rejected their king, their true priest after the order of Melchizedek, their Messiah, and are rejecting the sacrifice He offered.

The short chapter 3 ends with a glimpse at the distant future. It says, "Afterwards the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the Lord and to His blessings in the last days" (verse 5). Divine love is a force that knows no bounds. God still loves relentlessly.

Chapter 4 to the end of the book covers many years. It is Hosea's condensed ministry. The complaint of backsliding is directed to the nation as a whole from 735 BC onwards. These chapters reveal the ways of God. It's like a court of law and God is prosecuting. The nation is guilty of all the sins in the book. Listen to the charge in verses 1 - 2: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed." That is why the land is not productive.

God holds the priesthood accountable. This breakdown in law and order is the result of the priests not doing their job, so everyone is stumbling. "My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests" (verse 6). To ignore the law of God is to invite trouble. The priests had so corrupted their religion that they relished wickedness, because it meant more fresh meat to eat as sin-offerings. 'Like people, like priests' – both groups would face judgement. There would be no exemptions.

Just think of the courage of Hosea in confronting this intense struggle against the paganizing tendencies of his day. After a hard day opposing a bent priesthood, the thought of going home was not comforting. There he would face even more trauma, conflict and grief.

The fact is, Israel had been playing the harlot, flirting with false gods and was guilty of spiritual wantonness. Food and sex have been their obsession. "They will eat but not have

enough; they will engage in prostitution but not increase, because they have deserted the Lord to give themselves to prostitution” (verse 10).

A people, once enlightened by the living God, have become befuddled with wine and have turned to bits of wood for guidance – praying to an idol, and for divination studying the way a stick, thrown up at random, might fall and point.

The problem, in a nutshell, is spelt out in chapter 4:12 “A spirit of prostitution leads them astray; they are unfaithful to their God.” Canaanite fertility rites involved sexual activity and these sins were being repeated (verse 13).

Hosea was addressing a society that was running downhill, where sin flourished unchecked. There was an unholy mixture of true religion and aspects of paganism resulting in decadence. Under Jeroboam the state was a powerful military nation, influential in international affairs, but sick at heart. In 746 BC Jeroboam died.

The royal shrine at Bethel (‘house of God’) was nicknamed ‘Bethaven’ (‘house of evil’) (verse 15). In the words of the Authorised Version ‘Israel slideth back as a backsliding heifer’ (verse 16). Israel is like a headstrong, stubborn cow, wilfully resisting her Master’s orders, whilst expecting still to be treated like a pet lamb (verse 16). “Ephraim (God’s pet name for the Northern Kingdom) is joined to idols’ (verse 17). Israel is wedded to idols, spellbound by idols. The outcome is clear. “A people without understanding will come to ruin!” (verse 14). It will end in shame – ‘a whirlwind will sweep them away’ (verse 19).

What more can God do? He is married to His people Israel and He hates divorce. He couldn’t just walk away from the covenant. So He sends His last chance prophets to plead with Israel to be reconciled to Him.

## Studies in Hosea

### 4 – Home Truths

Hosea chapter 5 is heavy stuff. This is God's exposure of His people and what must happen to them. God sees His people as a menace, when they were meant to be a blessing to the world. Now no one can see the difference. The leaders are found wanting and a scathing rebuke is administered in public. The label once fastened on the Canaanites and on harlots comparing them to snares and nets must now be pinned on God's people.

"Hear this, you priests! Pay attention, you Israelites! Listen, O royal house! This judgement is against you!" (5:1). God states, "I know all about Ephraim; Israel is not hidden from Me. Ephraim, you have now turned to prostitution; Israel is corrupt" (verse 3). The Living Bible, in verse 4, reads, "Your deeds won't let you come to God again, for the spirit of adultery is deep within you, and you cannot know the Lord." God hates mixture ('iniquity and solemn assembly' Isaiah 1 verse 13) and His people have arrogantly been playing fast and loose with other gods. Now God is going to withdraw Himself. This is judgement by frustration. "When they go with their flocks and herds to seek the Lord, they will not find Him; He has withdrawn Himself from them" (verse 6). Divine withdrawal is part of judgement.

God's anger is that of love not hate. His relentless harrying of His people is designed to bring them home. God's judgement needs a reason. His compassion doesn't. One can sense the prophet's heart break when he says, "They are unfaithful to the Lord" (verse 7).

The alarm will be sounded on Judah's borders because Judah shares the sin to which Israel, alias Ephraim, had become addicted. "Blow the ram's horn shofar in Gibeah, the bugle in Ramah! Signal the invasion of Sin City. Scare the daylights out of Benjamin!" (verse 8 The Message). The reality is "Ephraim will be laid waste on the day of reckoning" (verse 9). The people are stained and polluted and a harlot spirit possesses them.

Hosea is speaking some home-truths very plainly, but people did not want to hear his message. The prophet was announcing that the new foe was not to the north, nor to the south. The new foe to the nation was a former ally – the God of Israel. Behind the gathering clouds of international conflict, Hosea perceives an even greater threat, namely God has turned against Israel on the basis of the nation's sin. God, who should have been Israel's closest friend in covenant, would be an irritant to both nations, like a festering sore. The outlook is incredibly bleak, the prognosis blazingly thorough. "Judah's leaders are like those who move boundary stones (i.e. all moral landmarks). I will pour my wrath on them like a flood of water. Ephraim is oppressed, trampled in judgement, intent on pursuing idols" (verses 10 - 11).

Hosea was one of the most radical of Israel's prophets using striking language to grasp the attention of his audience. Verse 12 is hardly the language of theology. The Lord says. "I am like a moth to Ephraim, like rot to the people of Judah." Because all things serve Him, God can use not only the march of armies to work out His purposes, but even the silent process of decay is His. When Ephraim woke up to its predicament, it turned straight to Assyria for help. "But he is not able to cure you, not able to heal your sores" (verse 13).

This is no empty threat on God's part to be 'like a lion' tearing them to pieces and carrying them off 'with no one to rescue them' (Verse 14). The Northern Kingdom was wiped out in 722 BC. The pantomime of Israel's worship was simply a cover up for the gross actions of a people who no longer desired to find God. They wanted the myths and magic of the corn god, not the Ten Commandments and a surrendered life. Just some self-indulgent, mindless religion to keep God happy. So God will withdraw Himself. Verse 15 reads, "Then I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt. And they will seek My face; in their misery they will earnestly seek Me.

I guess chapter 5 of Hosea could be subtitled "How to make God your enemy." The people have certainly managed to do that. God sees His people as a menace. The leaders are weighed in the balance and found wanting. "Their rulers dearly love shameful ways" (4:18). They are arrogant, stumbling in their sin. It was a day of rampant paganism with guilt written all over the nation. In place of shamefaced looks, is a brazenness that denies that anything is amiss.

Commentators suggest that chapter 6 opens with the words of a penitential psalm, but they are not really meant. So the tone is ironic. Such words must be heartfelt, not just words spoken like a mantra. "Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces, but He will heal us; He has injured us but He will bind up our wounds. After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will restore us, that we may live in His presence" (verse 1 - 2).

Words of repentance that only sound good are like the dew, for this mood will quickly disappear. There's no admission of guilt, no specific sins are mentioned and there's no evidence of true repentance. Maybe these are simply facile and presumptuous words with no substance, no genuine turning back to God.

## Studies in Hosea

### 5 - Ungrateful

We're in Hosea chapter 6 and Israel's unrepentant spirit is breaking God's heart. There's a Hebrew word 'chesed' which is a covenant word meaning total devotion to someone, more loyalty than love. It means remaining absolutely loyal to the other covenant partner whatever they do to you. God is asking, "What went wrong with our marriage?"

Verse 3 sounds good, but the people don't mean it. The words are great, "Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge Him. As surely as the sun rises, He will appear; He will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth." Sadly there is a complete absence of repentance and a failure to confess sins by name. There is no remorse. The crucial requirement of admitting their guilt has been carefully omitted. God sees through their empty words and so now hear the cry of heart of their tremendous lover: "What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears" (verse 4). Superficial repentance is no use.

A failure in love led inevitably to a failure in worship because true worship arises out of true love. Sharp prophetic words have been ignored time and again. God's heart is expressed in verse 6, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings." The word 'mercy' (Hebrew chesed) can mean right conduct towards one's fellows, or loyalty to the Lord or both. It is 'undying devotion', 'stay-with-it love.' Israel saw religion as placating God with sacrifices – they were one hundred per cent out of tune with God's heart and purpose. Their offerings were meaningless: They meant nothing to God. Had not Samuel the prophet stated long ago, "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22). In short, God is after love that lasts, not more religion.

Hosea catalogues Israel's crimes in various localities from a town called Adam, to Gilead, to Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim. He calls the priests 'marauders' and murderers. God has 'seen a horrible thing in the house of Israel' (verse 10). He says, in effect, if the kingdom is a whore, then they are its pimps. Israel's sin had defiled the nation. A harvest of judgement awaited Judah (verse 11).

Hosea was a man of extraordinary courage to face danger and speak for God to the government of the day. The nation was literally on the verge of collapse. Israel had gone too far and the storm of judgement must soon break, for the priests had turned their religion into a heartless, murderous racket.

Listen to the indictment at the beginning of chapter 7. "Whenever I would restore the fortunes of my people, whenever I would heal Israel, the sins of Ephraim are exposed and the crimes of Samaria revealed. They practise deceit, thieves break into houses, bandits rob in the streets; but they do not realise that I remember all their evil deeds. Their sins engulf them; they are always before Me" (chapter 7:1 - 2). God doesn't pull His punches. Verse 4

in the Message reads, “They’re like wood stoves, red hot with lust. Through the night their passion is banked; in the morning it blazes up, flames hungrily licking.”

Hosea was witnessing a morally bankrupt and spiritually backslidden nation hurtling away from God at breakneck speed. Their supreme sin has been to leave God completely out of the equation. “All their kings fall, and none of them calls on Me” (verse 7).

In verse 8 we’re told “Ephraim mixes with the nations” – that means mingles with pagans – “Ephraim is a flat cake not turned over.” Ephraim is half-baked. Some years ago we were in Tunisia watching a Berber woman, Fatima, and her clay oven. A flat cake, a disk of dough shaped like pitta bread, was clapped to the side of the oven and left unturned. One side was inedible, raw dough, the other side scorched crust. Ephraim had one side turned to the nations and was getting badly burned. The other side, with its unpalatably weak commitment to Yahweh, was underdone.

The big problem in Hosea’s day, around 733 BC, is the same problem we face in the 21st century. We fail to recognise God is in charge: we are blind to all His warnings and we systematically phase God out of our increasingly secular worldview. Are we in danger of becoming, as Israel had, an unteachable people?

Hosea can be compared to Jeremiah, a later prophet in the southern kingdom. Jeremiah warned his people in Judah that they would go into captivity, and he lived to see it happen. Hosea warned the people in the northern kingdom that they would go into Assyrian captivity, and he lived to see that happen.

The messages of nearly all the writing prophets belong to the period of the divided kingdom. When the kings failed, then God raised up prophets to speak to the nation.

But in 733 BC Hosea found himself addressing an unteachable nation. The priests ought to have been exemplars and teachers of covenant righteousness, but they became masters of deceit and priestly guile. David Pawson has listed Israel’s seven deadly sins as follows: infidelity, independence, intrigue, idolatry, immorality, ignorance and ingratitude.

Years ago I saw a Salvation Army production of “Hosea – the musical”. The one song I remember was entitled “I nearly forgot to say thank you.” Israel had completely forgotten and ingratitude ruled supreme.

## Studies in Hosea

### 6 - Unfaithful

We're studying the forgotten book of Hosea where Israel's the root problem is piercingly exposed. There are two themes that emerge – the judgement of God and the love of God. Two faces of a single coin. In Hosea there are unparalleled expressions of the love of God and the grace of God, and God's unbelievable depths of tenderness shine through so gloriously.

To Israel her decline was doubly imperceptible. It was unnoticed through its gradualness and it was invisible to their pride. Israel was past her sell-by date and must come to judgement. The Lord uses such scathing word pictures – the inedible cake (chapter 7 verse 8), the first grey hairs (verse 9), the flustered bird (verse 11) and the flawed weapon (verse 16).

Let me read Hosea chapter 7 verses 8 - 10 in the Living Bible. "My people mingle with the heathen, picking up their evil ways; thus they become as good-for-nothing as a half-baked cake! Worshipping foreign gods has sapped their strength, but they don't know it. Ephraim's hair is turning grey, and he doesn't even realise how weak and old he is. His pride in other gods has openly condemned him; yet he doesn't return to his God, nor even try to find Him."

One commentator has written, "How better describe a half-fed people, a half-cultured society, a half-lived religion, a half-hearted policy, than by a half-baked scone?" 'Mixing with the nations' has resulted in such a loss of conviction. The unique identity of God's people has been obscured through compromise, pragmatism and expediency. By mixing with the nations and ignoring the Lord, the nation was secretly losing her strength. She was having to pay tribute to foreigners to keep them at bay. No wonder God has to keep turning up the volume of His judgement until it reaches an intensity that captures Israel's attention. Only after the judgement has reached the terrifying magnitude of the destruction of the entire kingdom and the exile of its people will the seeking and returning take place (chapter 3:5).

The nation has no direction. "Ephraim is a silly, witless dove, calling to Egypt, flying to Assyria. But as she flies, I throw my net over her and bring her down like a bird from the sky; I will punish her for all her evil ways" (verse 11 - 12 Living Bible). The nation tries out every policy but the right one. They will not turn back to God, the true Head of State. Israel's foreign policy kept altering. She changed alliances with every shift of the political wind, flitting from Mesopotamia to the Nile in search of an ally. There was an innate inability in Israel to come down off the fence and be definite. With all her cleverness, she was out manoeuvred by God. Israel would fly straight into the one peril she had overlooked – the net of divine judgement. If Ephraim will be the dove, Yahweh will be the crafty hunter.

God is at the end of His tether with them. They have strayed from Him and rebelled against Him. Here's the heart ache of God, "I long to redeem them but they speak lies against Me (verse 13). They do not cry out to Me from their hearts" (verse 14)." "I trained them and

strengthened them, but they plot evil against Me (verse 15). They do not turn to the Most High: they are like a faulty bow” (verse 16).

Perhaps the greatest sin in all the world is to become unfaithful to the one who loves you. Israel is sinning against love. In chapter 2 it was a husband’s love. In chapter 7 it is a father’s love. God desired to pasture His people ‘like lambs in a meadow’ (chapter 4:16), training and strengthening and rescuing were what God had in mind. Israel’s agenda was somewhat different – wandering, lying (verse 13), rebelling, plotting and insolence (verse 16).

Here’s the verdict, God’s people are like a crooked bow that always misses targets. Their leaders will perish by the sword of the enemy and all Egypt will laugh at them.

The date line is still 733 BC. A bird of prey is circling the nation ready to pounce. The nation is in terminal decline. Chapter 8 begins, “Put the trumpet to your lips! An eagle is over the house of the Lord because the people have broken My covenant and rebelled against My law. Israel cries out to me, ‘O our God, we acknowledge you!’ But Israel has rejected what is good; an enemy will pursue him” (chapter 8 verses 1 - 3).

Having turned from God and looked elsewhere, Israel had ‘sown the wind.’ Now it will ‘reap the whirlwind’ of consequences and judgement is unavoidable, destruction inevitable. Their worship was unclean, their fields were empty (a judgement of famine) – everything Israel did turned to ashes. Their dangerous self-reliance and their man-made gods have brought ruin upon them.

“They crave kings, but without asking Me. They set up princes but don’t let me in on it. Instead, they make idols, using silver and gold, idols that will be their ruin. Throw that gold calf-god on the trash heap, Samaria! I’m seething with anger against that rubbish! (verses 4 to 5 The Message).

One can sense God’s tenacious love yearning over them as he asks, ‘How long will they be incapable of purity?’ (verse 5). They have chosen the wrong allies. Their foreign alliance, their special relationship with Assyria, will cost them dear. Forgetting they had a covenant exclusively with God, they made covenants and treaties with other nations. The result is “Israel is swallowed up; now she is among the nations like a worthless thing” (verse 8). Israel has prostituted herself amongst the pagans ‘like a wild donkey’. ‘Ephraim has sold herself to lovers’ (verse 9). Kings of Israel were paying a tribute to the Assyrians for their protection. Ephraim (Israel) hasn’t understood that God does not want more religion “Though Ephraim built many altars for sin offerings, these have become altars for sinning” (verse 11). Religion had become a curse. The law of God was regarded ‘as something alien’ (verse 12). It was totally ignored, but the ceremony went on. Such a performance sickened God and attracted the very judgement it was supposed to avert. They never stopped to ask what God made of all this. Human sin inflicts incredible hurt on God.

The chapter ends with the clear statement, “Israel has forgotten his Maker” (verse 14). But no impressive fortress in the north or in the south will be able to withstand God’s impending day of reckoning.

## Studies in Hosea

### 7 - Unfruitful

Chapter 9 begins in the Message paraphrase, “Don’t waste your life in wild orgies, Israel. Don’t party away your life with the heathen” (verse 1). God had blessed Israel with prosperity, but this had blinded her to the reality of her true spiritual condition. She is now on the verge of captivity. In fact, the party’s over. For Israel their form of religion managed to penetrate everything except conscience. Their worship was unclean and unholy.

The result of this is, “they will not remain in the Lord’s land” (verse 3). In fact “My God will reject them because they have not obeyed Him; they will be wanderers among the nations” (verse 17). Because their feasts have become like pagan activities, to the pagans they will go and their religious festivities will be impossible in exile (chapter 2:11).

Grief is in store for Israel as God withdraws His love and grace by departing from them. Their persistent abuse of God’s love eventually releases the landslide of self-induced judgement. “The days of punishment are coming, the days of reckoning are at hand. Let Israel know this. Because your sins are so many and your hostility so great, the prophet is considered a fool, the inspired man a maniac” (verse 7). The alert watchman, God’s lookout man, has spotted the impending disaster and sounded the alarm. But he’s not popular – prophets never are – and obstacles are numerous. “Snares await him on all his paths, and hostility in the house of his God” (verse 8).

How serious the situation has become is spelled out in verse 9 “They have sunk deep into corruption, as in the days of Gibeah.” Gibeah was a name that went down in infamy in Jewish history as one of the most sordid scenes in the Old Testament. It was the city where the gang rape and sex murder of a Levite’s concubine occurred and it nearly led to the wiping out of the Benjamites in a civil war (Judges chapters 19 - 21).

The Message Bible puts it bluntly “Some of you are going to end up bankrupt in Egypt. Some of you will be disillusioned in Assyria. As refugees in Egypt and Assyria, you won’t have much chance to worship God ... You’ll be starved for God, exiled from God’s own country” (verses 3 - 4).

In chapter 9 verse 10 God becomes nostalgic. “When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert; when I saw your fathers, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig-tree.” The very beginnings of His relationship with His people was like the surprise and delight with which one might come upon a vineyard in a desert. One can sense the divine disappointment. At Baal Peor the Moabites seduced Israel (Numbers 25:1 - 5) even before they entered the Promised Land. God laments “they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol” (verse 10).

In verse 11 the end of Israel’s nationhood draws near. “Ephraim’s glory will fly away like a bird ... Woe to them when I turn away from them!” (verses 11 - 12). Sin leads to judgement which, in grace, will lead to restoration. God will judge in mercy, by letting them go. They will be out of fellowship, but not out of relationship. They remain God’s ancient people.

We need to remember judgement is rooted in love, the grief of God's love. Love constantly abused results in unavoidable judgement.

At Gilgal Saul was made king (1 Samuel 11:15) and, in effect, God was rejected and the rot set in. Moffatt's translation reads, "Their guilt lies all at Gilgal; so there I learned to hate them! For their evil practices, I drive them from My house; no longer will I love them – their rulers are all rebels" (verse 15). The reality is that "Ephraim the Fruitful" bears no fruit.

There's strong irony here. When God says, "Because of their sinful deeds, I will drive them out of my house", He's echoing the promises given to Israel at the Exodus and reversing them. The Canaanites were driven out so Israel could enjoy God's gift of the land: now the Israelites were to be driven out because of their assimilation of Canaanite practices. As the unfaithful wife was driven from the husband's house, so Israel was driven from God's 'house' i.e. His land.

When God says He 'hated them' it means 'loved less than before'. Warm affection pervades the book of Hosea from end to end. Such language announces with anguish not the final ultimatum but a break off of relationship, that is, the suspension of the marriage. In Hosea's vision he has seen the sons of Israel doomed.

The Israelites have worshipped fertility through the sex rites of Baal and they have sold their souls for peace. Their judgement will be infertility and war. The chapter ends with the picture of the wandering Jew, living as a refugee, scattered far and wide. The Message puts it this way, "My God has washed his hands of them. They wouldn't listen. They're doomed to be wanderers, vagabonds among the godless nations" (verse 17).

But this is not God's last word on the Jews! Romans chapter 11 makes that abundantly clear. Read that chapter and see there the purposes of God for them. Hosea doesn't pray out of a hateful vengeance against Israel, but because he shared God's holy wrath against her sins. Despite God's condemnation and the harshness of language with which the unavoidable judgement was announced, the major purpose of the book is to proclaim God's compassion and love that cannot – finally – let Israel go.

## Studies in Hosea

### 8 - Unholy

We've reached chapter 10 in Hosea and the going is tough because the message is grim. God cannot forget their past relationship of genuine love. "Israel was a spreading vine" (verse 1), luxuriant and filled with fruit. But defection has set in – big time. Perhaps this section could be subtitled "Look back in anguish" as God outlines their on-going waywardness. They have no reverence for the Eternal.

"Their heart is deceitful" (verse 2) – the force of the word is 'smooth, slick, slippery' – it was used of the psalmist's treacherous comrade in Psalm 55 verse 21 where he wrote, "His speech is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart; his words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords." The Message Bible paraphrases verse 2, "Their sweet smiles are sheer lies. They're guilty as sin. God will smash their worship shrines, pulverise their god-images."

It grieves God to see that His ancient people are up to no good, year in, year out. Dumb idols proliferate: ethics have vanished. "They make many promises, take false oaths and make agreements; therefore lawsuits spring up like poisonous weeds in a ploughed field" (verse 4). Bethel's calf-god, a detestable idol overlaid with gold, is said to be at Bethaven which means 'house of wickedness.' The Living Bible puts verses 5 - 6 like this, "The people of Samaria tremble in case their calf-god idols at Bethaven should be hurt; the priests and people, too, mourn over the departed honour of their shattered gods. This idol – this calf-god thing – will be carted with them when they go as slaves to Assyria, a present to the great king there. Ephraim will be laughed at for trusting in this idol; Israel will be put to shame" (chapter 10 verses 5 – 6 The Living Bible).

What a heavy message! Without God's blessing, the kings were impotent. Their stupid calf-idol will become tribute for the Assyrian king when they are deported. "Samaria and its king will float away like a twig on the surface of the waters. The high places of wickedness will be destroyed – it is the sin of Israel. Thorns and thistles will grow up and cover their altars" (verses 7 - 8). When it finally dawns on them that their hill-top shrines which were the centres of their corrupt cult have contributed massively to their national shame and disgrace, they will cry out to be buried alive. "Then they will say to the mountains, "Cover us!" and to the hills, "Fall on us!" (verse 8).

Reference is made again to Gibeah where civil war nearly wiped out Benjamin's tribe when it sheltered the lewd men who'd ravaged the Levite's concubine. The Living Bible puts verses 9 and 10 this way. "O Israel, ever since that awful night in Gibeah, there has been only sin, sin, sin! You have made no progress whatever. Was it not right that the men of Gibeah were wiped out? I will come against you for your disobedience; I will gather the armies of the nations against you to punish you for your heaped up sins."

Ephraim used to be a pet heifer, tenderly trained by Yahweh, that loved to thresh but she would not yield her neck to the harness, but just ploughed her wicked ways. The word 'trained' suggests tractable, responsive, useful. But things are different now. As a trained heifer, the chosen people should have broken up the fallow ground and sowed a righteous

crop, but the nation had forgotten its vocation. Instead of being a working heifer, the nation had become a grazing cow. The NIV Study Bible comments, “Now God would cause Israel (here called both Ephraim and Jacob) and Judah to do the heavy work of ploughing and harrowing under a yoke – a picture of going into the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities.

Here’s a timeless truth. “Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love (here’s that Hebrew word *chesed* again) and break up your unploughed ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, until he comes and showers righteousness on you” (verse 12). Sadly that is not what Ephraim has been doing. “But you have planted wickedness, you have reaped evil, you have eaten the fruit of deception. Because you have depended on your own strength and on your many warriors the roar of battle will rise against your people” (verses 13 - 14).

No one can live by the devil’s standards and then expect to reap a reward from God. When you sow sin, you reap sin. This is not rocket science, just spiritual law! Israel’s salad days were over, she would soon feel the Assyrian yoke. The danger of self-reliance is symbolised in soldiers and fortifications, but the arm of flesh will fail us. The Message Bible ends chapter 10 with this paraphrase, “You thought you could do it all on your own, flush with weapons and manpower. But the volcano of war will erupt among your people. All your defence posts will be levelled as viciously as King Shalman levelled the town of Beth-arba, when mothers and their babies were smashed on the rocks. That’s what’s ahead for you, you so-called people of God, because of your off-the-charts evil. Some morning you’re going to wake up and find Israel, king and kingdom, a blank – nothing.”

Sometimes we’re tempted to gloss over Bible passages such as today’s study because it’s unpleasant reading and we say, “I got nothing out of that,” but the Bible declares that “All scripture is God breathed and is useful” (2 Timothy 3:16). The wise will realise these things. The discerning will understand them.

## Studies in Hosea

### 9 – Undying Love

Let's recap quickly. The story so far – chapters 1 to 3 are personal. The prophet and his faithless wife, Gomer. Chapters 4 to 14 are prophetic about the Lord and His faithless nation, Israel. In Hosea we're entering God's heart.

When chapter 11 opens the tone changes. God is reaffirming His position – no other love have I, only my love for you, Israel. We learn that there is hope beyond judgement. The image is not of Yahweh the farmer tending Israel as His grapes, His vine or His heifer, but Yahweh the parent grieving over Israel, His rebellious child.

Hear the heartbeat of God in these verses: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from Me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images” (verse 1 - 2). God's pet name for the northern kingdom, as a term of endearment, was Ephraim. It is used 36 times in Hosea. God says, “It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realise it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them” (verse 3 - 4).

Someone has said that the central theme of the Old Testament is a love story – God's undying love is never returned by the chosen people. This theme continues like a relay race over the centuries. The Old Testament writers take their themes of divine grace and promise and thrust them forward like batons to the runners who succeed them. The New Testament writers reach back and take those themes that suit their purposes, firmly grasp them, and race forward with them to enlighten the church.

One can sense the frustration and hurt in God's heart as He declares of His son, Ephraim, “Now he wants to go back to Egypt or go over to Assyria – anything but return to Me! That's why his cities are unsafe – the murder rate sky rockets and every plan to improve things falls to pieces. My people are hell-bent on leaving Me. They pray to god Baal for help. He doesn't lift a finger to help them” (verses 5 - 7 The Message). What to do when the objects of your love 'refuse to repent' (verse 5), when your people are determined to turn from you? The Authorised Version puts it like this: ‘My people are bent to backsliding from Me’ (verse 7). It is the picture of a backsliding heifer, the little calf which, when you try to push her up the runway into the old wagon, simply puts down her front feet and begins to slide backward.

God sighs, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim?” (verse 8). Admah and Zeboiim were cities at the southern end of the Dead Sea which were destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah. “My heart is changed within Me; all My compassion is aroused” (verse 8). God's heart recoils, all His compassion kindles – how can He give them up? His insides churn in protest so He's not going to act on His anger. The judgement sets off a turmoil in the heart of God. He hates the sins, but loves the sinners. God suffers because He loves. Love overcomes wrath and conquers law. This verse (verse 8) gets us closer to the heart of God than cold theological definitions of the attributes of God ever can. God's thoughts and feelings have been 'turning over' within Him. One is reminded of Joseph's warm feelings at

the sight of Benjamin in Genesis chapter 43 verse 30. “Deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep. He went into his own private room and wept there.”

Once the necessary judgement has been accomplished at the hands of Assyria, God will not again destroy Ephraim. He intends to redeem them and His explanation of His commitment to continue beyond the judgement of Assyrian captivity is both passionate and profound. “I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man – the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath” (verse 9).

Incidentally this is the only place in Hosea where God’s holiness is alluded to, but what a remarkable summation of God’s transcendence and His immanence – ‘the Holy One among you.’ The end game is expressed in ‘The Message’ thus: “‘The people will end up following God. I will roar like a lion – Oh, how I’ll roar! My frightened children will come running from the west. Like frightened birds they’ll come from Egypt, from Assyria like scared doves. I’ll move them back into their homes.’ God’s Word!” (verses 10-11). The remnant threw in their lot with Judah and their descendants returned with them from Babylon (1 Chronicles 9:1-3). To such a return the book has been relentlessly driving (1:11; 3:5; 11:11). Here’s the message of hope after the axe falls. There will be a home-coming in the last days. The population of Israel in Hosea’s day was about 150,000.

God has disclosed His innermost feelings, pledging His compassion (verse 8), despite their disloyalty (verse 7). The chapter ends, in Moffatt’s translation, like this: “Ephraim throngs round Me – with lies, the house of Israel with deceit; Judah is wayward still with God, with its faithful Deity” (verse 12).

The history of Israel in 1 and 2 Kings tells the desperate story of the reigns of the northern monarchs. The average length of their reign was three years. Many were assassinated and there were a number of coups. It was government not based on God’s chosen royal line and it failed spectacularly. God was married to the people of Israel, so He couldn’t walk away from the covenant. He sends his last chance prophets to Israel and, ten years after Amos, Hosea arrives as God’s last prophet to the ten tribes with a message of affection rather than accusation.

## Studies in Hosea

### 10 – God’s Perseverance

There is great profit in studying the minor prophets such as Hosea. This is a book for the backslider with its heart breaking story. It tells of extraordinary graciousness on God’s part as He graciously disciplines Israel and punishes her gradually. Grace always precedes judgement. Israel’s sin was the sin of a people who had the Word of God and who knew God, but had now ignored every warning and turned from Him. They no longer knew Him nor worshipped Him.

We’ve reached chapter 12 in our study and it’s a puzzling chapter written in a condensed style. The scorching east wind of God’s judgement is blowing in, oven hot, from the desert. God intends to let the Assyrians come through the land just like the sirocco wind. Judgement is God’s strange work, His alien work, but as Spurgeon noted, “If we obey not the gentle drawings of His love, He will send affliction to drive us into closer intimacy with Himself.” Courting the super-powers offends God.

“Ephraim feeds himself on the wind; he pursues the east wind all day” (verse 1). The NIV Study Bible comments, ‘Pursuing the wind symbolised Israel’s futile foreign policy, which vacillated between Egypt and Assyria.’ Eugene Peterson in “The Message” puts it this way “Ephraim ... tells lies non-stop, soul destroying lies. Both Ephraim and Judah made deals with Assyria and tried to get an inside track with Egypt. God is bringing charges against Israel. Jacob’s children are hauled into court to be punished. In the womb, grasping the heel, Jacob, got the best of his brother. When he grew up, he tried to get the best of God. But God would not be bested. God bested him. Brought to his knees, Jacob wept and prayed. God found him at Bethel. That’s where He spoke with him. God is God-of-the-Angel-Armies, God-Revealed, God-Known” (verses 1 - 5).

What’s required is plainly stated in verse 6, “You must return to your God; maintain love (it’s that chesed word again, which means devotion or true love), and justice and wait for your God always.” Ephraim has acted like a merchant using dishonest scales, crooked business practices. This suggests that Israel was no better than a Canaanite. “He loves to defraud” (verse 7) with the result that she has been lulled into a false sense of security by the seductive power of riches. “Ephraim boasts, ‘I am very rich; I have become wealthy. With all my wealth they will not find in me any iniquity or sin’” (verse 8).

God is the One who ‘spoke to the prophets, gave them many visions and told parables through them’ (verse 10). They were sent to make men think, to disturb and confront them. Moses was the prophet of the exodus as Samuel was the prophet of the settlement in Canaan. Now another prophet held centre stage – Hosea. He declares that “Ephraim has bitterly provoked God to anger” (verse 14). The Lord had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, settled them in a land they could neither have won nor bought on their own, and their response has been rank ingratitude.

The note of hope in this gloomy chapter is the references made to Jacob. Hosea focuses on the deceitfulness of Jacob, that crafty shuffler, a most unattractive man who majored in deceitfulness. – just like the nation Israel. But the life of Jacob is a demonstration of God’s

perseverance with man. God delights to work in cases like Jacob's, for he starts where there is no promise of anything and produces something for his glory.

Consider this – Jacob strove with God. Jacob was hard work; from birth to manhood, he was a twister, crooked as a cork screw, skilled in sharp practice – yet God's forbearance extended even to a rogue like him. Israel, as a nation, has been as bent as Jacob, so presumptuous, but God is the 'Tremendous Lover' who loves the unlovable.

Jacob fled to the country of Aram where he served his uncle Laban, that master of manoeuvre, to get a wife. He served 14 years. He went through life taking advantage of others, tripping them up so he could get ahead. Jacob had snatched at his destiny time and again – so had Israel and Judah with land grabs (chapter 5:10), rash treaties (12:1) and infatuation with Baal. Wasn't the nation of Israel playing the same dangerous game? Trying to dodge God. With the entire universe to occupy God's interest and attention, isn't it staggering that He is interested in us?

God is spelling it out so clearly. The Message again: "Not so fast! I'm God, your God! Your God from the days in Egypt! I'm going to put you back to living in tents, as in the old days when you worshipped in the wilderness" (verse 9). God says, "The sins of Gilgal flourish just the same. Row on row of altars – like furrows in a field – are used for sacrifices to your idols. And Gilead, too, is full of fools who worship idols" (verse 11 The Living Bible).

God's love will not let them go. He'll transform Jacob into a prince however long it takes – centuries or millennia.

How wonderful that God condescends to be called 'the God of Jacob' (Psalm 146:5). He is the God of the misfit, the God of the warped personality, Jacob's God is the God of long suffering. If you're more Jacob than Israel, so was he when the call came in the far country (Genesis 31:3). Without stopping to exhort or explain, God disciplined him. The Spirit of God disciplines us all the time. Everything in our lives is directed to this end, to bring us to the place of Israel, a prince with God. Jacob's trouble was himself – self-will, self-purpose, self-defence, self-desire, self-righteousness. Jacob's self-life had to be dealt with. God weakened him. It's the same story with the nation of Israel.

## Studies in Hosea

### 11 – Judgement Day

Hosea chapter 13 is not really bedtime reading. It covers the Lord's anger against Israel and contains some very colourful language and some frightening threats, but the nation has long since stopped listening.

When God gives warning of judgement, He's not playing with words. The nation of Israel had shrivelled in spirit and what was happening was that the sin which had been covered up was being uncovered. All was being exposed. The Living Bible opens chapter 13 with these words: "It used to be that when Israel spoke, the nations shook with fear, for he was a mighty prince; but he worshipped Baal and sealed his doom. And now the people disobey more and more. They melt their silver to mould into idols, formed with skill by the hands of men. 'Sacrifice to these!' they say – men kissing calves!" (verses 1 - 2). Idolatry carries its own punishment. You worship nothing, you get nothing and you end up as nothing. It's just vanity.

Don't we also live in a day when there is no shame? Sin is brought out into the open and flaunted. A halo is put around sin today. The sinner is commended for doing something new and daring and courageous. The openness of sin is not a mark of advancement, but it indicates that we are losing the civilization which formerly carried some semblance of Christian culture. Open sin is applauded. They hate hypocrisy – which is laudable- but sin is still sin whether hidden or out in the open.

Chapter 13 is the climax of Hosea's prophecies of doom, but it is not the climax of the book. The roots of Israel's failure were to be found in the inner life of the nation. "Therefore they will be like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears, like chaff swirling from a threshing floor, like smoke escaping through a window" (verse 3). Mist, dew, chaff and smoke are all figurative for Israel, who was soon to vanish as a nation. The very God who cared for them in the desert, in the land of burning heat, is now ignored. "When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot Me" (verse 6).

God's response sounds outrageous. He, who had previously been pictured as a shepherd (4:16) would now attack like the wild beasts that often ravaged their flocks. Remember that God is a jealous God. He is no tame divinity. The popular picture of God is as a tolerant, easy going spectator. Here's a ferocious picture of God. He would become like a dangerous lion, a lurking leopard, a mother bear robbed of her cubs, a female bear in a frenzy. Moffatt's translation says, "So I was a lion to them, I leapt like a leopard on their path, I sprang at them like a bear robbed of its whelps, tearing their breast open; I crunched them like lions, and worried them like wild beasts" (verses 7 - 8).

The Authorised Version in verse 9 states, "O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself: but in Me is thine help." We've already seen how this alarming situation has been reached. Israel had turned a deaf ear to every appeal, defiance and obstinacy became her lifestyle, wantonness was second nature to her. There was a deep reluctance on God's part to resort to

judgement but perhaps, at last, it might serve to bring His people to their senses. Their foolish trust in political leaders has seriously let them down (verse 10).

One of the outstanding features of this book is its sudden changes of tone from the sternest of threats to the warmest of resolves. So we can glimpse a promise of redemption from death, even the death of the nation. Verse 14 says, "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave is your destruction?" In the New Testament Paul applies this passage to resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:55). Could it be that, although the death-knell sounds in long delayed judgement, death can be overcome because God is the God of resurrection?

If God could change Jacob, a wheeler dealer, full of guile and arrogance, a nasty piece of work, engaged in such dubious conduct, could He not save Israel, Jacob's descendants? In His sovereign will, God laid His hand on Jacob for a special purpose, and when God undertakes something no one can defeat Him. The God of Bethel took the initiative and dynamically intervened in Jacob's life (Genesis 28: 10 - 19) in such a classic display of grace, unexpected, unsought and overwhelming. The very God who recovered His wayward child, Jacob, is the unchanging God who can recover His wayward nation, Israel. He is the God of predestination who undertakes to see something through to its end. Eventually Jacob bore fruit and God revealed Himself in this unpromising man. He became a gentle and deeply feeling parent, despite his former meanness and ability to pull a fast one. He had a genuine desire for spiritual things.

Doomed Israel will have a future, though it doesn't look like it in Hosea chapter 13. The Message ends the chapter with these words: "God's tornado is on its way, roaring out of the desert. It will devastate the country, leaving a trail of ruin and wreckage. The cities will be gutted, dear possessions gone for good. Now Samaria has to face the charges because she has rebelled against her God: her people will be killed, babies smashed on the rocks, pregnant women ripped open." Using the cruel, godless nations around them, the judgement of God was about to fall on unrepentant Israel.

History tells us that Samaria held out from 724 to 722 BC, then fell to Sargon the second. Israel's inhabitants were deported to Assyria to be replaced by other subject peoples.

## Studies in Hosea

### 12 – Hope for the Backslider

At the end of Hosea it's evident that the game's up. It's over. There are no more last chances. The prophet's preaching was finding fulfilment in daily events, for Samaria, Ephraim's capital, fell in 722 BC. One can imagine hearing the breaking news "This is the BC World Service – Here are the headlines – Hosea was right."

Powerful imagery has been used throughout the book. Israel has been compared to a prostitute, an unfaithful wife, a bride, a stubborn heifer, someone terminally ill, the prey of a wild animal, a mouldy inedible cake, a silly dove, a broken bow and a wild ass! But in the last chapter she is being beckoned again. The way is signposted with the landmarks which she passed on her spiritual journey into the far country.

If chapter 13 announced that Israel would be judged in the present, chapter 14 declares that she shall be saved in the future. This is incredibly good news. God's love will win the day. There's hope beyond judgement. God's love is a committed love that will ultimately triumph. God's mercy endures insult and injury from the one it loves. God moves into reconciliation without grudge or malice. He remains so utterly faithful when we turn out to be utterly faithless to Him. At conversion God's love changes from a general love to a "never-let-you-go" kind of love. It is love like the Hebrew word 'chesed' which, as we discovered in chapter 6, is a covenant word meaning total devotion to someone, more loyalty than love. It means remaining absolutely loyal to the other covenant partner whatever they do.

Chapter 14 begins with 'back to basics.' The Message paraphrase reads, "O Israel, come back! Return to your God. You're down but you're not out. Prepare your confession and come back to God. Pray to Him, 'Take away our sin, accept our confession. Receive as restitution our repentant prayers'" (verses 1 - 2). The prayer continues in verse 3 in the NIV: "Assyria cannot save us; we will not mount war-horses. We will never again say 'Our gods' to what our own hands have made, for in you the fatherless find compassion."

At the dedication of the Temple, Solomon's prayer had included these words, "When your people Israel have been defeated by an enemy because they have sinned against you, and when they turn back to you and confess your name, praying and making supplication to you in this temple, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your people Israel and bring them back to the land you gave to their fathers" (1 Kings 8:33 - 34). A sincere repentance, words of true repentance only would suffice.

God promises to 'heal their backsliding and love them freely' (verse 4 AV). Three times Hosea uses the word 'backsliding' in his fourteen chapters. It is used in scripture only by Hosea and Jeremiah, both of whom spoke to a nation ready to go into captivity. Israel and Judah were guilty of backsliding, guilty of refusing to be led by God and refusing to come to God. The silly dove has finally come to its senses and ceased its flitting. The chronic sufferer has decided to change its doctor (5:13). The wild ass is seeking to eat from the Trainer's hand (8:9).

God's response, when they repent, is a love song. It's the language of love, like the Song of Solomon that rings in their ears and carries them into exile. It mentions "dew (that refreshes) ... blossom ... lily ... Lebanon ... fragrance ... dwelling in His shade ... vine ... wine." Here's the passage in full (chapter 8:4 - 7 NIV) "I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily. Like a cedar of Lebanon he will send down his roots; his young shoots will grow. His splendour will be like an olive tree, his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon. Men will dwell again in his shade. He will flourish like the corn. He will blossom like a vine, and his fame will be like the wine from Lebanon."

Against all deserving, the marriage still holds. He is still hers. How can this be? The transformation has happened by chastening. It's the triumph of love, the persistence of the "Tremendous Lover", the vindication of the Lord's 'chesed' - his devoted love for them. Israel has gone through the mill of her own choosing and in the end she'll be more spiritually beautiful than she was before.

Moffatt translates verse 8, "What more has Ephraim to do with idols? 'Twas I who humbled him, 'tis I who will protect him. I am like a cypress evergreen: his welfare ever comes from me." The folly of idolatry still stalks our land. Robert Murray McCheyne spoke of self-righteousness as the largest idol of the human heart. How God hates it. It sits on Christ's throne and is a grim idol, like Manasseh's carved image in the holiest of all. The idol of earthly pleasures in this hedonistic age is a smiling, dazzling idol with ten thousand worshippers, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.

Matthew Henry, who died in 1714 aged 53, writes in his monumental commentary that, according to Jerome, Hosea prophesied of the destruction of the kingdom of the ten tribes and lived himself to see and lament it. The concise style of Hosea, in some places, seems like the book of Proverbs, without connection and rather to be called Hosea's sayings than Hosea's sermons. His final saying in his last sentence is his fundamental belief, "The ways of the Lord are right."

## Studies in Hosea

### 13 – There Is a Future

What a glorious God shines through this seldom read minor prophetic book. Here's the wonder of the infinite God, torn with an agony of longing for a people who have forsaken Him and who have no awareness of His pain caused by their desertion. Yahweh is torn apart by years of unrequited love, pulled one way by His anger and another way by His love. In every direction His people have played Him false– in religion (by flirting with other gods), in politics (relying on other nations), in morals (engaging in unbridled sex and violence). Through it all, God refused to write them off.

Without God, they will continue to stumble every step of the journey. “You stumble day and night, and the prophets stumble with you” (4:5) and “Israel's arrogance testifies against them; the Israelites, even Ephraim, stumble in their sin; Judah also stumbles with them” (5:5). Hosea's last verse asks, “Who is wise? He will realise these things. Who is discerning? He will understand them. The ways of the Lord are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them” (14:9). Hosea so desired the day when Ephraim might respond like David when the Philistines had seized him in Gath, “For You have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life” (Psalm 56:13).

Another key concept in Hosea is the importance of acknowledging the Lord. “She has not acknowledged that I was the one who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold – which they used for Baal” (2:8): “I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord” (2:20); “There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land” (4:1): “A spirit of prostitution is in their heart; they do not acknowledge the Lord” (5:4): “Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him” (6:3): “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings” (6:6). To treat God as an irrelevance is very provocative.

We've reached the end of Hosea, a book about perverse human behaviour and the divine response to such disloyalty – a response of suffering love, outrage and compassion. It's an incredible story how God's own people can be pagan and promiscuous, stubborn and tainted as a harlot, so unconcerned about God and His feelings. It's as if God says ‘Do you think you mean as little to Me as I mean to you?’ Gloom has dominated the prophet's ministry, but the book ends on a note of love. There is a future. God's love cannot die even if one day His ancient people worship Him and the next day they worship Baal.

Hosea has a disjointed style. It's not a flowing book. This last prophet of the kingdom of Israel was one of the most radical, using striking language. He's been called the ‘Jeremiah of Israel.’ But what a man of God! Imagine the turbulence of his own feelings. How did he grapple with his bewilderment, despair, rage, revulsion and jealousy regarding wanton Gomer? She had embarrassed him and abandoned him. Perhaps shame filled his soul as hot tears streamed down his cheeks.

Hosea was a very gracious man, pure and righteous. He denied himself, took up his cross daily and followed God's call. He laid aside the small town gossip – “Where's his wife? ....

You never see them together ..... Oh, don't you know, she's carrying on with so and so .... Well, I've heard men leave her house at all hours." From the tragedy of a broken home and the stinging reality of a broken heart, Hosea gains great insights into God's purposes and God's heart-break.

One of the basic words in Hosea's vocabulary was the word "Return." "Afterwards the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God" (3:5): "Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God" (5:4): "Come let us return to the Lord" (6:1): "Israel's arrogance testifies against him, but despite all this he does not return to the Lord his God or search for Him" (verse 7:10) : "But you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always" (verse 12:6) : "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the Lord" (14:1 - 2).

The Lord would be found by Israel only when she turned to Him with integrity of heart. The intimacy of the covenant relationship between God and Israel has been illustrated in the first part of the book by the husband / wife relationship and is later amplified by the father / child relationship. The message is crystal clear: unfaithful wife (Israel) and faithful husband (God): unfaithful nation (Israel) and still faithful God. His loyalty to the covenant is unshakeable.

Surely Hosea has a timely message for our day. National sin brings down national judgement. Kipling's "Recessional" echoes in our ears: "Judge of the nations, spare us yet – lest we forget, lest we forget." We still don't acknowledge that the ruin that hurtles in our direction is directly connected to our rebellion against God. The deception that we can live godlessly without any consequences dominates our worldview. Today's philosophy will tolerate anything, but God's not like that.

Where are today's intercessors? Do we not need prophets like Hosea whose pleading words reach heaven and whose fearless assault on sin is relentless because of his being sold-out-to God alone? A loud alarm needs to be sounded, giving notice of judgement to come.

This is a message not only to nations, but also to each individual. Where do you stand in your relationship to the living God? Have you turned to Him in true repentance for your sins. Have you accepted the provision for forgiveness that He has made through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ because of his love for you? Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near.