

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Messages from some Old Testament Prophets: Hosea

The task that we have before us this morning is somewhat akin to the old problem of how to put a quart into a pint pot, or in our case, how to give an adequate exposition of one of the minor prophets whose treatise consists of fourteen chapters, in a time of about twenty five minutes. We will do our best.

The prophet for our consideration is Hosea whose name means 'to save', and it is the same name that Joshua bore before he was renamed by Moses. His new name incorporates the old and means 'Jehovah is salvation'. He prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah, Jothan, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reigns of Jeroboam II, Zechariah, Shallum, Menahem, Pekaniah and Pekah kings of Israel. During this time the kings of Judah (apart from Ahaz) did what was right in the sight of Jehovah; but the kings of Israel, without exception did that which was evil. Hosea's prophecy is directed towards Israel, who is sometimes alluded to as Ephraim, although Judah is not altogether omitted.

In studying the books of the prophets from Isaiah through to Malachi we must always remember that these are the words of Jehovah to His people the Jews. Whilst the Gentile nations are spoken of it is fallacious exposition to apply these Scriptures to the Church. Many teachers, perhaps most, wrest all the blessings of which the prophets speak, that God has in store for the Jewish nation, and make them apply to the Church leaving only the judgements for the Jew. This is a grave distortion of the Word of God. The Jews are God's earthly people, the seed of Abraham, descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob, multiplied into a nation whilst slaves in Egypt, called out of that land by Jehovah, given their own land, one that flowed with milk and honey and endowed with all the blessings of God, so long as they were faithful to Him. Sadly they were not; they sinned against God with a high hand and ultimately compounded it all by crucifying their Messiah, the Son of God Himself. Subsequent to Calvary God, so to speak, suspended the Jewish nation and made salvation available to all, Gentiles and Jews alike, simply on the basis of faith in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. So, there is eternal blessing for all who believe, but for the unbelieving Jews the awful judgement of the holy God awaits them. But this is not all, for after the rapture of the Church to glory God will re-gather His ancient people to their land He will again take up their cause, and once again they will be a nation, but this time with Christ, great David's greater son ruling over them. If my listener would like to turn to Romans 11:25-32 he will be able to read a passage pertaining to this great event.

The theme of Hosea's prophecy is Israel's sin and he refers to it either specifically or by implication in every chapter. Jehovah had already determined the nature of the punishment; it was to be the complete overthrow of the kingdom by the Assyrians, accompanied by the transport of the nation to various regions under the government of their conquerors. Religiously, the great sin of Israel was their embracing of Baalism. Baal was the chief god of the Canaanites and when Israel first inhabited the land, temples, altars, high places and such like erected to Baal would have abounded. Upon their entry God had instructed His people to completely destroy these pagan tribes but they had not done so and these places of Baal worship were allowed to remain. Then when the kingdom was divided Jeroboam the first king of Israel had made golden calves (See 10:5. and 13:2 of our prophet) and instituted new feasts, ostensibly to worship Jehovah, because Jerusalem with the temple was no longer available to his people. But soon Jeroboam's new institutions became associated with Baal, Jehovah was forsaken and Baal and Ashtoreth the chief female goddess of Baalism were worshipped. Jehovah terms all this spiritual harlotry and this analogy is frequently used in Hosea's preaching. To us the language employed might seem somewhat indelicate but really it is used to emphasise the repulsive behaviour of Israel in the sight of God. There were brief periods of restoration, for example under Elijah who after showing the falsity of Baal worship on Mount Carmel, then slew his prophets (1 Kings 18:17-46), and then under Jehu who exterminated the worshippers of Baal in 2 Kings 10:18-28, but at heart Jehu was an evil man, as we shall see later. The spiritual rot had therefore begun at the very inception of the northern kingdom and it had continued during every reign subsequent to that of Jeroboam. One has only to read the history of the nation of Israel beginning in 1 Kings 12 to get some idea of the spiritual degradation into which the people had fallen.

The moral depravity of the nation was a direct result of their idolatry. Baalism incorporated as part of its worship fearful sexual licentiousness. Ashtoreth, for instance was the goddess of fecundity: the produce of the land, the increase of the flocks and large healthy families were all attributable to her and such blessings would have been given in response to worship which would include sexual union between devotees of the cult. Hence sensual and unrestrained license and widespread moral corruption became the order of the day. If God, in His goodness did allow

their harvests to be good or their flocks to multiply, all this would be attributable to Ashtoreth. Israel's *moral* behaviour is illustrative of their abandonment of their allegiance to Jehovah, and the time has now come when He can allow it no longer – Judgement must come.

In chapter 1 Jehovah instructs His servant to “Go take unto thee a wife of whoredoms”. Surely a strange commandment from a holy God, but I think that what He is doing is speaking to the people by what we may term living analogies. So Hosea takes Gomer as his wife but again I do not believe that he was, at the time of the marriage, aware of her promiscuous tendency, although, of course, it was known to God. She gives birth to a son and Hosea is instructed to name him Jezreel. Jezreel was a city in Issachar the place where the infamous King Ahab and his even more infamous Queen Jezebel lived. They, of course, were avid followers of Baal and, by example, led the people in all its idolatry. Jezreel was the scene of Jezebel's horrible death, and verse 5 tells us that the valley of Jezreel would be the scene of Israel's final overthrow. There He would avenge the blood of Jehu, the bloodthirsty king already referred to, who had gone far beyond the commission that Jehovah had given him to avenge the blood of His servants that Ahab and Jezebel had slain. So all his life Jezreel's name would be a standing reminder of what God would do because of Israel's sin. Gomer then bears two more children, first a daughter and then a son. It is not said that Hosea was the father of either of these, and it may be that this is the first indication that he has of his wife's unfaithfulness. Again God instructs that the daughter shall be called Lo-ruhama which means ‘without pity’. Her name would have covered a twofold application – firstly that she was not Hosea's child and the name would indicate his feelings toward her; but secondly and more important, she was a portrayal of Israel in their departure from Jehovah who says “I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel, but I will utterly take them away”, verse 6. The second child, a son, was named, again under the directions of God, Lo-ammi meaning “not my people”. Again the name would indicate that he was not only not the son of Hosea, but would also point to the conditions that now prevailed between God and Israel. No doubt Hosea would have made known publicly why these children had been so named, and they would therefore have been a standing rebuke to the nation reminding them of God's repudiation of His people.

Surely this prophecy of Hosea has a message to this nation of which you and I form part. Over the centuries there has been at least some acknowledgement of the supremacy of God. Almost every village has its church, and the people attended and sent their children to the Sunday Schools, for centuries the Bible has been within the grasp of every man, woman and child, Sunday was treated as the Lord's Day, God in His goodness gave us great preachers who were faithful in proclaiming the gospel, men who were willing to give their lives at the stake rather than deny the truth of the Scriptures. Adultery and other immoral practices, whilst they certainly took place were not condoned. I am not saying that everybody was a Christian in the true sense of the word but at least there was some reverence accorded to God. But what do we see today; a complete overthrow of almost everything that was once regarded as good and righteous; the most heinous acts of wickedness are everyday occurrences; murder, violence of the most vicious kind, rape is an everyday event, moral depravity is regarded as normal and some of it even legalised by Parliament, much of what appears on the television screens is a disgrace and no doubt encourages the wickedness that currently prevails. In the religious field the Bible is no longer regarded as divinely inspired and therefore infallible, its fundamental truths such as the virgin birth of our Lord and His atoning death at Calvary are not acceptable but rather ridiculed. All this and much, much more. Has God not noticed all this – has it escaped His attention? No my dear listener it has not. He looks down from Heaven as He looked down upon Israel of old and I believe that the time is near when He will say “Enough - the time of judgement has come”.

In chapter 2 Jehovah through his servant attempts to restrain Israel in her path of idolatry by withdrawing his blessings from them. In verse 6 He “will hedge up her way with thorns, and make a wall, that she shall not find her paths”; In verse 8 she did not know that it was He who had given her grain, and wine, and oil, and had multiplied her silver and gold, gifts which they had used in their worship of Baal. Indeed they had attributed this prosperity to Baal but now they would experience a partial famine in order that she may realise the futility of idolatry. It seems that there was some response for Israel decides in verse 7 that she will return unto her first husband, for then it was better with her than now. But this so called return was without any repentance and the Baal worship continued, and God has to pronounce further and far more serious judgement. That duly came about and in 2 Kings 17:6-7 we read that “in the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria took Samaria, and carried Israel away captive into Assyria, and placed them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. For so it was that the children of Israel had sinned against the LORD”. The following verses of that passage until verse 23 gives Jehovah's case against Israel and concludes with the words “The LORD removed Israel out of His sight, as He had said by all His servants, the prophets. So was Israel carried away out of their own land to Assyria unto this day”. As a nation Israel has ended but God's purposes will not be thwarted. He had made a covenant with Abraham which pledged the ultimate blessing of Israel. See for instance Genesis 12:2; 13:16; and 15:4-6. Such a covenant could not be annulled or abrogated and Hosea in his prophetic utterances, which are of course a series of addresses and not one long discourse, often refers to a future day when God will recover His people. Already in chapters 1 and 2 he has alluded to it. In 1:10 God says “It shall come to pass that, in the place where it was said Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God”. And in 2:16 we read ‘of *that* day’, the day when restoration takes place Israel will no longer address God as Baali which means Lord and was the name of the god Israel was now worshipping, but would

call Him Ishi meaning 'husband'. That day is, of course, still future but when it comes Israel will return to their land and the Valley of Achor will be for a door of hope". Verse 15. The Valley of Achor was the scene of judgement executed against Achan after the defeat of Joshua's army at Ai (Joshua 6).

Hosea's prophecy, as we have it, in one book is one of constantly changing themes. As we have pointed out Israel's sin and wickedness predominates and there is the frequent warning of chastisement. As examples of this we could refer you to s 2:4; 4:5; 7:11-12; and 8:7; where we get the well known quotation "For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind": 9:3; 9:17 and 12:2.

As a specimen of Hosea's preaching let us look at one passage, chapter 5. Here He gives more detail about the coming judgement and calls upon the priests. They were not really priests for they were not of the tribe of Levi and moreover they were officiating at the shrines set up by Jeroboam, but nevertheless if they took to themselves such an office then they should have been the moral instructors of the people. But not only the priests, Hosea also includes in his call, the house of Israel, that is the people generally and the house of the king, the royal house. Jeroboam's original intention was that the worship of Jehovah should be practised in the northern kingdom, but very quickly it deteriorated into the worship of Baal. And the priests were not guiltless in all this as verse 6 shows. The people in their ignorance had gone with their animals for sacrifice to seek the LORD but they had been deluded by the priests. They had dealt treacherously and the gullible Israelites had been entrapped into idolatry. They, the priests, had been a snare in Mizpah and a net spread upon Tabor, verse 1. Both Mizpah and Tabor were centres of Baal worship. In verses 10 to 14 Hosea also includes the nation of Judah in his pronouncement of judgement for they too in the reign of king Ahaz had embraced the worship of Baal and that had not escaped Jehovah's notice. Judah, too, would be the subject of judgement.

But superimposed upon all is the promise of future recovery. As already remarked it is referred to in the earlier chapters but the climax is reached in the last, a beautiful and encouraging one. Hosea's plea to his fellow Israelites is very touching. Listen to him. "O Israel, return unto the LORD thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the LORD; say unto Him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously; so will we render the calves of our lips". Here the word 'calves' has the sense of praise or worship. Previously they had turned to Egypt and Assyria to help them in their troubles but they had both failed, and indeed, as we have seen, Assyria had later taken them captive. The Assyrian will be overthrown by Jehovah, as Isaiah 10:12; 14:24-27 and 30:27-33 teach but Israel, and the full reality of this will no doubt be in a coming day, will finally listen to the pleadings of their God and return to Him. How glad God is when His people finally repent and return to Him – how ready He is to lavish blessing upon them. Listen to His words. "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely; for mine anger is turned away from him. I will be as the new dew unto Israel; he shall grow like the lily, and cast forth his roots like Lebanon. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be like the olive tree, and his fragrance like Lebanon. They that dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall revive like the grain, and grow like the vine; the scent of it shall be like the wine of Lebanon". What can Israel say in response to such love? "What have I to do any more with idols? I have heard Him, and observed Him; I am like a green fir tree. From me is thy fruit found". As I close dear listeners, may I ask that you read for yourself chapter 14 and note the great grace of God even after such long provocation; and is not verse 2 so apposite for man personally and for the nation collectively today.

The last verse of the book is a call by the prophet that the wise may learn and profit from the experience of Israel – "For the ways of the LORD are right".

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