

The Book of Hosea

Chapter 4

In Hosea, chapter 4, the prophet reminds the Israelites that God has a dispute with them. He seeks to warn them that God will soon punish them unless they repent.

4:1

“Hear the word of the LORD, You children of Israel, For the LORD *brings* a charge against the inhabitants of the land: “There is no truth or mercy Or knowledge of God in the land.”

The prophet Hosea was sent to the children of Israel to warn them of God’s impending judgment on account of their unfaithfulness to God and His covenant. God’s chosen people heeded the warning and humbled themselves before Him, while those who were hardened in wickedness were further condemned. The unrepentant had no pretext for claiming ignorance, even if their consciences had become seared.

If the people had been meek and teachable, God would have sent them a gentle and kind warning. But since the people had become proud and hardened against God, the prophet speaks sharply and strongly. From this we should learn that whenever God threatens us with judgment, we ought to confess our guilt so that God’s wrath may be appeased.

The land of Israel lacked truth, it lacked mercy, and it lacked knowledge of God. Sinful behavior prevailed. The whole land was filled with contempt of God, rampant immorality, and crime. The people were deceitful like foxes and cruel like lions and wild beasts. Most shockingly of all, even though the Israelites were God’s chosen people and had received God’s Word, the Old Testament, there was no “knowledge of God in the land.”

4:2

“By swearing and lying, killing and stealing and committing adultery, They break all restraint, With bloodshed upon bloodshed.”

Lacking truth, mercy, and true knowledge of God, the land of Israel was filled with cursing, lying, murder, theft, and adultery. It became a land of anarchy, a land of lawlessness. Murder, crime, and violence dramatically increased. Having rejected God’s law, no police force could control the lawless people who broke “all restraint.”

The people raged against God. They had no shame, no guilt, no embarrassment. They did not fear God or His law. They had no true religion. There was nothing left to control their depravity and wickedness.

4:3

“Therefore the land will mourn; And everyone who dwells there will waste away With the beasts of the field And the birds of the air; Even the fish of the sea will be taken away.”

God’s wrath will at last be poured out upon the northern kingdom of Israel. Even the innocent beasts of the field and birds of the air and fish of the sea will be taken away, as

in the days of Noah and Lot. If the animal kingdom will be destroyed, what will become of men?

4:4

"Now let no man contend, or rebuke another; For your people are like those who contend with the priest." Or "for your people are like those who bring charges against a priest" (NIV).

The Prophet Hosea here deplores the extreme wickedness of the people. They would bear no rebukes. Being past-feeling and hopeless, they reject all advice and counsel, they reject all physicians and remedies. They close their ears and shut their eyes and harden their hearts against all God's mercies.

No one would dare to contend with or rebuke another sinner. Yet, at the same time, they had the audacity to act as those who wrongly rebuke God's ordained priests! They were like those who wrongly fight with or bring charges against their pastors and elders.

They did not take kindly to correction or admonition. They said, "Am I to be treated like a child? Don't I know how I ought to live?" They thought that they were above all the prophets, priests, and teachers. They did not want to hear sound doctrine. They accused God's faithful messengers of being "too rigid." And the people claimed that even though they rejected God's law, they yet were God's true people. How deceived they were.

So, on the one hand, all kinds of wickedness abounded among the Israelites, who were in rebellion against God. And, on the other hand, there was no freedom to teach or to admonish, for the people would not have it. They did not want to hear the word of the Lord. As soon as any one touched on their own sins, they were quick to become defensive and argumentative. They rose up in rebellion against their own teachers.

The people of Israel would no longer listen to God or to the messengers whom He sent. Thus, God declared that their disease was incurable. God's patience had come to an end.

4:5

"Therefore you shall stumble in the day; The prophet also shall stumble with you in the night; And I will destroy your mother."

God declares His coming vengeance upon the rebellious nation of Israel. If you pay no regard to my authority when I reprove you by my words, then I will judge you with contempt.

The day refers to that tranquil and joyous time during which the people indulged in their sin. Their punishment will come suddenly. This was no joke. God did not threaten them in vain. Even at mid-day, while the sun was shining, God would judge them. And when the dusk should come, the false prophets would also get their turn to be judged. (That is to say, the prophets referred to here are not God's true and faithful ministers, but those imposters who deceived the people.)

The *mother* referred to here is the nation of Israel, which is now the Church. The apostle Paul tells us in Galatians 4:26 that the Church is "our mother." So here God declares

that He will destroy Israel. The Israelites boasted that they were the children of Abraham and true Israelites. They reasoned, “How could God destroy us when we are God’s chosen people?”.

God here warns that being a member of the church does not exempt you from God’s judgment. In the case of Israel, the people’s rebellion at last led God to blot out the very name of their mother, dispersing the people around the surrounding nations. Why did God do this? In part, because they claimed to be the people of God when they were living in outright defiance and rebellion against God and His holy laws.

4:6

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.”

The Lord had set the priests over the people; yet they failed to do what God commanded them to do. The priests had been unfaithful, too. The clergy were living for themselves. They wanted to be popular among the people. They wanted wealth and prestige. And they got it---at the cost of denying God. They failed to proclaim the whole counsel of God. They failed to proclaim the Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. They failed to teach the law of God. In essence, they failed to keep their ordination vows, and God would hold them accountable for this.

The blame went both ways. On the one hand, the priests failed to proclaim sound doctrine. But how did they get to this point? It is because they gave the people what they wanted. The people did not want sound doctrine.

The apostle Paul instructs faithful pastors today in 2 Timothy, chapter 4: “Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn *their* ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables [fictional stories]” (2 Tim. 4:2-4).

The people liked to have false teachers, because they did not preach every word of God, teach sound doctrine, rebuke them, and convict them of their sins. The people preferred to hear lying words and fictional stories. This was to their own destruction: God says, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.”

The people were extremely ungrateful. They forgot God’s law, and so He threatens that He will forget their children! The people’s audacity is all the more striking when we consider how much God had blessed this people and their ancestors. God had given heavenly wisdom to the Israelites, which He had not given to any other nation on earth. He gave Moses the Ten Commandment on Mount Sinai. How then did it reach this point—that the Israelites should perish through their ignorance? The only explanation is that they closed their eyes to the light God had given them. They no longer were teachable, and thus they did not learn godly wisdom. They perished for their lack of knowledge because they did not want knowledge.

How strikingly similar this is to modern America today—a once Christian nation founded upon Christian principles, a land in which the Pilgrims and Puritans brought the true

Reformed faith and set up schools to teach true religion, morality, and knowledge. How could such a land lack knowledge? How could the people be Biblically illiterate and unwise. It is the same case in our day that people are destroyed for lack of knowledge because they willfully choose to reject the light God has given them; they do not want to serve and love Christ. They do not want to submit to or obey God and His Word.

How did it happen that the priests should be so careless in not teaching God's law to the people? It is because the people no longer wanted to hear the law of God; it was an annoyance to their ears. They did not like the preaching of God's servants, as they daily cried out against their sins. So the people gladly entered into an agreement with the priests—that they would no longer preach the truth of God's law. And the priests agreed.

Yet, the prophet Hosea declares that God will judge both the priests and the people with a dreadful judgment—He will blot out the whole race of Abraham. "I will forget your children."

If the Israelites had kept God's covenant, he would have kept His covenant promises to bless them. Yet, they violated the covenant, and, in doing so, brought God's curses upon them.

4:7

"The more they increased, The more they sinned against Me; I will change their glory into shame."

Hosea accuses the Israelites of having shamefully abused God. They were guilty of God abuse! The more their heavenly Father had shown His kindness to them, the more they obstinately rebelled against Him.

The Israelites had increased in number as well as in wealth. They were a prosperous nation under Jeroboam II. They enjoyed great material prosperity. Yet, the more they were blessed, the more ungrateful they became. Instead of showing their gratitude to God, they increased in their depravity.

So God declares that He will "change their glory into shame." God will judge the prideful, the unthankful, and the unrepentant. The people trusted in their riches, their prestige, their power, their horses, and their chariots. Now God will turn their prosperity into adversity.

4:8

"They eat up the sin of My people; They set their heart on their iniquity."

God had set up the sacrificial system so that a guilty sinner might mourn for his sin. By seeing an innocent animal slain on the altar, the sinner was to meditate upon his own guilt and dread God's judgment for sin. The sacrifice was also intended to call for faith in the heart of the sinner, that he might flee to Christ, the promised Mediator whose sacrifice once and for all has paid the penalty of sin. The penalty that God laid on sinners was meant to restrain us from sinning.

Yet, the ungodly mocked God. They went through the motions, the ritual of offering an ox or a lamb, and then freely indulged themselves in their sins. The false priests went

along with this hypocrisy with their soothing words of flattery. They assured the people that God loved them, even though the people were doing that which God detests.

4:9-10

“And it shall be: like people, like priest. So I will punish them for their ways, And reward them for their deeds. 10 For they shall eat, but not have enough; They shall commit harlotry, but not increase; Because they have ceased obeying the LORD.”

God shall judge both the priests and the people, as both were guilty as charged. The priests had abused their office. They were ordained to call the people to piety and holy living, yet on the contrary they affirmed the people in their sin and wicked deeds. The people, likewise, sought out these false teachers who would affirm and encourage their idolatry and sinfulness.

The prophet Hosea here teaches us that men are sorely deceived when they think that they can obtain their wishes by wicked and sinful means. The Lord will frustrate the desires of the wicked. In this case, the Lord will curse their fertility. The Israelites had worshipped Baal, the pagan god of fertility. Now God will deprive them of fertility. Their fields will not produce food, nor will their wombs produce children.

Why are they under God’s curse? It is because “they have ceased obeying the Lord.”

In their doctrine and worship, the Israelites had forsaken the true God. Although they claim to be God’s chosen people, the children of Abraham, God declares them to be apostates. Why? **Because they ceased to meditate upon God’s law day and night, and they ceased to obey God’s Word.** Instead, they followed their own desires and inventions. They freed themselves from the yoke of God’s law, and in doing so, they had departed from the Lord.

4:11

“Harlotry, wine, and new wine enslave the heart.”

The Israelites had lost their minds and become like brute animals. Having rejected the true God, the Israelites had become enslaved to alcohol and sexual immorality. Alcohol and sexual immorality were the true gods of the wayward Israelites.

4:12

“My people ask counsel from their wooden *idols*, And their staff informs them. For the spirit of harlotry has caused *them* to stray, And they have played the harlot against their God.”

To whom shall we look for counsel? Who shall be our counselor? God?

The Israelites turned to their wooden idols for counsel. Having abandoned the Bible, they looked to other sources of truth. The spirit of harlotry had caused them to stray away from God and His pure worship. They looked to the world and its false gods to guide them.

The “staff” may refer to the staff that a blind man uses. As when a blind man asks for his staff, so the Israelites asked counsel of their wood and staff. Yet, what reason or sense

does an inanimate object, a wooden staff, have? With a degree of contempt and irony, the Prophet here exposes the folly of those who consult their manmade gods. To consult wooden idols is just as foolish as to have a staff for your counselor.

What God desires of His true children is our spiritual chastity, our spiritual faithfulness to Him alone. God will not tolerate any rivals. For the Christian, the Bible *alone* is to be the source of our knowledge, our beliefs, and our practices. The Bible *alone* tells us how we are to live in a way that pleases God and how we are to worship Him rightly.

If we do not submit to God's Word *alone*, then our natural inclination will be rashly to follow our own superstitions. When we follow manmade idols or superstitious beliefs, we depart from God and are guilty of spiritual adultery. Yet, when we fix our eyes on Christ and His Word, then we remain chaste and faithful to Him.

The Sin of Acting out of "Good Intentions" Apart from God's Command

4:13-14

"They offer sacrifices on the mountaintops, And burn incense on the hills, Under oaks, poplars, and terebinths, Because their shade *is* good. Therefore your daughters commit harlotry, And your brides commit adultery. 14 "I will not punish your daughters when they commit harlotry, Nor your brides when they commit adultery; For *the men* themselves go apart with harlots, And offer sacrifices with a ritual harlot. Therefore people *who* do not understand will be trampled."

Those who practice false worship or incorporate superstition into God's worship often are prone to cry out and boldly contend: "What! Can this be called harlotry when we are worshipping Christ?" They argue that they are zealous for Christ and have good intentions, and therefore what they do must be good and pleasing to God.

Many churches argue that their worship is approved by God even though it is not based on God's Word because they have good intentions.

Yet, the prophet Hosea showed the Israelites that although they thought that they were worshipping God with pious zeal and good intentions, they were actually committing spiritual adultery. It is adultery when you "offer sacrifices on the mountaintops and burn incense on the hills, Under oaks, poplars, and terebinths."

God had indeed commanded the Israelites to make sacrifices and offer incense. So why was He so angry with them? Despite their zeal and claim that they were worshipping the true God, the Lord reproves the Israelites for their superstitions. In other words, He reproves them because even though they do what He commanded, they do not do it in *the way* He commanded it to be done.

God is our judge. He pronounces all false acts of worship, however pious and godly they might appear, to be adulteries and harlotry. "Good intentions," which aren't based on God's commandments in Scripture, often lead to sinful and disastrous results. Why? Because it is a high offence against God to depart from His Word.

God commanded sacrifices and incense to be offered to Him *only* at Jerusalem. Yet, the Israelites transgressed this command. And, obedience to God is of more value with Him than all sacrifices: Samuel said, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and

sacrifices, As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22).

The Prophet adds that they burned incense under the trees “because their shade is good.” In other words, the people were pleased by the false worship they invented.

In Colossians 2:23, the apostle Paul acknowledges that “self-made religion” or “self-imposed worship” has an “appearance of wisdom.” In other words, those religious acts that men invent or ordain that are not found in Scripture, which God regards as “superstitions,” may have “an appearance of wisdom.”

Despite this “appearance of wisdom,” Hosea warns us that all these things that are not ordained by God in His Word are in God’s eyes an abomination!

Among the Israelites, the ungodly and hypocritical imagined their worship to be approved by God and perhaps that it was even better than the worship of the Jews in Judah. In Judah they worshipped God only in one place, but in Israel their nation was filled with altars and memorials of God. Yet, God did not even recognize the worship of Israel at all. They did not worship God in the way He commanded, and therefore they did not worship the *true* God at all. Jesus said regarding the Pharisees, “And in **vain** they **worship** Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matt. 15:9). And also, Jesus told the Pharisees, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. . . . you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down” (Mark 7:9, NKJ; Mark 7:13, NIV).

The Israelites departed from the true faith, and God gave them over to gross immorality. Their daughters, their brides, their men—the whole nation became idolatrous and depraved.

God will give the people over to their sin, and they at last shall stumble, for they willfully departed from God and now God will deliver them over to their final destruction.

4:15

"Though you, Israel, play the harlot, Let not Judah offend. Do not come up to Gilgal, Nor go up to Beth Aven, Nor swear an oath, saying, 'As the LORD lives'

The southern kingdom of Judah was infected with false worship and superstitions, just as the northern kingdom. However, God had in large part kept the southern kingdom relatively pure.

In the northern kingdom, from the time that Jeroboam led the ten tribes after him, the worship of God was corrupt. He forbade the Israelites from ascending to the true temple of God in Jerusalem, where they ought to have gone to offer sacrifices in accordance with God’s law. Instead, Jeroboam had altars built in the northern kingdom, which were perversions of divine worship. Israel had cast away the fear of God and played the harlot with the false Baal gods and others.

God warns us that it is difficult to remain undefiled, if we come into contact with false religion. By nature, we all have the tendency to forsake true religion and follow our own inventions and superstitious ideas. By nature, we all have a sinful tendency to desire to

mix some false and ungodly forms of worship into the true worship of God that He ordained in His Word.

The Israelites had destroyed the true worship of God by building altars for themselves in Bethel and Gilgal, where they pretended to worship God. Here Bethel (which means "house of God") is called by its derogatory name, *Beth Aven*, house of idols.

Gilgal was a famous location. After passing through the Jordan, the Israelites built there a pillar as a memorial of the miracle. The people remembered this miraculous display of God's favor. Yet, Jeroboam, or one of his successors, took this reminder of God's faithfulness and perverted it by building a temple in Gilgal. Gilgal was not holy, as God had not ordained it to be a holy place. (Only God can declare a place to be holy.) Yet, the wicked rulers of Israel did this very thing with Gilgal and so deceived the people.

Bethel was named by the patriarch Jacob because God appeared to him there. It was Bethel, "the house of God" (cf. Gen. 28:17). Yet again, the rulers of Israel twisted the fact that Jacob had sacrificed there to God and turned Bethel into a "holy place." Despite their "good intentions," Bethel became the house of idols and iniquity.

Hosea condemns the Israelites for leaving the legitimate altar in Jerusalem and running to the profane places first established by Jeroboam. They willingly embraced the new ways of worship that had been invented by the wills and imaginations of men, not God.

On the one hand, there were Gilgal and Bethel, which were worship centers invented by men. On the other hand, there was the temple built by God's command on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, the worship center that was ordained by God.

This passage should teach us how dangerous it is for us to stray from the Lord's commandments and think that we can do things our way, instead of God's way. Should we not follow what God alone commands us to do? The prophet Hosea's teachings call us today to keep pure and entire all that worship that God has instituted in His Word and neither to add to it nor subtract from it!

The prophet adds that they should not "swear an oath, saying, 'As the LORD lives'" God did not want the Israelites to swear in His name any longer, for He could not bear to have His name connected with idols (cf. 2 Cor. 6:15). How dare they use God's name when they were worshipping idols. God said in Ezekiel 20:39: "As for you, O house of Israel," thus says the Lord GOD: "Go, serve every one of you his idols -- and hereafter -- if you will not obey me; but profane My holy name no more with your gifts and your idols. In other words, God rejected all their false worship, even though they did it in His name.

Likewise, in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 7, verses 21-23, Jesus declared, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"

4:16

"For Israel is stubborn Like a stubborn calf; Now the LORD will let them forage Like a lamb in open country."

The Prophet compares Israel here to an untamable, stubborn calf. The calf could not bear the yoke of his lord. So now his lord will let him roam about in open country like a lamb in a spacious place. So the Lord will scatter the stubborn Israelites all around the world after the Assyrians destroy their kingdom.

4:17

"Ephraim is joined to idols, Let him alone."

God mentions the tribe of Ephraim because the kings of Israel came from that tribe. The Lord had sent the prophet Hosea to the Israelites to lead them to repentance. He wanted them to reform their ways and be conformed to His likeness. God called the people to turn from their error and obey Him alone with a pure faith.

Sadly, He now saw that the prophet's labor was in vain. Hosea was having no success. So God commanded him to leave this people alone.

Nothing can be more frightening than this—for God to leave us alone when we are in sin and traveling on the highway to hell. Rebukes and corrections may seem unpleasant to us, but let us fear and tremble lest God should ever leave us alone!

By saying that "Ephraim is joined to idols," God means that they could not be drawn away from their lovers. Their hearts were hardened against God. Israel would not return to her true husband.

4:18

"Their drink is rebellion, They commit harlotry continually. Her rulers dearly love dishonor."

The Israelites were characterized by their rebellion and unbridled licentiousness. They committed harlotry—both with their bodies and their souls—continually.

Even her rulers were caught up in the rebellion. There was none to exercise discipline or to provide correction.

4:19

"The wind has wrapped her up in its wings, And they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices."

A sudden storm would sweep away the people, and thus would they be made ashamed of their sacrifices.