

Return to the LORD

Hosea 14:1-9 on February 27, 2022

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Please read Hosea 14:1-9 before reading further in this transcript.

Today is part 2 of a 2-part series on the Old Testament book of Hosea. Much like last week, this week's sermon needs a "PG-13" disclaimer. Hosea's message contains some fairly adult content. Hosea 14:1 begins, "Return, Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall!" In order to understand these sins, we need to understand Israel's relational commitment to Yahweh. The northern kingdom of Israel is often referred to as Ephraim¹ in the book of Hosea.² You see, "the tribe of Ephraim enjoyed a particular prominence because Joshua was an Ephraimite."³ ⁴ Joshua is the one whom God chose to lead Israel into the Promised Land in the first place. Now, Joshua died at the age of 110, and he was buried in the hill country of Ephraim.⁵ His final words to Israel give us some background context for Israel's rebellion in the book of Hosea. Right before his death, in Joshua 24:14-24, he gives Israel one final reminder: "Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." Then the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God." Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. *If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.*" But the people said to Joshua, "No! We will serve the LORD." Then Joshua said, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD." "Yes, we are witnesses," they replied. "Now then," said Joshua, "throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel." And the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the LORD our God and obey him."

¹ "EE fra ihm" Severance, W. M., & Eddinger, T. (1997). In *That's easy for you to say: your quick guide to pronouncing Bible names* (p. 65). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

² 37 times according to *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1746 footnote on Hosea 14:8.

³ "EE fra ihm ight" Severance, W. M., & Eddinger, T. (1997). In *That's easy for you to say: your quick guide to pronouncing Bible names* (p. 65). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁴ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 107 footnote on Genesis 48:13-20.

⁵ See Joshua 24:29.

And so God's people began with good intentions of serving Him wholeheartedly. But faithfulness and perseverance don't come so easily to us humans. The old hymn says it well, we are prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love.⁶ God expects us to remember these lessons from the past and to learn from them. Hosea offers a helpful corrective for our own lives, for when our sins, like Israel's sins, become our downfall. In other words, Hosea wasn't just written as a message to Old Testament Israel, it was written for us modern-day readers as well. In fact, Hosea 14:9 still calls to us today, "Who is wise? Let them realize these things. Who is discerning? Let them understand. The ways of the LORD are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them."^{7 8 9} You see, most of Hosea's prophecy is focused primarily on Old Testament Israel. But in the FINAL verse of his book, Hosea now closes with a call to his readers. And while the original audience was Israel, and the southern tribe of Judah, his readership also includes you and me. It's a call for us to realize these things that Hosea has written, to understand them for ourselves.¹⁰ The verse ends by leaving us modern-day readers a choice: We can choose to walk in the ways of the LORD or we can stumble along in our own, ongoing rebellion.^{11 12}

Unfortunately, Israel waited a long time to repent of their sin and to return to the LORD. And yet, because the LORD loved Israel so much, He didn't give up on them. Instead, He disciplined them. Part of God's discipline included allowing Assyria to invade Israel and take them away into captivity.¹³ This is recorded all throughout the book of Hosea, even up to just a few verses before today's Scripture reading. Hosea 13:15-16 records, "...An east wind from the LORD will come [*This is a reference to Assyria coming from the east*], blowing in from the desert; his spring will fail and his well dry up. His storehouse will be plundered of all its treasures. 16 The people of Samaria must bear their guilt, because they have rebelled against their God. They will fall by the sword; their little ones will be dashed to the ground, their pregnant women ripped open." Samaria was the capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel, so here it represents the rebellious people who lived there. And what a difficult and sobering verse to read, in

⁶ These words are part of the lyrics from the incredible hymn, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing."

⁷ Suddenly, we are exposed "to the same searching encounter, for the word of God goes on speaking; it never slips safely into the past." Derek Kidner, "The Way Home: an exposition of Hosea 14," The Gospel Coalition, Themelios: Vol. 1, #2, Spring 1976, p. 4.

⁸ "God's revelation through his prophets has very practical purposes: it guides people in 'the way of the LORD' so that they can live for him rather than against him." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1747 footnote on Hosea 14:9.

⁹ 1 Thessalonians 2:13 says, "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe."

¹⁰ Hosea 14:9 is a "A Challenge to the Wise Reader." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1723.

¹¹ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1459 footnote on Hosea 14:9.

¹² This Wednesday is referred to as Ash Wednesday, which is the official beginning of the season of Lent. It begins a 40-day countdown until Easter. It's actually 46 days but Sundays aren't counted, so it's technically 40. Learn more here: <https://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/len/when-does-lent-start-and-end-this-year.html> Lent is a time for sober reflection, for fasting and repentance. So today, as we walk through Hosea's call to "Return to the LORD," let's consider our own need to repent of our sin.

¹³ Eventually the Babylonians will overtake the Assyrians, thus the southern kingdom of Judah will join the northern kingdom of Israel in captivity some 150 years later. See note in *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1725 footnote on Hosea 1-7.

the history of God's people. One author notes: "The horrors of war, including brutality against women and children, would mark the end of the nation... ALL this, could have been avoided, but it came about because Israel 'rebelled against their God.'"¹⁴ As harsh as this discipline may sound to us, we need to keep it, in its historical context. Joshua had warned them about this back in 24:20, "If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you." God loves His people far too much to let them wander forever in sin. One author says it this way: "Severe and final as that judgment is, Hosea persists in seeing it as chastisement, as discipline, as the search of God for the repentance of his people."¹⁵ Hebrews 12:10-11 reminds us, "...God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."^{16 17}

Back in Hosea 9:10 God said, "When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert; when I saw your ancestors, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree. But when they came to Baal¹⁸ PEore¹⁹, they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved."^{20 21 22} In other words, Israel's relationship with God started off as something wonderfully positive and refreshing. This imagery of grapes and figs "beautifully convey[s] God's delight in Israel, when she, out of all the nations, committed herself to him in covenant [love]."²³ But despite her past commitment, Israel broke their covenant with God, and consecrated themselves to things that were shameful and vile. But exactly what kind of sin are we talking about here? In other words, what specific sins was Israel committing? Before we consider some of their sins, let's agree to avoid approaching this with a haughty attitude, of looking down our noses. Let's not pretend as though WE would NEVER sin, like those terrible Israelites! Instead, let's soberly admit our own depraved human condition. Let's admit our own potential to be JUST like Israel. And let's humbly proclaim that apart

¹⁴ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1745 footnotes on Hosea 13:15-16.

¹⁵ James Luther Mays, *Hosea*, Westminster, Philadelphia, PA, 1969, back dustcover.

¹⁶ In other words, He doesn't give up on us, but pursues us whatever it takes. We actually talked about this briefly at our Life Group this past week. One person made the comment: "Discipline is the wonderful mercy of God." On 2/22/2022, I think it was Jason who said this.

¹⁷ So Yahweh withdrew his provision and protection for Israel, just as Joshua had warned them He would. One author says it this way: "Despite God's condemnation and the harshness of language with which the unavoidable judgment was announced, the major purpose of the book is to proclaim God's compassion and covenant love that cannot-finally-let Israel go." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1443.

¹⁸ "BAY uhl" Severance, W. M., & Eddinger, T. (1997). In *That's easy for you to say: your quick guide to pronouncing Bible names* (p. 33). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹⁹ "PEE ore" Based on Severance, W. M., & Eddinger, T. (1997). In *That's easy for you to say: your quick guide to pronouncing Bible names* (p. 129). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

²⁰ Baal Peor is "part of a place name and refers to the apostasy committed by an earlier generation of Israel with the Canaanite deity who gave his name to the site." J. Andrew Dearman, *The Book of Hosea: NICOT*, Eerdman's, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 350.

²¹ See Numbers 25:1-13.

²² References in Hosea to "Baal" are referring to "Canaanite deities other than YHWH." (J. Andrew Dearman, *The Book of Hosea: NICOT*, Eerdman's, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 349. Also see top of p. 351.) Therefore, "[Baal] is not a personal name." (J. Andrew Dearman, *The Book of Hosea: NICOT*, Eerdman's, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 349.)

²³ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1453 footnote on Hosea 9:10.

from Christ, we'd have no hope either.²⁴ With this admission in mind, let's now consider some of Israel's specific sins. They're woven all throughout the 14 chapters of Hosea.

First of all, **Israel sinned by turning to idols.** We just read about this in Hosea 9:10, "But when they came to Baal Peor, they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved." Hosea 13:2 later adds, "They kiss calf-idols!" God gave Israel the 10 Commandments, and here they go breaking the first 2 of them, right out of the gate. God commanded them: "You shall have no other gods before me," and "You shall not make for yourself an image of anything...."²⁵ Not only was this behavior shameful and vile, it was ridiculous. Here they were, God's chosen people, handpicked by the one true God, and now they're "doing something so ridiculous as 'kissing cows' in order to receive a blessing!"²⁶ Now, our modern-day idols probably aren't images carved out of wood, or fashioned from silver and gold. But anything that we place before God can be an idol. Things like:

- > Making our career the most important thing in our life,
- > Hoarding wealth rather than stewarding it for God's purposes,
- > Placing devotion to family and friends above our devotion to God,
- > Worshipping creation by putting too much focus on hunting, fishing, the outdoors.
- > Choosing sinful behavior with our significant other rather than godly purity.

An idol is anything that seduces us away from full devotion to Jesus.

Israel also sinned by turning to worldly behaviors. Hosea 4:1-2 says, "Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites, because the LORD has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed." Verse 1 says that God's people lacked godly character; lacked faithfulness, lacked love, lacked any acknowledgment of God. They were missing the distinctive characteristics that God intended for His distinctive people. In other words, they were no different than the world around them, which is why they turned to worldly behaviors. They were cursing, lying, murdering, stealing, and committing adultery. And that makes 5 more of the 10 commandments broken in a spirit of rebellious disobedience!²⁷ One author summarizes it this way: "Where God is not acknowledged, moral uprightness disappears."^{28 29 30} This is a good reminder for us as believers in Christ: God intends for us to be markedly different than the world

²⁴ Brother or Sister in Christ, we are more like Old Testament Israel than we'd care to admit. In fact, in light of last week's text, you might even say that we are just as prone to go out whoring after sin. We are just as prone to wander, to sell ourselves for sex, by compromising our devotion to Christ for worldly gains, false security, and pleasures.

²⁵ Exodus 20:1-6.

²⁶ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1744 footnote on Hosea 13:2.

²⁷ Exodus 20:7-17.

²⁸ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1447 footnote on Hosea 4:2.

²⁹ Hosea 7:11 says they were calling for help from their "friends" in Egypt and Assyria. Indeed, bad company had corrupted good behavior (1 Corinthians 15:33-34). "Israel's outlook had become as worldly as her friends." Derek Kidner, "The Way Home: an exposition of Hosea 14," *The Gospel Coalition*, Themelios: Vol. 1, #2, Spring 1976, p. 3.

³⁰ Hosea 13:4 says, "But I have been the LORD your God ever since you came out of Egypt. You shall acknowledge no God but me, no Savior except me." "Hosea saw the failure to acknowledge God as Israel's basic problem." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1442.

around us. 1 Peter 2:9, 11 reminds us, (*Mind you, this is written to Christ-followers.*) “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you OUT of darkness into his wonderful light.... Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.” This begs the question for every Christian hearing this message: Do you remember that you’ve been chosen? Do you realize that YOU are God’s special possession? And if so, are you walking in the light, or are you back in the darkness? Are you abstaining from sinful desires, which war against your soul? Are you living differently than the world around you?

Israel also sinned by turning to financial arrogance. “God called Hosea to predict the destruction and exile of Israel at a time when Israel was at the height of its material prosperity.”³¹ As Christ-followers living in America today, our ears should perk up a little at this, because we are currently living in a nation “at the height of its material prosperity.” Hosea 8:14 warns, “Israel has forgotten their Maker and built palaces....” Hosea 12:7-8 says, “The merchant uses dishonest scales and loves to defraud. Ephraim boasts, ‘I am very rich; I have become wealthy. With all my wealth they will not find in me any iniquity or sin.’”³² But in Hosea 5:2-3, God clarifies, “...I will discipline all of them. I know all about Ephraim; Israel is not hidden from me....” You see, Israel had grown haughty and smug, due to their financial wealth and the false security that it gave them. Rather than thankfulness to God, or generosity toward their neighbors, this led them to financial arrogance and financial dishonesty. Jesus warns His followers in Matthew 16:26, “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” Likewise, Hosea records a time in history, when there was a battle going on for Israel’s soul.³³

Let’s consider just one more specific sin that Israel was committing.

Israel sinned by turning to reliance on political solutions. Hosea 7:11 says, “Ephraim is like a dove, easily deceived and senseless—now calling to Egypt, now turning to Assyria.” As Israel faced one crisis after another, rather than turning to God, “they turned to Egypt and Assyria in an attempt to build national security by clever diplomacy.”³⁴ Hosea 8:9-10 says, “For they have gone up to Assyria like a wild donkey wandering alone.”³⁵ Ephraim has sold herself to lovers... they have sold themselves among the nations....^{36 37} So not only did Israel prostitute themselves to idol worship,

³¹ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1719.

³² Hosea 6:11-7:2 says, “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 practice deceit, thieves break into houses, bandits rob in the streets; but they do not realize that I remember all their evil deeds. Their sins engulf them; they are always before me.”

³³ Hosea displays “the inner tragedy and glory of the God who by his own choice struggles for the soul of his people.”

James Luther Mays, *Hosea*, Westminster, Philadelphia, PA, 1969, p. 7.

³⁴ James Luther Mays, *Hosea*, Westminster, Philadelphia, PA, 1969, p. 12.

³⁵ Jeremiah 2:24 paints the picture more clearly. This is a reference to a donkey in heat, making it easy for the males to find her. In other words, this is yet another reference to Israel carelessly prostituting herself.

³⁶ Hosea 5:13 says, “When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his sores, then Ephraim turned to Assyria, and sent to the great king for help. But he is not able to cure you, not able to heal your sores.”

but they also prostituted themselves to foreign nations. Israel does all of this without even consulting the LORD, without even turning to the LORD.^{38 39} Israel thought that their political strategies could be a substitute for turning to Yahweh. Hosea 13:9-10 says, “You are destroyed, Israel, because you are against me, against your helper. Where is your king, that he may save you? Where are your rulers in all your towns, of whom you said, ‘Give me a king and princes?’” In other words, trusting in their political leaders rather than trusting in Yahweh, did NOT go well for Israel.^{40 41}

Brother or Sister in Christ, at times, we are just like Israel, we behave promiscuously; we sell ourselves to the sinful things around us:

We rely on our politics more than on our faith.

We find security in our wealth rather than in our LORD.

We are of the world, rather than just living IN the world.⁴²

We prostitute ourselves to the various idols in our life.

Thankfully, the book of Hosea ends with an encouraging note of hope. It offers a loving reminder that there’s still an opportunity for Israel to restore their relationship with Yahweh.⁴³ Hosea 14:1 invites them, “Return, Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall!”⁴⁴ But HOW exactly does one “Return to the LORD”? The answer is laid out for us in Hosea 14:2-3. Verse 2 begins, “Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: “Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips.” So returning includes confessing with our mouths. Saying to God, with all sincerity, “Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously.” We offer the fruit of our lips, words that flow from a broken and contrite heart.⁴⁵ Verse 3 goes on, “Assyria cannot save us; we will not mount warhorses. We will never again say ‘Our gods’ to what our own hands have made, for in you the fatherless find

³⁷ They did this paying them financial tribute, hoping to keep them at bay. Hosea 12:1 says, “...He makes a treaty with Assyria and sends olive oil to Egypt.”

³⁸ Consider Hosea 7:8-10, “...despite all this he does not return to the LORD his God or search for him.”

³⁹ Throughout the Old Testament, we find examples of Israel demanding and preferring a human king, over King Yahweh. God had warned them that having human kings would NOT turn out well for them, but they insisted on them none the less. Hosea 8:4 says, “They set up kings without my consent; they choose princes without my approval...” We know from Israel’s history, that one of the ways they turned to their own political solutions, was by assassinating the king they didn’t like in exchange for a supposedly better king. Hosea 4:2 says, “bloodshed follows bloodshed.” In fact, there was a 25-year period during which Israel had 6 different kings. 4 of those 6 “were murdered by their successors while in office.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1441. However, once these men were on the throne, they saw the monarchy as the source of Israel’s strength rather than seeing Yahweh as their strength. (See James Luther Mays, *Hosea*, Westminster, Philadelphia, PA, 1969, p. 12.) Hosea 10:13 records, “...you have depended on your own strength and on your many warriors.”

⁴⁰ This is why Christians need to be wary of the inherent dangers of Christian Nationalism.

⁴¹ “The institution of the monarchy upon which they founded their hopes of security will curse them with the very insecurity they feared. The surrounding national powers to whom they turn in search for salvation will become the instruments of their judgment.” James Luther Mays, *Hosea*, Westminster, Philadelphia, PA, 1969, front dustcover.

⁴² Consider John 15:18-19 and 17:13-19.

⁴³ “In the final tragic days of Israel’s existence Hosea gave Israel a prayer as a way to return to their God (14:1-3) who never gave up his desire to be their Saviour (vv. 4-8).” James Luther Mays, *Hosea*, Westminster, Philadelphia, PA, 1969, p. 15.

⁴⁴ Hosea 14:1 begins with the word “return.” “The Hebrew word also conveys the concept of repentance and conversion.” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1746 footnote on Hosea 14:1.

⁴⁵ See Psalm 51, especially verse 17.

compassion.” This clarifies that *returning begins with saying the words, but it also includes our actions*: We’re no longer going to turn to Assyria; instead, we’re going to turn to the LORD. We’re not going to trust in warhorses, in our own strength; instead, we’re going to trust in the strength of the LORD. “We will never again” worship idols; we will only worship the one true God. The God who is our Heavenly Father, full of compassion.

This “Return to the LORD” will then result in wonderful healing and restoration. Hosea frames it in the beautifully symbolic agricultural language in Hosea 14:4-8, “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 splendor will be like an olive tree, his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon. People will dwell again in his shade; they will flourish like the grain, they will blossom like the vine—Israel’s fame will be like the wine of Lebanon. Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols? I will answer him and care for him. I am like a flourishing juniper; your fruitfulness comes from me.”

So let’s return to the LORD and find restoration.