

George Philip Bible Readings

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THE PROPHET HOSEA

1:1	5:15-6:3	10:11-15
1:1	6:4-6	11:1-4
1:1	6:7-11a	11:1-4
1:2-9	6:11b-7:7	11:1-4
1:2-9	6:11b-7:7	11:5-7
1:2-9	6:11b-7:7	11:8-9
1:10-2:1	7:8-10	11:10-12
2:2-7	7:8-10	12:1-6
2:8-13	7:11-12	12:1-6
2:14-23	7:13-16	12:7-9
2:14-23	8:1-6	12:7-9
2:14-23	8:1-6	12:10-14
3:1-5	8:7-10	13:1-3
3:1-5	8:7-10	13:1-3
3:1-5	8:11-14	13:4-8
3:1-5	8:11-14	13:4-8
3:1-5	8:11-14	13:9-13
4:1-3	9:1-6	13:9-13
4:1-3	9:7-9	13:9-13
4:4-6	9:7-9	13:9-13
4:7-10	9:10-17	13:14-16
4:11-19	9:10-17	13:14-16
4:11-19	9:10-17	14:1-3
4:11-19	10:1-2	14:1-3
5:1-7	10:3-10	14:4-7
5:8-14	10:3-10	14:4-7
5:8-14	10:3-10	14:4-7
5:15-6:3	10:11-15	14:8-9

1:1

One commentator speaks of this book as revealing the heart and holiness of God. Such a message was revealed to the people in the personal experience of the prophet, as we shall see in the first three chapters. Hosea, like all the other prophets, spoke God's message in a particular national, historical, political, moral and spiritual situation. His message was contemporary and practical. If we are to understand it in any real way we must grasp the facts of history, recognising that any one generation has to be seen and evaluated in relation to and as part of the on-going purposes of God in the world. Each of the prophets was raised up at a particular time, to speak God's message to a particular situation, which situation had developed out of the past. Think, for example, how in our generation we are living with the varied results and legacies from the nineteen sixties and seventies. Situations don't just happen. The children live with the moral and spiritual results of what grandparents and parents have done, and they in turn leave a situation for the next generation to cope with. Keep in mind that the prophets spoke initially to a people who were God's redeemed people, delivered, taught and provided for. Never lose the distinction between faith and unbelief, between the church and the world. These are basically different in nature and destiny. Hosea's ministry is dated clearly in this first verse, but the story of the nation goes far back. It began with Abraham in 2000 BC. In the time of Moses, 1280 BC, the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt and forty years later entered the promised land of Canaan. The story of Joshua, Judges and Samuel takes us to 1050 BC. David was king of the united nation in 1000 BC and seventy years later, on the death of Solomon, the nation was divided into Israel in the north, with Samaria as the capital city, and Judah in the south, with the capital in Jerusalem. That was 930 BC. In 722 BC Samaria fell and in 586 BC Jerusalem fell and thus began the seventy years' captivity in Babylon. At a specific stage in the story we have the ministry of Hosea.

[Back to Top](#)

1:1

Hosea's home and his ministry were in the northern kingdom of Israel, and his ministry began towards the end of the reign of Jeroboam (the second king with that name) who died in 753 BC. After Jeroboam, who was the thirteenth in a succession of nineteen evil kings in Israel, there followed seething political unrest, with the throne being taken and lost in a series of murders. These temporary kings of Israel are reckoned to be unworthy of mention and Hosea's ministry is dated according to successive kings of Judah. The name of Uzziah is familiar and it was at the end of his reign that Isaiah began his long ministry in Judah (Isa. 6:1-13). If Hosea's ministry went on to the time of Hezekiah (729-693 BC), then he ministered for some thirty years right to the final collapse of the nation. Keep in mind that Hosea was not the only prophetic voice in the northern kingdom. Amos, a native of Judah and therefore a 'foreign missionary', had been ministering for about ten years before Hosea's ministry began (Amos 1:1). Contemporary with Isaiah in the south there was the ministry of Micah (Mic. 1:1) and by these various details we are reminded that God does not leave Himself without a witness (Acts 14:17). The separate ministries were rich and full but in each there is a recurring note indicating that all was not well between the people of God and their God. Read Isa. 1:2-9 with emphasis on the body politic going rotten. In Micah 1:2-5 God witnesses against the nation because of its sins. In Amos 1:2-5 the nations are told that crisis is coming because of national sins, not least because Israel had resisted, pressurised and broken the spirits of some of God's godly servants (Amos 2:11-12). In Hosea 4:1-3 we are told God had a controversy with His people, and yet that same God asks in 11:8 'How can I give you up?'

[Back to Top](#)

1:1

To complete the picture of the situation in Israel when Hosea ministered read 2 Kings 14:23-29. We are told in v.24 that, led by the king (the equivalent of the government in our day), the people persisted in their deliberate rejection and contradiction of God's pattern for worship and life. Religion was mixed up with the worship of Baal with all the expressions of a 'fertility cult'. There was an obsession with and a justification of sexual indulgence, just as there is in our own day. At the same time v.25 tells us that the nation prospered in terms of national security and great economic prosperity, a situation described in Amos 6:1-7. There were in Israel extreme wealth and poverty together with moral decadence (Amos 2:6-8) and there was religion that was an

offence to God (Amos 5:21-24). There was also a deep persecution of and an attempt to silence any 'evangelical' ministry (Amos 7: 12-16a). If we now read 2 Kings 15:8-17 we are told of the succession of evil kings in Israel, a story that goes on until it reaches a climax in 2 Kings 17:1-18. From a state of security and affluence the nation careered down the slope of apostasy until finally it was removed from the map. God is a God of amazing patience (2 Pet. 3:9) but He is not mocked and eventually His righteous judgment falls on a whole nation. Such thoughts should sober us in relation to our own nation, which assumes it will prosper in spite of its blatant rejection of God's truth and God's standards of behaviour. It was Amos who challenged the people saying, 'Prepare to meet your God, O Israel' (Amos 4:12). It was in the same evil context that Hosea exercised his ministry and revealed the forgiving, restoring, healing love of God. The love of God for the totally undeserving should be a constant source of wonder and thanksgiving. 'The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.' (Van Alstyne)

[Back to Top](#)

1:2-9

This passage raises problems that have been argued about by commentators down the ages. Did God command Hosea to marry a woman who was a prostitute (possibly a temple prostitute) or was Gomer a pure virgin when she married and then proved unfaithful? Verse 2 could read, 'When the Lord first spoke through, or to, or with, Hosea.' Or it could read, 'When the Lord began to speak,' or 'The beginning of God speaking through Hosea.' There may be a suggestion that Hosea was a prophet before his marriage but soon, in order to equip him to be the messenger of God to the people, God spoke to and taught Hosea through the terrible experience of a marriage that broke down because of blatant unfaithfulness. In this way God showed the prophet and made the prophet *feel* the real nature of Israel's sin. It was sin against love by a people covenanted to God. The experience was also to reveal the consequences of such sin in the dereliction and shame of Gomer. Then the experience, when God told Hosea to take Gomer back, revealed the love of God that buys back the sinner by paying the price of redemption (3:1-2). Everything in Hosea's personal story is a symbol and sign of spiritual truth. It was an experience that must have torn out his heart and it made Hosea a 'Man of Sorrows', certainly acquainted with grief, a man able to express in wonderful words the heart and holiness of God. The beginning of God speaking through Hosea was his own life's experience which was in God's hand. Some things can only be learned by sore experience. Think of the Son of God who became a true man in order to be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He knew temptation and bafflement (Heb. 4:15; 5:7-8). He understands and therefore can help.

[Back to Top](#)

1:2-9

Behind God's command to Hosea to take such a wife are the words 'for/because' the nation was guilty of the vilest spiritual adultery in departing from God. The prophet obeyed without question. This was a marriage in the will of God. What kind of woman was Gomer? Was she already a 'bad' woman with a bad reputation when Hosea married her? Could it be that Hosea did not know the kind of woman she was? The significance of v.2 may be that the narrative is looking back and recounting how this marriage actually worked out. Some suggest that Gomer was a pure virgin when Hosea married her, that she remained faithful until the children were born and then left her husband. Some suggest that the second and third child may not have been fathered by Hosea. The whole situation was one of deep and painful tragedy and, because Hosea's experience is used to illustrate and expose the sin of Israel against the God of love, it seems reasonable to believe that Gomer was pure at first and then turned away to a life of sin. In several places in Scripture there is reference to Israel as a virgin betrothed to God (Jer. 18:13; Amos 5:2). In 2 Cor. 11:2 Paul speaks of converts out of the degenerate society of Corinth being betrothed and presented to Christ as a pure virgin bride. These people had been living lives of sin but they had been washed and made clean (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Gomer may well have been 'bad' and had found forgiveness and cleansing from her sin, and it is a wonderful blessing to those who have 'fallen' in this way to know that 'cleansing' is real and complete. Think of Isa. 1:18. It may have been that Gomer fell back into the snare that had once before trapped her life, and if that be so then she exchanged the love of Hosea for mere sensation! Of course Israel had been saved, cleansed, sanctified and blessed, and they too had turned from the pure love of God to carnal satisfaction.

[Back to Top](#)

1:2-9

We must still consider the names of the children born and their significance. The first son, referred to specifically as Hosea's son, was to be called Jezreel and the explanation is given. The name signifies God's judgment on the house of Jehu, whose representative then was the king Jeroboam. This judgment was to be in 'a little while' but it was thirty years before Israel finally fell. The 'mills of God grind slowly', but they are sure. Jezreel was the place where Jehu's sin was committed and it would be there the judgment would fall. The second child, a daughter, but not specifically called Hosea's child, was to be called 'Lo-Ruhamah' which means 'not pitied'. It is a name that signifies estrangement or 'not my loved one' (2:23), someone who did not know a father's love. God was making it plain that He would no longer deal with His people in this tender, parental way. The third child, a son was to be called Lo-Ammi, which means, 'Not my people', God signifying that He would no longer own or recognise His people as belonging to Him. He disowns them. He refuses to be called their God. These three names constituted to the nation, in its sin and backsliding, the message of judgment, estrangement and rejection. This is what sin brings to the life of an individual or a congregation or a nation, when sin is persisted in and when the appeals of God's love and grace are scorned and ignored. The deep truth and powerful emotion of God's message would have been felt by the prophet through his own sore experience and, understanding the hurt of God's heart, Hosea was able to be God's true messenger. In contrast to God refusing to be their God read Heb. 11:16 where it says to those who have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation that God is not ashamed to be called their God. What a Gospel for sinners to hear and to believe!

[Back to Top](#)

1:10-2:1

In the midst of solemn words of rebuke, rejection and judgment, God spoke a word of hope. Peter, who certainly knew sin and failure and a sense of deserved rejection, takes up this theme in his epistle (1 Pet. 2:10). Judgment was not God's final word. His love suffers in the presence of sin, and His heart is broken by the faithlessness and rejection of His people, and yet His love will find a way for the sinner to come back home. But it is the way of redemption, by the paying of a ransom price. Keep in mind that the context is still that of Hosea's own sad and painful experience. In the midst of that desolating, shattering experience, there is kindled the note of hope. Humanly speaking Hosea may not have seen any hope at all, and that is often the case with us, and may be the situation with some who read this note. But God is always the God of hope and we must in faith cling to hope, even when there seems to be little ground for hope (Rom. 4:18-21; 15:4, 13; Heb. 6:11-12, 17-20). Of course, our hope must be in God and not in ourselves or in our circumstances (Ps. 78:5-7; 146:5). Hosea is being prepared to preach the astonishing forgiveness and restoration that come from God. There is nothing mean or limited in the forgiving heart of God. Think of the open arms of the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11 ff). The same generosity, dare we say extravagance, of grace is declared in these verses before us today. In the reference to the sand of the sea there seems to be an echo of the promise to Abraham (Gen. 22:17), and a reminder that God's promises hold good in spite of all the failures and rebellions of His people. In the very place of their failure, and where their failure was declared and judged, there would be forgiveness and restoration. It is God who declares that this will be so, and the blessing of the Lord will be far more than just individual restoration. Israel and Judah will then be one people, as it had been in the beginning. Look to the future with hope and expectation.

[Back to Top](#)

2:2-7

Keep in mind that Hosea, because of his own personal heartbreak, is able to enter into and to share the hurt that God felt because of the faithlessness of His people. If Hosea's heart was broken because his love was spurned, so God's heart was broken. With a sense of shock we hear the children being called to plead, as in a court of law, the case against their mother. But the following verses make it plain that it is the nation that is being spoken of: not just the immediate generation but those who would come afterwards. Sin has consequences and any one generation creates the seed-bed for the next generation and, as Hosea will yet make plain, the harvest will be greater than the sowing (8:7a; cf. Gal. 6:7-9). The main thrust of the passage is to describe what sin is

and what it has done. It is sin against love. It is sin against God. Its pleasures are very temporary (Heb. 11:24, 25) and the price is high (Rom. 6:20-23). Sin is against God, no matter the human area of its expression (Ps. 51:4). Of course others are hurt, and God will not hold the sinner guiltless in that respect. Sin breaks the relationship with God (2a), distances us from God, and is described as spiritual adultery - an ugly term for an ugly thing. If there is to be restoration, then sin must go. There is no point in just feeling sorry for ourselves when the life we have created by our own wrong choices begins to hurt and make us desolate. Self-pity is not repentance, and it is unproductive (2 Cor. 7:8-10). The terms God uses in v.3 would remind Israel of the time she was a slave in Egypt and a disobedient wanderer in the wilderness, barred from the Promised Land because of unbelief and disobedience. Think of it this way: would we like to go back to the kind of life we lived and the kind of people we were becoming, before God in His mercy laid hold on us? That is exactly where sin leads.

[Back to Top](#)

2:8-13

The end of yesterday's passage emphasised the objective of God's stern dealing with His sinful people. He frustrated their lust for gratification until, like the Prodigal, they would speak the words in v.7b. Read Lk. 15:14-17. Now link v.5b in yesterday's passage with v.8 in today's passage. Hosea's wife had played the harlot (2:5) a stronger term than 'unfaithful' (NIV). She had gone looking for 'love', enticed by the lavish life-style, unaware that the love she really wanted and needed was with her husband (5,8). In the same way Israel, having received abundance of blessing from God had turned aside and used God's good love-gifts in a life of gratification in the worship of Baal. But in the disciplinary providence of God, ordered by the unchanging love of God for His people, there were to be consequences. There would be economic depression (9), moral degeneration in the nation (10), religious life would become bleak and unattractive (11) and the blight of a pagan attitude to life would spread over the life of the whole nation. The picture is really of the decline of a nation because of its obsessive pursuit of indulgence, together with a forgetting of God. The whole of society would go sour, not simply because of economic and international factors, but because of the direct displeasure of God. What we are reading about is God's shaming of a once proud nation. God's hand was against the nation in every area of its life. And the root cause was spiritual. What will God have to do with *our* nation before it comes to its senses and repents of its godlessness? Read two passages, and remember the message is being addressed to God's redeemed people: Isaiah 55:6-7 and 2 Chronicles 7:12-14.

[Back to Top](#)

2:14-23

Look back over the chapter and note the word 'therefore' in v.6, 9 and 14. The first two have the note of rebuke and judgment as a direct consequence of sin. But in v.14 the note is one of the sheer, persistent grace of God, the God who searches and seeks for the lost sheep in order to bring them home again, cf. Lk. 15:3-7. In the earlier verses God is acting in stern discipline to bring His people to their senses, and we must recognise that God does deal with people and nations in this way. Sometimes we have to interpret and handle our circumstances in this light. We need to be attentive to what God is saying to us. Read Heb. 12:5-11, where the quotation is from Prov. 3:11-12. But we must never forget that God's discipline, even when it is stern and long-lasting, is exercised in love. In v.14 we have words of a genuine lover, wooing and encouraging the loved one to come back. Keep in mind Hosea's own sore personal situation, the deep heart-hurt caused by his beloved wife's unfaithfulness, and then think of him speaking tenderly to her, encouraging her to come back to his true and faithful love. That will enable us to begin to understand the love that God has for His people. No matter what we have done, God is willing and eager to take us back and He deals with us with that end in view. When God speaks about bringing His people into the wilderness there may be reference to the coming desolation of the nation at the hands of its enemies and even to the ultimate captivity in Babylon for seventy years. That would mean that the restoration to favour and blessing would be long-term promise, and would apply to the next generation. That is a solemn thought and should make us consider the state of the church and nation in our own day. The spiritual unfaithfulness and the moral carelessness that blight the situation may not be remedied until the time of our children and grandchildren. Such thoughts should make us pray!

[Back to Top](#)

2:14-23

Keeping the prophet's personal situation in mind, and recognising that in 3:1-2 the unfaithful wife is taken back, we may think of God's disciplines having results in the near future rather than in the long-term. The opening verses today speak not only of gentle words but of gracious gifts (vineyards). Sometimes it is God's sheer goodness that awakens repentance and brings the backslider back again. But the second half of v.15 speaks of the Valley of Achor, which is the valley of trouble or weeping. Whether we think of Gomer or of the nation, the miserable situation they have created for themselves, bleak, bereft of happiness let alone fulfilment, is spoken of as a work of God, a means of grace, to turn the heart of the sinner back to God. There are many echoes here again of the story of the Prodigal Son. In that story the coming of the great famine, and the timing of that famine when the man's finances had run out (Lk. 15:14-19) have to be seen and understood in terms of the sovereign working of the gracious Spirit of God. Many would testify that it was when they became aware of what they were and what they were rapidly becoming in their worldly, wayward lives that they were shaken enough to begin to turn to God. It is sometimes a significant blessing spiritually when everything, humanly speaking, goes wrong and we find ourselves up against it. In all His dealings with us, God in His astonishing love, is always seeking to win back our hearts to Himself (Lk. 19:10; Rom. 5:6-8; Eph. 3:18,19). When God has our hearts, He will have our lives and service given gladly.

[Back to Top](#)

2:14-23

Whether you read the RSV or NIV it is clear in the passage from v.15c to the end that God is speaking of a relationship restored, a relationship in which He gives Himself without reserve to His sinful people who have come back to Him. In v.15c the sinning one answers (RSV), or responds (NIV footnote), to the disciplines of love. The freshness of the early days of commitment to God will return. In v.16 there is a new, glad, loving confession that God is her (Israel's) husband. The people who had given their hearts to Baal (and all that that signified) now confess that their hearts are given back to God, their true lover. In v.18 God seems to covenant safety and peace for His restored people. In v.19-20 we have the language of love and marriage, commitment and faithfulness, righteousness and justice. Keep in mind Hosea's feelings as he spoke this message from God to a sinful people. Think of how he had loved his wife, how she had betrayed his love, time and time again, how he had forgiven her so often. He must have wondered if things could ever be right again, let alone better than at first. But then, if God's grace and power could do this for such a wretched people, could not that same power work in his human situation? In v.21-22 there seems to be reference to the ending of famine by the coming of rain and the consequent enriching of the nation's life. In the last verse the people who had been rejected because of their sins are taken back and, restored to fellowship, they gladly confess the name of their God. Running right through the chapter there is the great emphasis on love: God's love and human love. No matter how often love is sinned against, no matter how deeply love is hurt and disappointed, true love will keep loving and in the end will forgive and take back the sinner. This will be shown in the next chapter from Hosea's own story and we shall see that restoration is not easy and takes time.

[Back to Top](#)

3:1-5

All through this book the story of Hosea's broken heart and the story of God's broken heart are mingled, the one illustrating and amplifying the other. The prophet had experienced the sweetness of love and then the desolating hurt of love spurned and prostituted. Because of this he was able to understand in measure and then to preach the amazing love of God for a sinful people. We are often so taken up with our own feelings that we simply forget the feelings God has about us, and we tend to think it is easy for God to be spurned and ignored, and easy for Him to forgive, restore and take us back when our sins have made us unhappy and when misery has begun the work of repentance. But it is costly to love, and if we love, then we lay ourselves open to deep hurt. But on the other hand, if we shut up love in our own hearts and refuse it expression, it will fade, wither and become a spirit of bitterness. When that happens we become loveless and un-loveable people and we will live our lives resenting our circumstances, resenting the fact that people neither love us nor value us, and our attitude to all sorts of people, even those whom deep down we really love, will be hard, harsh and destructive. What we have in today's brief chapter is a lesson on and a demonstration of redeeming love, that is, love that pays the price for

the recovery, restoration and the blessing of the loved one, who deserves none of that love. It is a practical lesson which we shall ponder again, keeping in mind the fact that God commended His love to us, in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). There is a profoundly practical application of this in 1 John 4:9-11. Read it!

[Back to Top](#)

3:1-5

This chapter begins with a command to love. Love is not an option we may take up or refuse. And it has nothing to do with deserving or with being sure of the right response. The command is accompanied by the example of God who still loved in spite of the gross, shameful and degenerate way of life of the people who owed everything to His love, grace and goodness. The language of these verses is devastatingly glorious and the words 'again', 'adulteress', 'even as' and 'though' highlight the costly drama of love. It is the fact of God's love for His erring, faithless people that rekindled, stirred and impelled Hosea's love for the wife who had dealt so falsely, cruelly and contemptuously with the love he had given and pledged at his marriage. We must not think that going in love to take back his wife was without cost to Hosea. But then we must never think that it is easy for God to love and to go on loving us in spite of all we have done and have failed to do. As Hosea obeyed God's command, he 'must have faced the fact that old wounds would have to be reopened and that what had happened once might happen yet again,' (Kidner). It seems quite clear that Hosea knew where to find his wife and that he was fully aware that her life of adultery and indulgence had not ended. The woman's life would probably have been public knowledge and Hosea's arrival on the scene would not have been private or secret. The picture of the one who had been wronged going to seek out, to love and to restore the one who had hurt him so deeply, is a wonderful picture of the God who commended His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). It reminds us of the basic fact that Jesus Christ came to seek and to save the lost, to save sinners (Lk. 19:10; 1 Tim. 1:15). Hosea's love is contrasted with the infatuated indulgence of the wife who had abandoned him. And God's love is set over against the cheap gratification of other gods who offered 'cakes and raisins', physical gratification.

[Back to Top](#)

3:1-5

If v.1 reveals the nature of sin, verses 2-5 describe graphically the effects of sin, the immediate and long term consequences. Gomer had not only fallen into sin, she was held captive by it. She had to be redeemed, bought back, by the paying of a great price. We are not told what the price represented. The woman may have ended up 'owned' by someone and was being sold in the slave market. Her adultery may not have been confined to one man and she may therefore have been in the grip of a master or mistress who would not easily let her go. It may have been that her indulgent life had piled up debts that had to be paid off. The picture makes it plain that Gomer had paid a high price for her sinful life. The pleasures of sin are very temporary (Heb. 11:25), and we need to be reminded of what sin does to us and what it takes from us (Rom. 6:20, 21). Who can tell the anguish of Hosea's feelings as he went about the redemption of his wife for no other reason than that he loved her. Think of the hymn based on the story of the ninety-nine sheep and the one that was lost.

'But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed,
Nor how dark was the night that
the Lord passed through,
Ere He found His sheep that was lost.' (Clephane)

All of us need to be reminded again and again that we were redeemed, rescued and restored at a very great price (1 Pet. 1:18,19) and, as a result, we are not our own, and our lives and capacities are not our own to live as we please (1 Cor. 6:19,20). To glorify God in our bodies is the practical standard, and it is high. But when we think of all the love and mercy we have received from God, then the appeal in Rom. 12:1-2 is eminently reasonable. It indicates the pattern of life expected of every Christian believer.

[Back to Top](#)

3:1-5

Hosea took Gomer home to where she really belonged. We are not told anything about the erring wife's feelings. In spite of her chosen way of life having landed her in degrading bondage she may have resented being 'bought' yet again. Since the story is illustrative of God's wonderful, redeeming love, we may safely assume that Hosea's attitude towards his wife was one of grace, compassion and tenderness. He would not want in any cruel way to 'rub it in' as to how miserable she was and how pitiful she looked. True forgiving love does not give the 'message': 'I hope you realise how generous I am being.' That would not be the pattern of God as seen in the dealings of Jesus with sinners. But Jesus did say, 'Go, and sin no more.' Forgiveness is neither sentimental nor indulgent. Once home, Hosea made plain to Gomer that genuine forgiveness does not at once erase the past or eliminate the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual scars and entail of sin. There had to be no more trifling and trafficking with sin. Neither could there be an immediate resumption of the physical relationship of husband and wife. That is the meaning of v.3. After all, on various levels, when relationships have been distorted and spoiled, basic *trust* must be restored before the *relationship* can be restored, and that takes time. That is one of the big problems in backsliding. When we come to our senses and come back to God, or rather, when we are brought back to God, we tend to want everything to be sweetness and light at once. Sometimes there are regrets and memories to be lived with. Sometimes our jangled feelings make us incapable of reacting properly. Sin is just not worth the price.

[Back to Top](#)

3:1-5

These few verses are full of basic spiritual teaching and we must learn the lessons well if we are to understand and profit from the rest of this book. Hosea's personal story is illustrative of how it would be with Israel in relation to God. Just as Gomer was to live for a spell without the former and expected blessings of a relationship, so the people of Israel, because of their sins and spiritual carelessness and presumption, would have to be bereft of the 'blessings' they had come to expect and which they felt they were entitled to. They would be a people bereft of the leadership of a king whose task it was to be responsible for them. They would have to live without 'sacrifice or pillar', without services of worship and without the accepted tokens of God's presence with them. The 'ephod' may refer to the prayers of the High Priest and indicate that the 'prayer life' of the congregation would disappear. Some people who never attend the Prayer Meeting in their own congregation, but who are glad to ask for prayer, would be shocked if the Prayer Meeting were stopped. In v.4 the pillar, sacrifice and teraphim (idol) may however refer to the idolatrous activities which had become a basic part of the life of the people. In that case, the message is that all they had lived for and given themselves to would be taken from them. Sometimes, in the prime of life, health or work or both are suddenly taken away and people are left with nothing but a vast empty hole in their lives. But if a Christian feels he or she is left with nothing, there has been something far wrong. Think of Jesus' words about what life is (Lk. 12:13-15ff) and the challenging comment on life in James 4:13-15. But note the word 'Afterwards' (5). God's objective is always the ultimate and abiding blessing of His people. But the way can be long. Israel had to go into captivity before she learned where 'home' really was.

[Back to Top](#)

4:1-3

Before beginning to study the full ministry of Hosea, and because we have been dealing with serious and searching matters for some days, we pause to consider, in the words of familiar hymns, the dealings of God with us in forgiveness and restoration. Read first Isa. 1:18 and 1 John 1:5-2:1.

Today Thy mercy calls us
To wash away our sin,
However great our trespass,
Whatever we have been;
However long from mercy
We may have turned away,
Thy blood, O Christ, can cleanse us,
And make us white today.' (Allen)

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Hosea

'Wean my rebellious heart from earthly things,
Show me the Fount whence living water springs;
Teach me to feel that, when afflictions come,
They're sent in love to turn my thoughts to home.'

'So may I live, that in my daily race
The things of God may hold the highest place;
So may I die, that death to me may be
The opening dawn of immortality.' (N. Lambert)

'Sinners Jesus will receive:
Tell this word of grace to all
Who the heavenly pathway leave,
All who linger, all who fall;
This can bring them back again:
"Christ receiveth sinful men."' (Neumeister)

Now read the story of Jesus with sinners in John 8:2-11 (AV, and as footnote in RSV and NIV); Lk. 5:17-32; 7:36-50. There is a Saviour for sinners.

[Back to Top](#)

4:1-3

To be told plainly that God has a quarrel with you is, or should be, a solemn experience. But, if we have grasped the basic message of the first three chapters, we will be aware that it is the God who loves with astonishing love, whose love has been rejected, and who has been deeply grieved by His people, who is speaking in this stern and practical way. We begin to be shown what happens to a nation and its people when they abandon their spiritual heritage and ignore both the law and the love of God. The picture we have here is astonishingly contemporary. There is not only spiritual and moral disintegration, there is environmental disaster. The whole land has been polluted and God makes very plain that the root cause of all the ailments is simply the sins of the people. In our opening studies in Hosea we outlined the chaotic political situation with kings being disposed of by murder, and with clear evidence of prejudice toward and resistance of any authentic ministry of God's Word. Any glory the nation had had was in the past. Internationally she had lost status and was sidelined. The internal life of the nation was a shambles, but there seemed to be no awareness among rulers or people that the predicament was in any way related to God. The people would have said they had nothing against God, and perhaps little against those who believed in God, provided they held their belief quietly, without trying to influence others. Verse 1b sounds like a report from the Social Work Department. In v.2 we could have the newspaper headlines. In v.3a we have the assessment of the CBI and in 3b the protest of the Green Party. All this can happen and be said in our day, as it was said in Hosea's day, without anyone ever thinking that there might be a spiritual cause. But the fact is that God was speaking to the nation very loudly in its day to day experiences. God was displeased. God was taking action to awaken repentance. He is the God who comes down to investigate the sins of society and this often intimates coming judgment (Gen. 18:20-21).

[Back to Top](#)

4:4-6

God has already declared that there is no knowledge of Him in the land and He now lays the responsibility for that, fair and square, on the priests in their capacity as teachers of God's Word and Law. It is a fact of experience that people attending church in our day, even evangelical churches, are to a great extent ignorant of or at least vague about the content of Scripture. The reason is obvious. For years, ministers of various kinds simply have not taught, expounded and applied the teaching of the whole Word of God. The language of v.6a is stark. It echoes Prov. 29:18 AV: 'Where there is no vision, the people perish.' The RSV reads, 'Where there is no prophecy (revelation NIV), the people cast off restraint.' Some suggest that the picture here is of the elders

of Israel sitting at the gates to deal with 'cases' brought to them, and Hosea comes to intimate that God has a case to bring against the nation. The reaction and indignation of all present can be imagined. In v.4 (RSV) the message seems to be that there is no need to look around for someone to blame because God accuses the priests. In NIV verse 4b reads, 'Your people are like those who bring charges against a priest.' But the main thrust of the passage is clear. God is charging priest and prophet alike that they have failed to fulfil their God-given commission to teach the people the good Word of God, which is their life and peace and hope. When those charged with bringing the light of God to the people fail there are two devastating results. The people stumble and are destroyed and the priests and prophets are rejected and dismissed from their ministry. But there is a further sad and solemn consequence. The next generation will suffer (6b) because they will grow up, not only ignorant of God, but with distorted views of God and without standards for life.

[Back to Top](#)

4:7-10

It helps to understand this passage if we see that the word 'they' in v.7-8 refers to the priests. Remember, of course, that these were priests who had prostituted their calling and were serving themselves, not God. The priesthood was recruiting more and more to their ranks and for specific reasons. Having failed to minister God's Word, the people were turning to idolatry. They were then told that such sins called for sacrifices to make things right with God. The sacrifices were, of course, prime lambs or kids, the greater part of which were given to the priests for their own use (Lev. 6:25-26; 10:17). The priests had become a powerful group who could interpret the laws of God to their own advantage. They did not mind the increase of sin among the people because that meant more and more 'perks' for them. The saying in v.9a could mean there was no difference between priests (supposed to be holy) and people who were behaving with the decadence of idolatry. It could also mean that the priests were adjusting their message to suit and to fit in with what the people wanted to hear. That is always a temptation in the ministry, the eldership and for all Christians. We can keep quiet in the face of wrong, just to keep the peace. The verse could also mean that the people would sink to the level of the priests, a phenomenon that has appeared in history whenever priesthood has become a thing of power instead of service. The full thrust of v.9-10 is that God is warning of His judgment, not just frustration of life but punishment because it is deserved. The affluence and indulgence they have craved will be the very things to mock them. It is a solemn fact that we live with what we create. Now read God's searching words about unfaithful priests, prophets and ministers in Ezek. 13:1-3,8; 34:1-10.

[Back to Top](#)

4:11-19

This is a vivid picture of what Israel had become: a pleasure loving nation. This is what happens when people forget God and lose all sense of destiny or purpose. Life becomes a matter of immediate diversion and gratification by any means available. Alcohol, which is basically a depressive not a stimulating drink, blurs the understanding (11). In that bemused condition, people brought up on godly teaching turn to inquire of and to pray to bits of wood shaped as idols (12). Their staff, thrown in the air, gives them advice depending on how it falls. Think of how people go seriously to use ouija boards, crystal balls and tarot cards. Some will seek advice anywhere except from God. Note that God says His people, redeemed, blessed, provided for and loved by Him, commit spiritual harlotry (not just adultery) by turning for satisfaction and stimulation to any kind of 'off-beat' religion that seems attractive and promises thrills without cost (12b-13). These are all examples of how bemused their thinking was. It is not surprising that literal harlotry and adultery followed (13b-14). 'Daughters' seems to refer to teenagers being promiscuous and 'brides' (RSV) seems to speak of some not long married and already unfaithful. Society, then and now, had gone the way of obsession with sex, and that is a form of madness because the one thing it does not give is satisfaction and it has nothing to do with love. Note very carefully that the sins of the men were not treated more lightly or differently from the sins of the women. In fact, it seems that the behaviour of the men had led the women astray. When a father's indulgence leads his daughter into sin, that is sin indeed. In v.13 the word 'therefore' makes the clear link of cause and effect between the spiritual backsliding of adults and the moral collapse of the young. These are solemn thoughts for our own generation.

[Back to Top](#)

4:11-19

In his BST Commentary on Hosea, Derek Kidner makes these observations: “The ‘therefore’ of v.13c brought to light men's heavy share in women's guilt; and in the same breath swept aside the accepted difference between going with harlots and going with cult-prostitutes. This last point throws a lurid light on Canaanite religion, which owed much of its appeal to the belief that one's crops could be magically made fertile through a sacrifice and a sex act at the sanctuary. The fact that our terms, 'cult prostitutes', 'temple prostitutes' and the like, translate a single word meaning literally 'holy women', shows the unbridgeable gulf between the values of the two religions. Biblical and pagan holiness do not inhabit the same world.

But today the concept in dispute is not holiness, which only one side talks about, but love. The passage is capped in 14c by a tersely devastating saying - just four words in the Hebrew - which could well be coupled with the verse which introduced the passage, thus (freely):

(11) Wenching and wining addle the mind;

(14c) And the folk that won't think won't survive.

No political initiatives, no social engineering, could save a people in this state of mindless apostasy. Nothing but repentance.” Now apply such observations to our own society which, on so many issues of behaviour says: 'I don't see why I shouldn't. Who says it is wrong?' Think of the easy attitudes to sexual relationships and to telling lies to make profit or to escape from discipline. These are not confined to unbelievers. Even some professing Christians behave like this, sometimes while maintaining a loud and confident allegiance to sound doctrine. This is what society has become, and tomorrow we will hear God warning Judah to keep clear.

[Back to Top](#)

4:11-19

God warns the southern kingdom of Judah to keep clear and not to get involved in the way of life that was destroying Israel. This is a practical warning because there would have been some considerable coming and going between the two kingdoms in terms of trade and pleasure. Business trips to and holidays in other lands are not new. In v.15 Judah is warned not to visit Gilgal and Beth-aven, Israel's favourite shrines. Such a warning would have been a clear indication of what God thought about Israel's behaviour. For us, it means that there are places we simply should not go to and patterns of life we should not follow, no matter how many people do these things. Some 'set-ups' are not just unseemly, but positively dangerous, because they expose us to temptation at times and in atmospheres when resistance is almost impossible. In v.16 Israel is portrayed as a stubborn, stupid heifer, its legs splayed, refusing to be led to better pastures. Are we not all aware of just how foolishly we refuse to change our pattern of activities; refuse to listen to advice and to challenges that come from God's Word preached; refuse to break off relationships that are manifestly not of God and will never be blessed by God; and refuse, simply because we are too proud to admit we are wrong? Listen to what God said: 'Ephraim is joined to idols, leave him alone.' He had made it clear what his choice of life was, let him get on with it. Let him go on with his life of revelry (18). It may not be until the Prodigal is thoroughly ashamed that he will turn his thoughts back to God. Then, of course, he will have to live with the thought of how much of his life he has wasted. The other application of v.17 is as if God said loud and clear, 'Look at the way Israel is going and what it is doing to them. DON'T GET INVOLVED.'

[Back to Top](#)

5:1-7

The priests, the general population and the royal house were all alike condemned. Keep in mind the word 'joined' in 4:17. It indicates a 'marriage' and a marriage brings forth fruit. The places mentioned in v.1-2 had a glorious association in the past (1 Sam. 7:16; Judg. 4:6,12-16) but were now places of enticing idolatry, places and activities which, in the name of religion, appealed to the senses and appetites of human nature. This tends to be the case in idolatry. There is an externalising of worship, making it have to do with forms, ceremonies, activities, times and places, without there being any requirement to change one's way of life. It is the kind of religion that leaves you alone, to do your own thing, provided you perform the ceremonies and, of course pay for them. God is not blinded or deceived by this kind of performance. He knew what Israel had been doing. The people had played false to God's love, and that kind of harlotry had defiled the nation. There was poison coursing through the life-stream of the nation and the result was that their deeds, their chosen way of life,

would not allow them to return to God. Their sins had either created a barrier to return or their sins had taken from them the desire to return. There is a deep practical lesson to grasp here. We hear in our day of the awfulness of drug addiction, of people trapped, and of the horrors of withdrawal experience. Sin, of various kinds, when trifled with, exercises the same domination, because behind sin there lies Satan. It is dangerous to trifle with what is wrong. Individuals and nations stumble and fall, and the fall can be great and devastating. But look at the solemn words of v.6. They will seek for God but will not find Him, because God has withdrawn. The children grow up as aliens from God. Think how many children in our own generation have never even heard of Jesus. Now read Isa. 1:1-4,12-20; Zech. 7:13.

[Back to Top](#)

5:8-14

A new section of Hosea's message begins at v.8. A sense of alarm is introduced to the situation and this is not surprising. It is one thing for God to say, 'Let him alone' (4:17), but another for God to say, 'I am withdrawing.' Think what this will mean. Amos spoke of a famine of God's Word (Amos 8:11,12). Now it is one thing to neglect our Bibles, whether in personal reading or in attending to the Word preached, but quite another thing to be left without Bibles at all. Jeremiah spoke of a time coming when God would not listen to the people's prayers (Jer. 14:11-12). It is one thing to be casual about saying our prayers, and to sit lightly to the church Prayer Meeting, even though we may be glad to ask prayer for our activities and problems. But if there were no prayer meetings because God had stated He would no longer hear, what would our reaction be? It is so easy to presume upon God and so easy to feel safe so long as deeply spiritual men and women are there to pray. But read Jer. 15:1; Ezek. 14:12-14. Of course serious spiritual decline is not always a very obvious thing and the consequences may not appear until it is virtually too late to remedy them. That seems to be the point made in v.12 with reference to the destructive work of moths and dry rot. Many a householder may have had a feeling all was not well, may have felt a smell they were not sure about, and then to their horror dry rot is discovered, by which time it has spread far and wide. In the spiritual realm it can happen like this to individuals and to congregations. Think how some of the churches were spoken to in Rev. 2:2-4; 3:1,15. They had been quite confident that they were spiritual and a source of pleasure to God. But it was not so. They had a spiritual reputation but neither true life nor love. We should examine ourselves, while we still have the sensitivity to do so. That is enough to think about for one day!

[Back to Top](#)

5:8-14

The places named in v.8 are on the southern border of Israel, indicating that the invading enemy would course right through the nation. These places had also been significant in a spiritual sense in the past. Gibeah (Gibeon) was associated with Solomon (1 Kings 3:4-5). Ramah featured in Samuel's story (1 Sam. 7:17). And Beth-aven (Bethel) was where Jacob had his famous dream (Gen. 28). But Beth-aven means house of wickedness, whereas Beth-el means House of God. The three names, spoken of as a precursor to a message of judgment, would be a stark reminder to Israel of how far the spiritual decline had progressed. The equivalent in our day would be the affirmation that significant centres of biblical ministry and spiritual life had become centres of God-denying idolatry? Part of the problem, and one of the roots of the spiritual and moral decline of the nation had been that the leaders of the nation had, contrary to God's Law, removed the landmarks (Deut. 27:17). But note carefully that this last rebuke about landmarks or standards was being applied to Judah, the southern kingdom, which at the time considered itself the spiritual people, true to God in comparison with Israel in the north. But when standards of behaviour in personal life and business life begin to slide, when concessions begin to be made in the areas of commitment and loyalty to the ways of God and the work of God, the spiritual decline of both church and nation is gathering momentum. Amos spoke of the danger when God's people are at ease, complacent about their spiritual standing (Amos 6:1). Now note carefully what Hosea's charge is. Aware of a crisis of some kind the people turned to Assyria (13). They looked for a secular solution rather than a spiritual one. In our own day the church so often looks for a remedy in applying business principles and methods rather than calling itself to repentance.

[Back to Top](#)

5:15-6:3

Many of us are familiar with the opening verses of chapter 6 through singing the paraphrase of the words, 'Come, let us to the Lord our God with contrite hearts return.' It is indeed a lovely hymn, but it is not true to the thrust of the words as they are in Scripture. We all know how easy it is to speak or to sing pious words, and to do so with apparent earnestness, and simply not mean them (Isa. 29:13; Ps. 78:34-37; Matt.: 15:7-9). We must begin by seeing in this passage the deep desire of the loving heart of God (5:15). He wants His people to come back to Him and to be with Him as they once had been in love and in fellowship. We have seen this expressed earlier in 2:14-15 where, as in today's passage, we are told of the methods of God's love. True love must sometimes withdraw, showing a coolness in word, attitude and action, in order to make the loved one aware that something is wrong. For love to do this is very costly indeed and during all the period of estrangement love will know the kind of grief not experienced by shallow emotions. The Lord so longs to hear His people speak the words of 6:1-3 that He is prepared to stand back and wait until they are shattered and shocked by their situation (cf. Isa. 30:15-18). The desire of God's heart is for His people to return. If they want to come back, He will heal and bandage up their wounds (1) and their experience will be like a reviving, or a resurrection from the dead (2). It will then be the beginning of a restored and continuing relationship, and the people will press on to know the Lord (2b-3a). The result of all this will be the refreshing blessing of God that will make dry and barren lives fruitful (3b). What encouragement there is here for backsliders, especially if we link this word with Joel 2:25-26.(RSV and AV).

[Back to Top](#)

5:15-6:3

It is good to consider just where we stand spiritually in relation to God and His good and perfect will for our lives. It is so easy to be casual in attitude, to assume we are spiritual and to presume upon God, simply expecting that He will bless us regardless of our own disobedience or wilfulness. This spirit seems certainly to be present in the opening words of chapter 6. The people seem to have been unimpressed by what God had said about the state of the nation and their attitude was that all would be well in a day or two and things would be back to normal (6:2). When God's prophets and ministers speak seriously and suggest that the people of God and the work of God (and they cannot be separated) are in a bad way and that the future looks bleak, they are often regarded as being alarmist and depressive. People point out that the work has gone on a long time, that it is well established, and that there have been difficult times before and all has come right. All that is true, and our debt to God's amazing grace is truly immense. But, as we have seen in Hosea, spiritual decline can be quietly sinister, and one indication of it is a spirit of resentment when it is suggested that all is not well. While 6:1a could signify a deep heart repentance, it can also indicate nothing more than a superficial tidying up of a few aspects of life that we agree 'may have been allowed to slip a bit.' If there is this spirit of easy repentance running through the passage, then in v.3 there is the clear assumption that the people regarded themselves without doubt as God's people and that God, being reliable, would take them back and bless them. That this proud presumption is present will be clear in the next verses.

[Back to Top](#)

6:4-6

The extent of the true happiness we will experience and enjoy will depend on the extent to which we dispose ourselves to listen to God as He speaks to us in His Word and as He teaches us by His gracious, providential disciplines. There was a time and a custom when people spoke about making New Year Resolutions, which were usually rather superficial good intentions. There is a temptation to be like that in respect of spiritual resolutions. We are moved by a sermon, a Daily Reading, or some special event in life, be it sorrow or joy, and we decide to return to the Lord with contrite heart. It sounds good, and it sounded good in Hosea's time, But God, who knows us through and through, is not taken in. He recognises that what we have experienced has been an emotional stirring, genuine as far as it went, but not a true spiritual turning of heart and life. The picture in v.4 is vivid. The morning cloud and the dew soon disappear as the day develops. We can be deeply moved in church on a Sunday and vow all manner of things to God, meaning it at the time. But by mid-week, when so many other things claim our interest and attention, we break our promises, our priorities get adjusted, and God has to fit in where we can find room. God went on to speak to the people to the effect that it was because of

their shallow thinking about and response to His grace and love that He had to speak with such stern, cutting words (5). And, because there had been no real response, God's judgment was beginning to operate with the light and heat of the rising sun, which, of course, dissipates both mist and dew. It was to be a process of exposure and it would bring to light the shame of what the people were doing. In their claimed repentance they were offering to God an increase of religious ritual and activity when what God wanted was love and obedience (cf. Matt. 9:10-13; 12:5-7).

[Back to Top](#)

6:7-11a

True spirituality is always practical, and love to God, in answer to His pledged love to His people, has more to do with actions than with feelings, and with a developing relationship rather than with formal religion. Read passages such as Isa. 1:12-17; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8. This does not mean that righteous behaviour and social justice are a replacement or a substitute for saving faith. All that was being said in the prophets was being said to a people, ransomed and redeemed, a people who bore God's name. It does signify that all we mean by righteousness should flow from saving faith and be expressed in the lives of the people who claim to be God's people. Indeed a right life, in personal morality and in social justice, is the visible indication and proof of true faith. This is the burden of the Epistle of James (Jas. 1:19-27; 2:14-26). Read v. 7 as *in Adam* or *like Adam*. The reference is to the first man who acted in direct and deliberate disobedience to God, and may signify that this has been the pattern all along in the experience of fallen humanity. If we read 'at Adam' (RSV), the reference may be to a specific place and occasion, possibly in Joshua 3:14-17. Very soon after that great deliverance, in which God's covenant was referred to, the people broke faith with God (Josh. 7:1). Hosea's words emphasise that the people had dealt faithlessly and shamefully with the God to whom they owed everything, even life itself. The covenant may refer to God's 'marriage' covenant with His people. They had despised that holy bond and in the reference to harlotry in v.10 the wrong and the shame of their actions are highlighted. They had gone to and given themselves 'in love' to anybody and everybody.

[Back to Top](#)

6:11b-7:7

God is dealing with the sin and the impending judgment of Israel and, in passing, the prophet speaks a word of warning to Judah, the southern kingdom in 6:11a. When we see the manifest sins of others and agree with God that such wrongs must be rebuked and dealt with, we need to be told to examine ourselves. It may be that we are already beginning to show signs of doing the very things we are condemning in others (Rom. 2:17-24). Keep in mind the words of apparent repentance in 6:1 and link them with the clear statement regarding God's desire to heal and restore His people, at the start of today's passage. It seems that God is prepared to take us at the face value of our pious words and, simply because we say we want to be right, He moves towards us in forgiving grace. Then it became clear that in Hosea's time, even as the people were saying holy words and professing their change of heart, they were in fact continuing in their chosen ways of sin. Do we ever consider the reaction of God when we deal shabbily with Him in spite of the depth and generosity of His love to us? Keep in mind Hosea's personal story. You can imagine the rising hope of his heart when there were signs that his erring wife was mending her ways and coming back, and you can almost feel the hard hurt of disappointment as he realised she was only making use of him for her own selfish ends. This kind of double-dealing can be seen at times in the so-called 'love affairs' in which people simply use each other for their own fulfilment and gratification. To pretend that you are giving or responding to love when in fact you are simply self-motivated is a terrible sin. To try to play a game with God, to be guilty of double-dealing with God is solemn and it is dangerous. Sin has consequences: a fact that people seem to forget. Look back to 5:15 and think of God no longer keeping company with us. Remember Samson (Jud. 16:20).

[Back to Top](#)

6:11b-7:7

A significant element in society in Hosea's time and also in ours is the almost total dismissal of any belief in the judgment of God. People simply do not believe in judgment by God or answerability to God, either in this life or in the world to come. We are told in v.2 that God remembers the evil works that people do. We are told in

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Hosea

Col. 2:13-14 of the bond, or the record of our sin that was against us. In Rev. 20:11-12 we are told of God's books being opened. In Heb. 4:13 we are told that all is open to the eyes of the God with whom we have to deal, and in 2 Cor. 5:10 we are told that every person will give account and be judged accordingly. The concept and time of judgment is quite specific as Acts 17:30,31 makes plain, the fact of judgment being confirmed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It is appointed that we live and we die and we face God's righteous judgment. Such thoughts of judgment and of our long-forgotten sins being brought to light in God's courtroom would be unbearable but for the fact of the Gospel which tells of forgiveness for all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ who, in His death on the Cross, stood in our place and paid the price of sin. There is something gloriously total about forgiveness. Read Jer. 31:33,34; Micah 7:19. Read also Heb. 9:26b. This is what our Saviour does for us. He puts away our sins, and in Him we are given our sure and accepted place among God's people (Acts 26:16-18). This glorious forgiveness and restoration was there for the people in Hosea's time but they were so busy with and so committed to their sinning that they missed out on it. But there is another element in sin. We must never forget that sin produces a harvest. What we sow, we reap together with the increase, and this is true of individuals, societies and nations. God is not mocked (Gal. 6:7).

[Back to Top](#)

6:11b-7:7

Sin is not to be trifled with, and whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. 'Sin is any want of conformity to or transgression of the law of God' (Catechism). We are told in 7:2b that sin encompasses or engulfs those who get involved. There are polite and cultured sins and there are carnal and gross sins, but both have the same effect. They may give pleasure for a limited time (Heb. 11:25) but their effect is to entangle, trap and master the sinner. When sin is flagrant in society and when knowledge of God becomes less and less, there is a general enjoyment of sin even among those who may not actually get involved in the most obvious wrongs. Paul speaks of this searchingly in Rom. 1:28-32. Think of how easy it is to watch, listen to and read about things we feel we would never actually do! In v.3-7 we are told of the different levels of society all enjoying the evil being done. Such a society is indeed sick. The metaphors of heated ovens, fires banked down temporarily, and yeast doing its silent but irresistible work are vivid and contain serious warnings. Hot ovens are dangerous to handle and they keep their heat. Once a certain temperature is built up no more stoking is needed. That is why we should clear out quickly from some situations without worrying about what people will think. Fires damped down need only a little stirring and a breath of temptation to make them burst into flame, often beyond control. Again, that is why we should keep clear of certain situations which we know full well will stir temptation (2 Tim. 2:22). In v.5 we seem to be being told of some royal celebration and the picture is of rulers and those in high society drinking themselves drunk and behaving in the way that usually follows from indulgence. It is a vivid, contemporary picture, and the final statement of v.7 completes the picture. God was not in all their thoughts.

[Back to Top](#)

7:8-10

Hosea's ministry is at times very vivid in its illustrations. He was speaking God's message to the political life of the nation but, because the nation was in fact God's people, called by God's name and supposed to be God's instruments, the message applies to the spiritual life of both nation and individuals. Israel, called in its words and work, in its attitudes and actions, to be God's clear and distinct people, was so mixed up with the life of the godless nations that it had no longer any distinct features. This was both the cause and the consequence of its spiritual failure. Think of how today the activities of churches, both liberal and evangelical, are becoming increasingly the same as those of organisations that have no interest in spiritual things. Think of how business methods are increasingly being used to address the deep problems of the churches. How dangerous it is when the churches try to adjust or qualify the truths and the demands of the Gospel in the hope of being listened to and of getting support. We need to take seriously the call in Romans 12:1-2 and refuse to be squeezed into the world's pattern of thought and action. Jesus spoke of the narrow gate (Matt. 7:13,14). John spoke of the spirit of the world and the danger of being enticed by its ways and works (1 John 2:15-17; 5:19). Paul spoke of the need to shine with true light in a dark and perverse world, and of the need for our lives to be worthy of the Gospel (Phil. 2:15; Eph. 4:1). In past days in the evangelical church there were necessary but not always balanced calls to be 'separate from the world', so that Christian believers would have a distinct way of life both in what they

did and what they did not do. That separation is not to be applied to secession from denominations or congregations, but from all that is or that appears to be immoral (2 Cor. 6:16-7:1). It is a way of life that has particular blessing.

[Back to Top](#)

7:8-10

Kidner's commentary quotes G Adam Smith on v.8. '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!' A cake not turned means half-baked. It is cooked on one side, perhaps cooked outwardly but not inwardly, not only no use for eating but having a taste that produces rejection. Think of some New Testament verses that emphasise and apply the lesson. Read 2 Tim. 3:5; Rev. 2:2-4; 3:1,15-17; Matt. 23:1-3. The half-baked cake speaks of those believers who are neither one thing nor the other. They have no particular convictions. They are sometimes in church, sometimes not. The second illustration is of someone who thinks he is still fresh and young and is not aware, as other people are aware, that the increasing number of grey hairs signifies the aging process is well on its way. Robert Murray McCheyne has a searching sermon on the theme of backsliding based on this ninth verse. The trouble with backsliding is that often we are not aware that it is happening. We are doing all the Christian things we have always done and yet the freshness is gone; routine has taken the place of a true walk with God; our prayers have a sameness about them; and the people who love us most are aware that we are not what we once were. Of course, we would deny and resent it if anything was said. A sermon on backsliding, preached by James Philip in Gardenstown in the 1950s, was based on Ps. 36:9 (A.V.), 'In Thy light do we see light.' It is when we are not walking in the light with God that we are unaware of the fact that we are drifting (1 John 1:5-7). Drift is a sinister word indicating a serious condition (Heb. 2:1).

[Back to Top](#)

7:11-12

Pigeons can be a pest. They are greedy, gobbling up food before the other birds can get at it. They make a mess and, as any motorist can tell, they tend to wait till the last moment before fluttering out of danger. They flit here and there, seemingly aimlessly but always motivated by hungry self-interest. They go here and they go there and people like that are simply like spiritual gypsies. This is all so different from homing pigeons who know where they belong, and no matter where they are set free they head for home. Ministers who read these words will think of Christians in their own congregations. But of course, there are ministers who are here, there and everywhere, and at times their own congregations are neglected. The picture Hosea gives is of a people pledged to God but feeling free to give their time and energy to whatever people or activities attract them at any given time. In political terms we can read of Israel in 2 Kings and see how, as various crises arose, the kings negotiated with nations with whom they had no real affinity, in order to *buy* some degree of stability and to maintain their own personal power. The last thing they wanted to do or had any inclination to do was to turn in repentance to God and to seek His help. This, of course, is what sin does. It makes people persist blindly, stupidly and determinedly in their wrongdoing. They will go again and again to the very things and places of danger, just like silly doves. God's sinful people saw in their circumstances danger after danger and tried to manipulate their way to safety. The one real danger that they failed to see, because they did not believe it would ever happen, was the danger of being caught in the net of God's righteous judgment. Why are we so slow to stop and to take stock of our lives in relation to God?

[Back to Top](#)

7:13-16

This is a devastating picture of the spiritual backsliding of God's people. Several times we have the words 'against Me' and 'from Me' indicating that their attitude was essentially a personal rejection of God. In these verse we have solemn words of consequence, but also the clearly stated desire of God. He wanted to redeem them, to buy them back out of their miserable condition and to bless them, but they would have none of it. The way they spoke about and spoke to their God was a pack of lies. They were insincere. They were false. In v.14, when they cried to God it was to complain, to ask why such hard things were happening to them. They were demanding their 'daily bread' and saw no reason why God should not provide for all they *wanted*. In v.15 God

speaks of how, as a loving Father, He had brought up His children, provided for them, and showed them the path of life. But these graceless, ungrateful people used the life, health and strength God had given them in order to worship Baal. In v.14 the reference to gashing themselves (RSV), not gather (NIV), indicates the self-mutilation that was a part of Baal worship. Some commentators suggest the people were behaving like children in a tantrum, doing extreme things to themselves, in order to get God's sympathetic attention. If so, they were indulging in emotional blackmail. In v.16 the backslidden people are likened to a treacherous bow, a weapon that is no longer useful, let alone reliable. The reference to Egypt may indicate that turning away from God is nothing less than turning away from salvation and going back to the bondage of worldly, indulgent, cruel and demanding Egypt. Just think what we lose when we backslide! Just think how worldly people deride Christians who abandon their Christian life-style. No matter how we disguise it, to be a turncoat is a shameful thing.

[Back to Top](#)

8:1-6

The trumpet of warning has to be sounded but the people seem unaware of danger. The picture is given of a vulture, or an eagle, hovering like a dark speck high above the house of the Lord. To many, the danger seemed very slight and certainly not imminent. But a bird of prey can swoop down very swiftly and with devastating effect. During the last war, air-raid sirens would sound and because people saw no enemy planes some would go on carelessly, often to be taken by surprise. Israel did not believe that national collapse was anywhere near, even though many problems were manifest. In our day, how many give a thought to the fact that the whole religious establishment within the nation could crumble and fall very quickly? If, for example, an unfriendly anti-religious government were to abolish the repayment of Income Tax to churches and charities, would not whole denominations go bankrupt? People say it would not happen. Perhaps not. But if unbelief undermines the foundations of the church, and if wrong living denies and breaks God's laws for behaviour, how long will things stand? Whether we think of the nation, the church, or our individual lives, we do well to pause and to read Psalm 127:1: "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it." Read also Psalm 16:5-11, especially v.8 which points the way to a true and happy life. Read also Jesus' words to a religious people who had been greatly blessed and richly ministered to (Matt.23: 29-39). Now take time to ponder just how much we take for granted and how easily we assume that all will go on as it has been doing, in spite of the fact that there are signs that all is not well, signs that may not be obvious because we choose not to look.

[Back to Top](#)

8:1-6

The people had broken off their engagement to the Lord by their deliberate choice to live in transgression of God's laws. Their way of life had made that plain. But they still claimed to be God's people and thus entitled to God's blessings. The best commentary on this is in Matt.7:15-27 where v.20-23 highlights v.2 of today's passage and v.24-27 highlights v.3. Both Hosea's word and Jesus' words make plain that the acid test of a profession of faith is the pattern of life that is lived. God's word to the people through Hosea was blunt and plain. They decided to solve the nation's problems by making kings, often by devious means, but God was not in that (4). The voice of the people is not guaranteed to be the voice of God! The people decided not to follow God's pattern of worship and, forgetting the disaster when the first golden calf was set up (Ex.32:1-10), they made their own idols, determining how *they* would worship God, whether or not God liked it. This is still the attitude of those who edit out from Scripture the bits they do not like, and make worship a thing for people to enjoy and accept, sweeping away the historic elements of reverent worship. God makes it clear that man-made worship is not acceptable in His sight. That is not surprising, because such patterns and activities are made by man for man's satisfaction. God is expected to toe the line, and if God's prophets speak of restrictions to behaviour, such ministry is resented as fundamentalist and unacceptable, because people will not stand for it. Hosea's words here make it plain it is God who will not stand for man-centred worship. This is the God who is long-suffering (2 Pet.3:9) and who is still willing to redeem His people (7:13b).

[Back to Top](#)

8:7-10

These verses speak of the inevitable and inescapable principle and progress of judgment. The message is to the nation, but the principle applies to individuals and to the church. The verses speak of failed harvest because of lack of rain; and no benefit from harvest because of wrong foreign policy leading to invasion (7). The next verse speaks of Israel becoming an insignificant factor in the international situation, no doubt despised by those who once admired them. The description in v.9a is of a wild, untamed, wandering donkey, all on its own, no doubt braying either in hunger or frustration, or trying to attract some attention. In v.9b-10 the picture is of Israel paying any kind of price, cheapening and prostituting itself in the hope of gaining friendship or at least allies of some kind. But that is a process that gains only distrust, never respect. This is a lesson that needs to be learned on a variety of levels. Some people, for example, will go to any lengths, consent to anything, and even be prepared to be 'used' in order to hold on to a relationship or to gain promotion. It is the way of despair and there is no future in it. That is what God was saying to Israel at this desperate stage in its story. All the glorious possibilities that had once been there were virtually gone. What they *could* have been and become in the grace and love of God was now lost in the increasing fog of their sad human and spiritual disintegration. This year of grace (1996) is not far advanced yet, but where is it leading? How much of our life, with its opportunities in God, has already been wasted? What will the future be?

[Back to Top](#)

8:7-10

In our lives we sow and we reap with an increase. People say, by way of exhortation, 'Put nothing in and you will get nothing out.' That is true but rather negative. Hosea says that what we put into life we will harvest with a mighty increase. The wind produces the whirlwind. The way we handle our lives is vital because everything creates something else, and that is why we need to be clear and sure that what we are doing with our lives is pleasing to God and can carry His blessing. Let Scripture comment. Sin, when it is finished, when it has done its devious and destructive work, giving nothing and costing everything, brings forth death (Jas. 1:13-15 A.V.). When we live separating ourselves from the Saviour, sin brings us into a state of bondage, and we soon discover the folly of claiming that we can stop when we choose (Rom. 6:16-19). It is not so much that sin disappoints us but that it destroys us. That is the burden of Paul's words in Gal. 6:7,8; and Rom.8:12,13. There is nothing static about life. It is developing and proceeding. We are sowing and the crop is growing and will come to harvest and we shall reap. The New Testament presses the principle right on into the world to come in passages such as 1 Cor.3:10-15 that speaks of life leading to gain or loss, and 2 Cor.5:9-10 that relates this life to the life to come. In the second of these references the A.V. speaks of receiving the deeds done in the body, good or bad. That makes life's choices very important indeed. 'Dabbling in evil, we may be amateurs; but we are playing with professionals who will make short work of us' (Kidner). Behind evil there is the power of the Devil (Eph.6:10-12). Be careful. Be warned.

[Back to Top](#)

8:11-14

The basic truth about Israel is summed up and expressed in v.14a. They had forgotten God. This was the people who owed their existence, their identity, their whole history and all that had ever been good in their lives to God. Apart from the goodness and mercy of God they would have been nothing but they had forgotten all they owed. The meaning of v.11 seems to be that along with their God-denying life-style they increased their religious activities. It is almost as if they tried to hide their sinning by an excessive show of spirituality. Jesus would call it hypocrisy. It was the general life of the nation that was like this, not just some individuals and we can therefore apply the lesson to the life of the church. Think of how much gets introduced into the life of the church on the ground that these things create: 'bridges' for the people to come to God. People may be brought into the church building, but very often the so-called 'helps' become hindrances to and even barriers to a real meeting with God. In fact they can become substitutes for God and mere human pleasure orientated activities are regarded as 'religion'. Hosea declares in v.12 that in such activities there is no meeting with and no response to God. No matter how often and how well God's laws and God's Word are spoken to the people they regard them as an intrusion. Think how worldly congregations resent the coming of a ministry that seeks to change the life of the church and to lead it in a spiritual direction. This is exactly what the prophet is speaking of and it

should be a comfort and encouragement to all who are seeking to build a spiritual church. In such a situation we are in the true succession of prophets, apostles and martyrs.

[Back to Top](#)

8:11-14

We must never think of God as being indifferent to the way we do things and the way in which we organise our lives and activities as professed believers. Hosea recognised that the people can be enthusiasts for religious activities. They love every 'special' occasion, they enjoy it, and feast to their satisfaction on it. They go to their homes afterwards and there is general agreement that it was a great service, there was a great atmosphere, and it was right to go ahead and organise a 'follow-up' gathering or even a series of them. But note that the whole emphasis is on their enjoyment. God found no delight in their 'worship'. Hosea was not alone in making such assessments of man-centred, God-excluding religion. Read Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8; and Isa. 1:2-3,11-17. It is so easy to substitute ritual for reality. It is a constant danger for example to reduce the sacraments to sentimentality, removing any real dealing with God and eliminating faith. Infant baptism can become a social occasion; adult baptism a routine; and in a Communion Service, how the bread and wine are spoken of and distributed can be more important than the spiritual declaration of salvation through the sacrifice of Christ. This parody of true religion not only gives God no pleasure, it attracts His rebuke and His reaction: a reaction expressed vividly in Rev. 3:15-19. Hosea's words in the second half of v.13 are searching in the extreme. What would it mean if God was to remember all our sins and sinning? What would it mean to be sent back to our old way of life in all that that meant to Israel in terms of bondage, misery, slavery and devaluation in Egypt? This is the story of a people who had forgotten God.

[Back to Top](#)

8:11-14

These verses are so searching of our spiritual condition that we must ponder them again. Note carefully that appearances suggested that all was well and that God was in fact blessing His people. They were prospering economically and socially and they were acquiring palatial houses to live in. Now, God is not against comfort nor against the 'extras' that make life that bit nicer. He is a generous God, as 1 Tim. 6:17b makes plain. But there is a danger in affluence, just as there is danger in poverty. God can be forgotten and His service is found well down the list of life's priorities. The discipline that would bring the people to their senses was to be achieved by their being sent away from their land, deprived of every spiritual privilege and blessing, so that they might learn true spiritual values. It took seventy years of exile to work true repentance. God, in His mercy, restored them to their land and their service. But what happened all too soon? Haggai 1:1-11 expresses it vividly. Old sins, old attitudes, old carelessness and casualness assert themselves so easily. How we need to set a guard on our souls! We seldom *mean* to backslide. It just happens, and we begin to drift; the troubled conscience begins to quieten; we intend to get ourselves sorted out but the urge never becomes action. We need to read Hebrews 2:1-3a; 4:1-2; 10:32-39. These are solemn thoughts and words, but the message is from the God who loves and longs that His people should come back to Him. All His dealings with them, stern as they may seem and feel, have the final objective. God promises to the penitent that He will heal their backsliding (14:4 AV).

[Back to Top](#)

9:1-6

When a nation has forgotten God its people tend to sit lightly to, and indeed are insensitive to, the significance of spiritual warnings. In a secular and materialistic age, when belief in God is vague at its best, and when people either believe there is no life after death or believe that everyone goes to some kind of happy heaven when they die, warnings about sin and its consequences have very little impact. But there can be times when, by the power of the Holy Spirit, there comes upon whole communities conviction of sin, righteousness and judgment to come (John 16:8). The people were warned by Hosea that many of the significant religious rites of the nation were to be forfeited; unclean food would be eaten (3), sacrifices that were symbols of forgiveness and acceptance by God (4) would cease; and pilgrimages and festival services (5) would be no more. But for this sin riddled people these religious 'exercises' were like 'lucky charms' that made them feel all was well. To

lose all these would not disturb them all that much. Of course, references to Assyria, Egypt and Memphis (whatever the exact meaning) spoke of being fugitives, refugees, and of losing their money and their homes. That would make some impact! In modern terms this warning from God speaks of a time when there will be no churches to go to, not even at Easter or Christmas; no ministers to marry and bury people, or to baptise their children or to visit and pray with the sick and dying. This is the consequence of spiritual unfaithfulness, called in v.1 prostitution. Sometimes God takes all spiritual privileges away. Sometimes He takes people away from all the 'means of grace'. But the valley of weeping can become a door of hope (2:14-15).

[Back to Top](#)

9:7-9

When a nation, or a church, denies and departs from its true spiritual heritage, a time of reckoning comes inevitably. God is not mocked and what is sown will be reaped (Gal. 6:7-8). Sometimes in one generation the consequences of long years of wrong come to fruition and judgment (Lk. 11:45-52). Is it not true that in our own country we are living with the consequences of the so-called 'swinging sixties'? The catch-words at that time were 'Make love, not war', 'Morals without religion', 'God is dead', 'freedom and liberty to be and to express ourselves'. Look where this has led! In that atmosphere there has come to pass exactly what Hosea spoke about. The prophets, the spokesmen of God, who believe and speak God's word as God has given it, are regarded as fools, declared to be mad, resisted and opposed in the nation and within the establishment of religion. Think of how now those ministers who stand by the Scriptures and the historic faith are scorned and branded as a danger to the church, and given, in its most scurrilous meaning, the name 'fundamentalists'. But the truth is that those who are called to be the spokesmen of God's Word are the watchmen of the nation, standing guard, giving warning of approaching danger. It is a lonely, dangerous and demanding task and no man can do it alone. Just as Moses needed, and had, Aaron and Hur (Exod. 17:8-12), so those who are called to preach need those who, with radical loyalty and dependability will stand with them, pray for them and with them, and in that way the sowing of the seed of the Word will be watered by prayer. Think how Paul, mighty man as he was, pleaded earnestly for prayer-support in relation to the preaching of the Word (Eph. 6:18-20; Col. 4:2-4; 2 Thess. 3:1-2).

[Back to Top](#)

9:7-9

In whatever area of service we are called to minister God's Word: pulpit, Sunday School, Bible Class, Youth Club, at work or in places of leisure, we can be sure that if we are faithful, we will be criticised and opposed. People hated Jesus (and He had no faults or imbalances) and they even said he was in league with the Devil (John 7:20; 8:48). Jesus' family thought He had 'gone over the top' (Mk. 3:20-22). Paul was accused of being a troublemaker, a religious traitor, and mad (Acts 17:6-7; 26:24). Jeremiah was treated shamefully and so were others of like mind (Jer. 29:24-28). Amos spoke of how a people (or a congregation) can break the spirit of a prophet and cause him to be unfaithful (Amos 2:11-12). Amos was told by the head of religious authority, with the agreement of the government, to go and preach somewhere else (Amos 7:10-13). In our own day the various agencies of the media are all deriding, devaluing and distorting the authentic Christian message. We have a battle on our hands! We are aware of the grim decadence and inhuman cruelty of our generation and we cannot but wonder just how far down we will yet go. Hosea preached to a nation that had corrupted itself as in the days of Gibeah. That story is in Judges 19-21, a story of depravity, with the people involved showing not the slightest regret, let alone repentance. Think how in our day those who commit adultery speak of it apparently without shame, and expect the public to have no reactions. In Romans 1:28-32, especially the last verse, we have a vivid and accurate summary of fallen society.

[Back to Top](#)

9:10-17

This is a devastating passage in which God expresses how He really feels about His people. In v.10 God seems to look back to the beginning, speaking in human terms of the thrill of finding and gathering His people like gathering grapes in the wilderness. He was full of anticipation regarding the love, fellowship and service He would receive from this people, whom He had made His people, by the price of redemption. But having taken,

enjoyed and benefited from the blessings of God's love, they then gave their love to another. The story of Baalpeor is in Numbers 25:1-3,6. Fleshly indulgence led to spiritual corruption and to a spirit of brash defiance on the part of some. 'In our own day the virtual worshipping of sex, needing no Baal to make it a religion, has proved as potent a distraction as it did in Old Testament times.' (Kidner) Hosea's reference to Baalpeor seems to emphasise that it was the spiritual corruption that led to the moral degeneration and that certainly seems to be so in our day, when people seem to be ignorant of the Ten Commandments and ignorant of the consequences of breaking them. An idol is anything that claims and is given the first love and commitment of heart and mind, displacing God. People build a life-style around their idols (10c) and inevitably grow to be like them (Ps. 115:1-8). When a nation forgets God, the life of that nation becomes God-less, and without God there are no restraints on the tendencies of fallen human nature. Two things follow. The glory of the nation disappears, so that it becomes third-rate among the nations, to a great extent despised. In v.11, 12 this decay is spoken of in very human terms. The vigour, capacity, integrity and continuity of family life disappear. Secondly and more fundamentally, the glory of the nation departs because God departs. To look on a nation and a church and to say, 'The glory has departed,' is a solemn thing (1 Sam. 4:21). When the word 'Ichabod' (the glory has departed) is applied to an individual who once was a fruitful servant of God it is sad indeed (cf. Judges 16:20).

[Back to Top](#)

9:10-17

The choices made by a nation and by individuals with regard to their way of life, when that way of life excludes God, lead to a particular atmosphere in which things lose their value. Relationships become merely physical, lacking the taste of true love. Everything is looked at in terms of what it costs rather than of intrinsic value and beauty. The end result is a money-grubbing population, whether obsessed with winning the lottery or with having more and more to spend on gratification of self. Ephraim had become like this and it signified its end as a nation. As a people they would disappear and be forgotten. But there can be a spiritual interpretation of v.11ff which we can apply to the church in our own day. Unfaithfulness to God leads to the situation where there are no spiritual births, no conversions, no growing up of a new generation to carry on the work, and no clear awareness of the presence of God. In v.14 there may be a reference to an abortive spiritual work, 'conversions' that show promise at first but come to nothing. In v.16 we have the picture of a dried up church. When we read of the spiritual life and growth of the church in different parts of the world, should we not be exercised in heart as to why such blessing and growth are not evident in our own land? It is all too easy, if our own congregation is 'going well' with good attendances and healthy finance, to ignore what is happening nationwide. If our own congregation is not producing successive age groups showing signs of real commitment to the work, what will the future be?

[Back to Top](#)

9:10-17

Because the theme of this passage is so solemn and searching, we must pause to consider v.15-17. We read of God beginning to hate this people, to put them out of His house, to stop loving them and having decided to cast them off. These could be desolating thoughts for those who have blundered and messed up their lives, and could lead to total demoralisation. But, right from the start of Hosea, there has been an emphasis on the fact that God goes on loving in spite of everything. That is the message of Hosea's own situation when, in love, he took back the wife who had so sinned against his love. It is not God's love that stops, but the expression of it and the enjoyment of it. We have to see in these verses the anguish of God's heart when His people are no longer true to Him. God withdraws from the relationship, and the unfaithful people are no longer to be allowed to experience and enjoy the blessings of His house. To put someone out of the house is a radical action, not done on the spur of the moment, but only when the climax of wrong behaviour is reached. That seems to be the significance of v.15, whatever the actual historical situation was. Evil reached such a pitch that God decided enough was enough. In the story of the Prodigal Son, the father allowed the son to leave home. Here the father puts the son out. Some parents who have had to do this will know the ache of heart that God must have felt. But the long-term objective is to bring the sinning children to an awareness of their sin and to awaken such a spirit of repentance that they long to return. The return may take a long time. That is made clear in v.17. The futile

wandering was both their own choice persisted in, and also God's rebuke. Read Heb. 12:5-11 and be aware of what God is saying to you.

[Back to Top](#)

10:1-2

Following on from the comment in yesterday's note, read these two verses and then go on to v.12b, where we see the point of all the solemn, searching and serious words spoken to the people. It was to bring home to their hearts the urgency of seeking after the Lord while there was still time and opportunity. The nation could not be saved from disintegration and that was the result of their chosen way of life. But individuals, a remnant of faith, could yet be brought to salvation. This note of urgency is largely absent from evangelical preaching in our day. People seem to assume that there is plenty of time to get round to sorting out their spiritual lives, but it is not so. Think of the good intentions we have at Christmas and at the start of the new year. The weeks of the year simply speed past. We say we have been busy and there have been so many things to attend to. But what of our soul's salvation and our lives of Christian service? Stop and think. Today is the day of salvation, not tomorrow, not least because we may not have a tomorrow. Read Isa. 55:6-7; 2 Cor. 6:2; Heb. 3:7-11. Now look at today's verses. Israel, the people called to be God's people, is likened to a luxurious, flourishing vine. But it is a degenerate vine because its fruit is not true to God. In the blessing of God the nation had flourished but the more it flourished the more it turned away from God to the various altars and pillars of idolatry, and to the way of life associated with and encouraged by that idolatry. The people in their way of life become more and more like the people around them who have no belief in God and no interest in true spirituality. We had better examine ourselves to see just where we are in relation to God.

[Back to Top](#)

10:3-10

The language of this whole chapter is vivid and its message is applicable to individuals, congregations and nations that have been recipients of God's goodness and mercy over many years. Yesterday's verses declared that the problem was not with the structures and organisation of life but with the heart (2) and, as a result, God was going to dismantle the whole of the religious system. Not only was it no longer serving God's will and purpose, it was a contradiction and a hindrance. Read Isa. 5:1-7. It is solemn indeed to think that a work God has blessed and prospered can reach the stage that God must bring it to an end! In v.3, keep in mind the political situation in Israel and the rise and fall of a succession of kings. The people seem totally dispirited. Politically there was a vacuum, with no king to govern and to solve problems. Getting rid of a government does not necessarily lead to something better. In the political vacuum there was a spiritual vacuum. There was no fear of God, no real belief in God, no belief in a divine hand that guided and controlled the course of history, no consciousness of spiritual values, and, of course, no one to pray to. What was the point of life? What could anyone do? This is a picture of today's society, in which all that is left for many people is the hope of winning the jackpot in the National Lottery. This is where spiritual unfaithfulness leads. In v.4 it seems that religion had become a thing of mere words, ritual phrases that people did not really believe. Think of clerics in our day who repeat the Apostles Creed with due pomp and ceremony and then in sermons and speeches deny basic truths of the faith. Can this kind of religious establishment survive? Hosea says that God is against it.

[Back to Top](#)

10:3-10

The metaphors used are vivid, and they point important spiritual lessons for our lives. Neglect of basic principles, lack of watchfulness and sometimes sheer laziness will allow weeds to over-run a garden and choke the life of every useful plant. Read Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23 and consider what is happening to the seed of God's Word sown in your hearing Sunday by Sunday. Note that the running to seed (to change the metaphor) in v.4 follows the decline into fatalistic humanism spoken of in v.3. When God is excluded from people's thinking, standards and values of morality disappear and lives are lived on the basis of convenience and momentary satisfaction. In v.5 the reference is to the golden calf set up at Bethel when Israel first split away from Judah (1 Kings 12:26-33). This was going to be the 'system' that was expected to be glorious, that would bring blessing and prosperity to the nation for generations to come, independent of God's 'system' based in Jerusalem. It was to

be the system that would demonstrate that the strict ways of God were an inhibition and a denial of human fulfilment. But now the failure of the system had been demonstrated and the golden idol itself was to be carried away and given in tribute to a foreign king, in the hope of buying off his enmity. We cannot but think of the public collapse of the massive system of atheistic Communism. But we must also be aware of a re-emergence of its power. Evil is persistent. But God is sovereign. The poet Tennyson spoke well when he said, 'Our little systems have their day; they have their day and cease to be.' The hymn writer also spoke well and truly: 'Pride of man and earthly glory, sword and crown betray his trust; what with care and toil he buildeth, tower and temple fall to dust. But God's power, hour by hour, is my temple and my tower.' (Neander – Al my hope on God is founded)

[Back to Top](#)

10:3-10

Read along with these verses Luke 13:1-9; 23:26-31; Rev. 6:15-17. Keep in mind that, according to v.9, what was happening to the nation of Israel was the culmination of generations of evil persisted in. The reference to Gibeah starts the story as far back as the days of the Judges. Samaria (Israel) had been a proud nation, self-confident and often ruthless, but now it was to perish and (7) would disappear like a twig carried away by the waters of a raging stream. The shrines and altars of idolatry would lie silent and deserted, overgrown by thorns and thistles, having no more significance than places for tourists to visit. Think of many massive religious buildings visited, admired and photographed. They are indeed impressive, but so often on Sundays there is but a handful of people of the older age groups there for worship. There is a final message in v.10 which reads, 'when I please', or 'when I so decide'. Whether we think of discipline or judgment it is never impulsive or immediate on God's part. It comes after long consideration and balanced assessment of the facts of the situation. An example of this is found in Gen. 18:20-21. What comes upon the sinful people is directly connected with their sins. God will chastise (RSV), or put them in bonds (NIV), because of their persistent (double) iniquity. 'The judgment awaits God's chosen time and it ties the sinner to the sinner's choice. Nothing could be less fortuitous or less arbitrary.' (Kidner)

[Back to Top](#)

10:11-15

Hosea's illustrations are simple, from everyday life, and with an obvious application. Ephraim, in early days, was like a well-bred heifer that loved the light work of pulling the threshing sledge over the grain, not least because the beast was allowed to eat as it worked (Deut. 25:4; 1 Cor. 9:9-12; 1 Tim. 5:17-18). The picture is one of obedience and contentment, but the people being spoken to were no longer of that spirit. This could be said of many Christians who 'used to be so eager and active in the Lord's service.' Part of the explanation for the change may be found in 4:16, where a stubborn spirit is spoken of. There is a good Scots word 'thrawn', that speaks of a wilful refusal to change even when we know we are in the wrong. There is also in v.11 a recognition that easy work must often give way to hard, demanding toil, and many Christians are not disposed to work at their Christian lives and service. There are so many 'attractive' activities on offer that many refuse, for example, the discipline and demand of the church Prayer Meeting, because it is hard work and sometimes not enjoyable. But the way of fruitful service is hard work. Israel was in a bad way with little time left for remedy, and Judah needed to waken up because there were signs there too of serious backsliding. The yoke spoken of in v.11 can be that of discipline, demand, denial or opposition. God fulfils His purposes in many different ways, and there may be a hint that this new yoke would not be as comfortable as in v.11 a. But, of course, the reins of the yoke are always in the good, guiding hand of the God who loves. Think well of Jesus' words in Matt. 11:28-30 and ponder the expression of these verses in the words of the hymn-writer, 'Take His easy yoke and wear it; Love will make obedience sweet: Christ will give you strength to bear it, while His wisdom guides your feet.' (Swain)

[Back to Top](#)

10:11-15

Anyone acquainted with farming or gardening will know that that there is no substitute for hard work, and that ploughing, digging and clearing away weeds and rubble are all necessary if there is to be a worthwhile crop. It

is the same in Christian life and service, especially if we have let things slide. We need to take ourselves to task, and we do well to ponder again the parable of the sower in Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23. The cares of the world, preoccupation with riches, shallow response to God that leads to superficial Christian living, and of course the subtle and swift activity of the Devil who can snatch away the good Word from mind and heart, sometimes by foolish chit-chat after services, all have the effect of compacting the 'soil' of our hearts and lives. We must get to work on our lives, just as we have to buckle down after holidays in order to get house and work back into order. It is indeed time to seek the Lord. Time is too precious to waste. We will never 'find' time to get to grips with God and His will for our lives. We have to *make* time. It all depends on how much we want to be right. As we read and study Hosea, the plough of God's grace is seeking to penetrate and to make friable neglected areas of our lives, so that in days to come God can pour the refreshing rain of salvation on our lives. The possible transformation is beyond calculation. The closing verses of the chapter make it very plain that there is a clear link between what we sow and what we reap, what we live for and what we become. The picture is given of what society becomes (13-14) and it bears a stark resemblance to the present day

[Back to Top](#)

11:1-4

In the central section of Hosea (Chap. 4-10) the recurring note has been rebuke and denunciation. The message was primarily to the nation, but that includes individuals. At the same time underlying the whole message, even the sternest sections, we have to be aware of the beating heart of God's everlasting love. If you are a parent and have known what it is to have a prodigal son or daughter, one who has rebelled, who has shown contempt for all you have given and taught, and who has ridden roughshod over your tender feelings, then you will understand these verses. God the Father tells us of His feelings towards His people. He looks back to the beginning of the story, as it were to the birth of His people. In their grievous bondage, suffering and humiliation in Egypt, God saw them, heard their cry, and in love He redeemed and delivered them (Exod. 2:23-25; Isa. 63:7-10). God loved them and they were blessed, but as His love continued they rebuffed Him. Have we not seen this in human experience? So often the bright, eager, spiritual response of youth fades and is replaced by a self-centredness that becomes cynical and hard. Do not parents (and ministers) look longingly for the second and third generation of our children to walk strongly and closely with God and to grow to spiritual maturity? The aged apostle John felt this (2 John 4; 3 John 4). What God is speaking of in v.2 is His people turning openly, without any sense of shame, to any and every kind of idolatry, and copying the evil life-style that such worship involved. What do we think when people who profess to be evangelical believers and who even hold office in Christian organisations live together outwith marriage and seem to see nothing to be ashamed about? But there are also other areas of life in which Christians behave in a way that is not worthy of the Gospel.

[Back to Top](#)

11:1-4

God looks back and He feels the hurt. We must not make God less capable of true feeling than ourselves. The picture is of the Father behind the child as it learns to walk, with hands ready to catch if the child should stumble. The child is not aware of how much it depends on the Father, but is eager, proud and adventurous in taking its first steps. The child does fall, many times, and it is the Father's arms that lift it up to heal the hurt. Then, as an adolescent, He continues to assume that the Father will always be there and takes for granted all the blessings and privileges of life in the Father's house and heart. It is sad indeed when familiarity with spiritual blessings leads us to devalue them, because familiarity does breed contempt. The picture in v. 4 is really that of a farmer with his working beasts and shows him as kind and considerate in every respect, never harsh or cruel, never expressing his own frustrations by ill-treating the animals. But let the illustration speak to us of the love of our God. We need to be led. Our fallenness makes us perverse as well as foolish. But God leads us and guides us with the reins of love and compassion. Is it not deeply moving to think of God, the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, and whose name is thrice holy, bending down to care for us, to minister to us, to look for any signs of hurt or stress or tiredness that the day's work has caused? This is the love God has for us, love that He expresses in so many ways over such long periods of time. But God testified that His love met with indifference. What hurt!

[Back to Top](#)

11:1-4

Along with these wonderful verses, which we sometimes read almost casually, read Isa. 43:1-4a; 49:13-16; Rom. 5:6-8; and 1 John 4:8-10. Then ponder the words of this old Redemption Hymn and, as you look back over your life, let the truth of God's love make your heart tender.

In tenderness He sought me,
Weary and sick with sin,
And on His shoulders brought me
Back to His fold again;
While angels in His presence sang
Until the courts of heaven rang.

He washed the bleeding sin-wounds,
And poured in oil and wine;
He whispered to assure me.
'I've found thee, thou art Mine;'
I never heard a sweeter voice,
It made my aching heart rejoice.

He pointed to the nail-prints;
For me His blood was shed,
A mocking crown so thorny,
Was placed upon His head;
I wonder what He saw in me
To suffer such deep agony.

Oh, the love that sought me'
Oh, the blood that bought me'
Oh, the grace that brought me to the fold.
Wondrous grace that brought me to the fold!

[Back to Top](#)

11:5-7

Over against the amazing love of God, His tender care and His constant attention, there is placed the stark truth of experience. God's people were 'determined to turn away' and the word 'bent' (v.7 RSV) says so much about the fatal bias of fallen human nature. People sometimes talk about being free and wanting to be free to live their own lives. But, with a basic defect in human nature, there is no such thing as freedom. Read in Eph. 2:1-3 the truth about our human state apart from the liberating, enabling salvation that is in Jesus Christ. On our own we are trapped by what we are and what we are becoming. When God says His people are 'determined to turn from Me, He is exposing the deliberate nature of sin. It has to do with choice, not with simple excusable weakness. In the AV we read in v.7 'My people are bent to backsliding from Me,' and sliding back is closely allied to refusing to go forward. We do well to ask ourselves just where we are and in what direction we are going in relation to God and His will for our lives. Hosea's message is that the people had reached a point of no return. Whatever v.5-6 mean in detail, the general meaning is clear. Things would go from bad to worse and it was all their own doing. There are various translations of v.7b and it is virtually impossible to be sure which is correct. The RSV indicates an appointed yoke of calamity which was to be long-term. What a contrast to the easy yoke referred to in v.4b! In NIV the translation affirms that even if they cry to God He will not lift them from their predicament. In the AV there is the emphasis of the priests calling the people to repentance but being ignored. If we feel the message is grim, how does the loving heart of God feel?

[Back to Top](#)

11:8-9

God is indeed a God of absolutely astonishing love. We asked yesterday how God's heart felt, and we have the answer here in totally human terms. His loving heart is all churned up within Him and He simply recoils from the prospect of giving up the people He has loved so dearly and amongst whom He has been pleased to dwell for long generations. Is there then indecision, uncertainty and confusion with God, so that He says on the one hand that He will send His people away into sore discipline and judgment, and on the other hand testifies with a passion of love that He simply cannot do it? We must not try to build a comprehensive doctrine of God on these few verses but we must grasp with total clarity the amazing love of God. It is love that will not let us go; love that seeks us through pain; love that follows all our ways, dogging our footsteps, disturbing our conscience, rebuking our wrongs, correcting our foolishness and always taking a long term view so that, when response is awakened, it will be a true response and not just a shallow device to smooth over differences. In the end, as history testifies, Israel was swept away as a nation and the people dispersed into obscurity. Was God's love then frustrated? It may be that a further opportunity for repentance was given and then refused. It may be that a remnant of faith moved south and allied themselves to Judah, and thus, in their descendants, became part of God's on-going work of redemption when the Jews returned to their land after the seventy years of exile. The casting off of God's people and the mystery of how that is linked with God's plan for the salvation of the Gentiles, and the ultimate gathering in of all Israel is the theme of the very difficult eleventh chapter of Romans.

[Back to Top](#)

11:10-12

Derek Kidner calls this passage, 'The great homecoming'. We have seen in this chapter the amazing love of God, the agony of unrequited love, the stern action of true love, and now we see that love does indeed take the long-term view, seeing very clearly right from the start the objective of love. There was to be a future for this sinful people who had caused such painful turmoil in God's loving heart. But note very carefully that v.10b speaks of the people returning, chastened and trembling, and v.11a also reads 'trembling' and not 'eagerly'. The reference to doves coming home may refer back to 7:11 and the flighty, foolish birds that seem to have lost all sense of direction. Now the people seem to be aware of whose they are and where they really belong and they start the journey back to God. The lion's roar may not refer to the thunder of God's call to repentance but to the fact that the lion roars as it makes the final dash for its prey. There seems to be a reference to God's astonishing (but prophesied) movement in history when, by the agency of the pagan Emperor Cyrus, He turned the captivity of His people and opened the way back to Jerusalem. Just as they were convicted of their sin and rightful rejection when sent into captivity (Ps.137:1-6), so they were amazed by God's taking them back (Ps. 126:1-3). These few verses speak of a time when the backsliding people will once again go after, or follow, the Lord instead of giving their hearts and lives to idols of various kinds. Look at v.12a. God had kept loving a people who had treated Him like that. In the RSV v.12b draws a contrast between backslidden Israel and faithful Judah. But in NIV the point is made that favoured Judah is going the same way.

[Back to Top](#)

12:1-6

We have seen at various points in previous chapters, because of references to specific people and places, that Hosea had a good grasp of the past history of his people, and here there is reference to the whole life of Jacob. If we link in 11:12 with the start of this chapter we will see the pattern to be Ephraim *and* Judah. This suggests that in 11:12b Judah is best described not as 'loyal to God' but as 'unruly against God' (NIV), 'restive under God' (NEB) or 'walking uncertainly with God' (JBP). These phrases are certainly applicable in describing the life of Jacob, a man who schemed and bargained with God and who dealt treacherously with so many people. The futility of Ephraim's life is described caustically as feeding on wind and chasing the east wind, moving all the time and getting nowhere. It is the picture of so many worldly people, their energy spent and having acquired nothing of permanence. Dishonesty and violence are the marks of society. The people who claim to be God's people curry favour with worldly but powerful Assyria and export olive oil by way of tribute to Egypt, seeking to buy favour and peace. There was a way of peace, prosperity and blessing but they would have none of it, as Isaiah the prophet had declared (Isa. 30:15-18). This was a nation sliding into disaster and being prepared to

seek any possible remedy except in God. That is a picture of our own nation today. But God now addresses Judah, the southern kingdom, which no doubt felt superior to its northern neighbour, and certainly felt spiritually more in tune with God. God declares that Judah, just like Jacob, was playing fast and loose with Him. Judah was chancing his luck, forgetting that God is not mocked. Ephraim and Judah had both to learn that their sins would find them out (Num. 32:23).

[Back to Top](#)

12:1-6

The story of Jacob is well documented in vivid terms in Genesis, starting in chapter 25. When the child Jacob was born he was grasping his twin brother by the heel (Gen. 25:26). All through his life he crept up on people to get the better of them, first his brother and then clever Laban (Gen. 27:36; 31:1-55). For most of his early life Jacob wrestled against God, argued the point, on the run from God, but still regarding himself as a man of God whose life carried the blessing of God. In the end God had to separate Jacob from all he had achieved and, in wrestling with the angel, Jacob was broken, and in that way God changed him and made him a prince with God, a man truly blessed and of use to God and to others (Gen. 32:22-32). Some of the old self-willed Jacob asserted itself again and again to the end of his days but he was a man God could use. Of course, early in Jacob's life it had been made plain that God had a purpose for him (Gen. 25:21-26). Even though that purpose was interfered with on a human level and Jacob had to flee (Gen. 27:1-45) God met with him at Bethel and spoke promises to him (Gen. 28:10-22). Jacob could have been a total disaster but God, in dealing with him often in radical and costly ways, brought him to repentance and to a yielding of his life. Then the future opened up to him in richness of blessing. Having reminded the people of that familiar story, Hosea then applied it in a call to repentance (v.6). By God's grace, *you* return. Deal rightly with God. Wait upon God instead of running and rebelling. If God brought Jacob back to being right with his God then God can do it for you and me. When Jacob was right with God he prospered and was a blessing to many. When he was adrift from God he still sometimes prospered but evil dogged his life and he was a hindrance and a menace to others and to God's work. God's dealings with Jacob brought him back. Blessed is the man who has the God of Jacob for his help (Ps. 146:5 AV).

[Back to Top](#)

12:7-9

These verses are stark and searching and become even more so when we are told that the word 'trader' or 'merchant' is the word 'Canaan'. That means God is addressing proud Ephraim as a Canaanite and declaring that the people who carried the name of God and were proud of the fact were actually more worldly and corrupt than those who made no profession of faith. Ephraim had grown rich just as Jacob had got rich but not always by methods that honoured God. In the Jacob story there are long spells when God is scarcely mentioned. That could be the story of many professing Christians. Israel testified 'I am rich' and that was true. But in the process Israel had lost its spiritual vitality and was either unaware of this or regarded it as irrelevant. Read again Rev. 2:1-5; 3:1-3, 15-22. Remember that Israel had been led into the land of Canaan to transform the land and make it God's place for God's service and God's honour, but the very opposite had happened. The influence, activity and atmosphere of Canaan had overcome the people of God, obscured their identity and aborted their service for God. Think how all manner of worldly activities and attitudes have infiltrated the church, even the evangelical church, with the result that the Gospel of salvation has been edged out in the interest of pleasure, secular attitudes and political involvement. It is not surprising that many people have neither interest in nor respect for the church. There seems to be nothing there that is different or distinctive. And in some cases the personal and business lives of professing Christians appear less worthy than those of worldly people. The situation in the church at Corinth is an example of what we mean (1 Cor. 5:1-2). Jesus' biting words to the Pharisees of His day is another example (Matt. 23:1-7,23-28). Hypocrisy is a terrible thing, and it cannot be hidden, certainly not from God.

[Back to Top](#)

12:7-9

The first part of this passage refers to those who are prepared to sell their souls and deny their spiritual birthright for worldly progress and success. Jacob's brother Esau did that (Gen. 25:29-34) and later, when he felt he wanted to be right with God, he discovered that God's blessing was beyond his reach (Heb. 12:12-17). Jesus told a vivid story about a man who was successful in his business life, and there was no suggestion of any wrong practices. But his whole policy of life was wrong. He lived for the wrong things (Lk. 12:13-21). How we need to learn that life does not consist in having things, and that in going after things we can lose our souls (Mk. 8:36-37 AV). The last verse of today's passage seems to deal with people who, in spite of their worldliness, are meticulous in their religious observances, making sure that every detail is just as tradition required it to be. Think of how people can go through the 'routine' of a Communion service, of whatever denomination, and then for the rest of the week never have a single thought about God. The first words of v.9 echo the introduction to the Ten Commandments. They reminded the people that they owed their salvation and life to the God who saved them from Egypt, the God who called them to live by His pattern, to glorify His name and so be a means of blessing to others, showing them the way to God and to life. The next reference is to the Feast of Tabernacles, observed to remind the people of salvation and to confirm them as God's pilgrims in an alien world. They observed the ritual and then went back to their worldly lives. Are we in a position to criticise? God seems to say that He would in fact take away all their comforts and privileges and make them once again live in tents. A bit of realism in our human circumstances can have a very healthy effect on our spiritual lives, not least in clearing up the issue of priorities.

[Back to Top](#)

12:10-14

It is interesting that in the context of such a serious situation God emphasises so clearly that *He* spoke to the people and the situation through the prophets. It is quite alarming to realise that while there was ministry of the calibre we have been studying, ministry that has revealed the loving heart of God as well as His righteousness and justice, there prevailed and continued a spirit of determined unbelief and disobedience. It is indeed sobering to think that sinners, and sinning saints can and do resist the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51). The reference to visions and parables may refer, not so much to ecstatic utterances as to the fact that God had given the people open vision or sight and teaching in parables that they could grasp and understand. But it was all to no avail. God's Word came to them but it was refused. That is the heart of unbelief. Hosea refers to specific places that were venerated for their religious rites but which ignored God's word and ways and God pours scorn on them. They are and will become heaps of rubble. The reference in v.12 is to Jacob's time in service to Laban but it is not clear why this piece of information is given at this point. In v.13 the emphasis is again on the word and leadership of a prophet, this time in the context of the Exodus from Egypt. In that story and that event the initiative and the power were from God and the work done was a spiritual work of redemption, saving a people from their sin and bondage. It was not just a work of political and social liberation. One of the clever devices and successes of the Devil in our generation is in causing the words 'Gospel' and 'Salvation' to be reduced to mere political and social concepts. Yes, the poor and down trodden need to be helped and should be helped. But if the emphasis is only on immediate physical and emotional need, ignoring the need to be forgiven and set right with God, then we fail the very people we say we want to help. The last verse makes plain that Ephraim's serious offence against God, causing God to turn His back, was that they had God's clear Word but had no use for it, no belief in it and no response to it. This is indeed the hardness of heart that comes from unbelief (Heb. 3:12-13).

[Back to Top](#)

13:1-3

One commentator entitles this chapter 'The Last Judgment', because the sin of the nation was building up to the day of reckoning. Another commentator entitles the opening passage 'Vanished Dignity', because a once-proud and respected people were becoming a laughing stock. Both titles seem to have an ominous ring with regard to our own nation (and the church within it) at this present time. As these words are being typed the news bulletins are agog with facts about the millions of people possessed with an obsessive lust to win some utterly obscene sum of money on the National Lottery. This testifies that the basic belief of countless people is that money is

the answer to all the hunger and hopes of human hearts. The Bible says that the love of money, which is closely allied to the spirit of coveting, is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:6-10). But we need to note clearly in this passage that the decline of the nation is not spoken of in terms of economic or political problems but is declared radically to be the result of spiritual backsliding. God had been forgotten and, in place of God-ordained forms of worship, people had turned to religion of their own inclination and invention. There is something grotesque about people kissing calves made of wood or metal, even precious metal, and assuming that this in some way was serving 'god'. When once the Word of God ceases to inform, mould and direct people's thinking, then superstition in many different forms becomes the 'religion' of the people. Think of our own society in which we can hear even Christians saying 'touch wood' or touching lucky charms or reading horoscopes with trust and even expectation. Think of how many people who believe nothing at all about God or about Christ wear a necklace with a Cross. Today's verses should make us turn to Romans 1:21-23. When people do not retain God in their thinking, their concept of God becomes distorted and increasingly debased and devalued. The trouble for all of us is that it is so easy to let thoughts of God slip away from our minds.

[Back to Top](#)

13:1-3

We must now apply these verses to the church, just as we have applied them to the nation. If dignity is lost, then respect is lost and, sad to say, society has little respect for the church, so little that it ignores the church rather than persecutes it. The church has brought this on itself, just as Ephraim brought on itself the contempt of the nations. But there is more than lost dignity; there is lost testimony or witness. There was a time when, if Ephraim spoke, others listened. There was a time when the faith of the church, held sincerely and proclaimed boldly, had an influence on the atmosphere and attitudes of society, and caused even non-religious people to have some sense of standards of behaviour. Granted there was hypocrisy, but certain breaches of the moral code were condemned by society and those who behaved in that way were made to be aware that they had done wrong and that they deserved just rebuke and punishment. Go again to Romans 1:28-2:6. If we speak of the church at large losing its witness because of spiritual backsliding, must we not also speak both of congregations that were once bastions of truth and also of individual Christians who were once eager, committed and dependable servants of Christ and the Gospel. How sad it is when 'salt loses its savour' (Matt. 5:13). It is not only of no use, it can become a positive danger to others. Backsliders usually take others with them, wives, children, friends and workmates. What a terrible thing it is to lead another away from God into the paths of destruction! Read and ponder Psalm 1 and consider whether you are chaff about to be blown, or wisps of smoke unsubstantial and disappearing, as Hosea speaks of it, or like a living tree with good roots, whose spiritual life is a blessing to others. It could well be that in the situation in which Hosea is ministering, the people kept going both to God's House and *also* to pagan temples. This could well be a manifestation of what is now called 'inter-faith' religion or 'comparative religion' and the false idea that all roads lead to God. Read Prov. 14:12.

[Back to Top](#)

13:4-8

In addressing the people, God here identifies Himself as the God who saved them from the land of Egypt, and the God of the Ten Commandments. He speaks personally and with searching power. He reminds them of what they had been, a people in bondage, devalued and persecuted, unhappy and with no future, a people who were in that predicament because their fathers had dealt falsely with God. Yet, even in their slavery, God knew them, heard them, came to them, saved them and led them into liberty and life. This is something we must never forget. Always remember what we were apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ and what we have been made. Read the contrast in Eph. 2:11-13,18-22. We were Christless, stateless, friendless, hopeless and godless, but we have been made members of the household of God, with life and hope built on a solid foundation. We must never lose sight of the privilege granted us by God's undeserved grace, but we must also remember that privilege brings responsibility. We must live as God's children, in the way God wants us to live. Read the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1-17), seldom studied these days by Christians and seldom preached by evangelical ministers, even the famous ones. Jesus said that a dependable test of discipleship, love and spirituality was the keeping of the Commandments (John 14:15). If we are God's people then our lives should bear witness to this fact. Faith without works is not faith at all and it is the 'works' of our lives that confirm and demonstrate our

faith (James 4:14-18). Consider the pattern of Paul's Epistles. First there is the exposition of the doctrines of salvation and then there follows the pattern of life that is expected to flow from faith. Our lives must be worthy of God and the Gospel (Phil. 1:27). Our lives should 'adorn' the doctrine of the Gospel, in the sense of showing it to its best advantage, just as a jeweller displays his precious goods set against a background of rich velvet (Titus 2:10). Do people recognise from our way of life that we are Christian believers (Acts 4:13)? Would people want to go with us because they see that God is with us (Zech. 8:20-23)? 'The heathen shall know that I am the Lord when I am sanctified in you before their eyes' (Ezek. 36:23 AV).

[Back to Top](#)

13:4-8

There is a further lesson in these verses and it concerns the danger of living in the context of the rich and continued blessing of God. Hosea charged the people to the effect that when they had been fed full with the good things of God they became 'fed-up' with God. This is one of the dangers of sitting for long years under a faithful ministry of the Word that is being blessed by God. We become accustomed to it. We assume the rich diet will always be there whether we 'pick at our food' or receive it gladly with thanksgiving. In spiritual terms, just as in human terms, we can destroy our appetite by constant nibbling at 'sweets' of various kinds. We can fill our lives with so many nice things that hunger for God's Word goes, and the awareness of our need for that Word is dulled. Think how, in their journeys, the Israelites became discontented and complained about 'This manna' (Num. 11:6) and began to look back to their worldly days in Egypt and the 'spicy' foods (and activities) they had relished. Forty years ago, when biblical ministry was scarce indeed and when the work in Sandyford was just beginning, in the context of a worldly congregation that had fallen on evil days, the little group of Christians, many of them teenagers, was resolute in commitment to the Prayer Meeting. All knew it was a spiritual battle and no gaps in the ranks were allowed. But now, in many places there are biblical, teaching ministries, but is there the same awareness of the priority of prayer? Is there the same commitment? For some, their early days when money was scarce, luxuries little known, and opposition from families was sore, Christian life was a matter of real dependence on God and obedience to Him. But what happens when some 'get on in the world' because God has blessed and prospered them? Hosea said their hearts were lifted up (that is they became proud) and they forgot God. We do not like being accused of pride. We do not like to be told we have lost out spiritually. We prefer to point out that the pressures and demands of life are much greater than they were. God knows where our hearts are, and Jesus said where our hearts are, our feet are likely to be (Mk. 10:23-31; Matt 6:19-21).

[Back to Top](#)

13:9-13

The last two verses of the previous passage are vivid and speak of God dealing with His sinful people no longer as a Saviour but as a predator. The lion and leopard seem to speak of the people having led themselves into lurking danger, into areas that would do them no good and would expose them to harm. We too need to learn to watch where we go. Some places are safe during the day but not in the hours of darkness. Some places are safe when we go with the right company but can be terrible snares if we are with the wrong people. The illustration of the bear, ferocious because her cubs are being stolen, should make us think of God who is jealous, in a righteous and justifiable way, over what is His by right. Because His people are precious in His sight, because His heart is set on them and because He has glorious plans of grace and blessing and fulfilment for them, He is against any and all who would steal His people from Him and so rob them of their inheritance and hope in God. We must never think of God's jealousy in terms of 'the green-eyed monster' of envy. We must not make God in our image and yet we can only think of God in terms drawn from our human experience. Jealousy in us is usually an infantile resentment that someone has what we do not have and we want it for ourselves. We are not interested in the other person. But there is a jealousy that is more earnest zeal to protect something or someone from being spoiled, protecting a relationship from what is trying to spoil it. If you are married and someone was working to destroy your loving relationship with husband or wife, would you not take action? Could you, if you love, be indifferent? Would you not go to any length to protect the one you love from that which would hurt, dishonour and prostitute them? God loves with that kind of love, and that love can be angry and radical when all other words and actions have failed. There is deep, controlled passion in the words of today's passage. In a

sense God is saying, (and how His heart must have ached) 'Look what you have done to yourself!' That is perhaps enough for us to think about for one day. If it makes us pray for ourselves and all those we count as friends, then we are making progress.

[Back to Top](#)

13:9-13

There is a great difference in the translation of v.9 between AV and modern versions and we consider both. In the context of our exposition we could understand God crying, 'O Israel, you have destroyed yourself.' The situation they were in, the problems that were crushing them, the enemies they had drawn against themselves, and the pathetic dereliction of their spiritual lives were all their own doing. *They* made the choices. *They* decided on which level they would live. *They* chose to compromise and qualify their obedience to God. *They* got their lives entangled with godless people, godless activities and the kind of behaviour that was an offence to God. Now they had to live with what they had created, and, of course, they did not like it. No doubt they would say as many of us have done, 'Why has God let this happen?' It is so easy to slip into a state of self-pity and to look for someone to blame, perhaps the government, perhaps friends who we feel have neglected us, perhaps parents in terms of how they brought us up, perhaps just circumstances. But God makes it quite clear. *They* had destroyed themselves. They had demolished all that God had done for them and given to them. Their privileges, blessings and opportunities had all been squandered, mostly in the interest of immediate indulgence and pleasure. All along God had spoken to them through the prophets but they had refused to listen to God, who alone could have been their help. They may have felt sorry for themselves but there was no sign of repentance (2 Cor. 7:10). Think of the state of our own nation and, to a great extent, the state of the church within the nation. Who are we to blame? Do we not see that our own choices have led us to this situation? The nation has sat lightly to God's Commandments. The church has had so many doubts and reservations about Scripture. Christians have allowed their thinking to be conformed to the pattern of the world (Rom. 12:1-2), so that commitment to Christ has taken second place. And prayer has become the Cinderella of the church's life. God's people have destroyed themselves. God says it!

[Back to Top](#)

13:9-13

Modern versions read, 'I will destroy you, O Israel,' emphasising the activity of God in their present predicament. The second half of v.9 reads, 'Who can help you?' (RSV), or 'Because you are against me, against your helper' (NIV), or 'In me is thy help' (AV). The three translations help to press home the message. Genuine repentance leading to a change of life was the only hope, but there was no sign of that at all. Whether this was due to complacency, rebellion or indifference is hard to say, but we all know how we react to the discipline of words or circumstances. God pressed home His challenge asking them where now were all the people and things they had chosen in place of God. The nation, as we learned in our early studies, had had a succession of disastrous kings, and God now takes them far back in the story to when they had first demanded to have a king. Kidner writes: 'The mood in which Israel had demanded a king is quite familiar to us: a compound of reasonable grievances (against mis-rule by Samuel's sons, 1 Sam. 8:1-5), ideas of grandeur ('like all the nations') and trust in the seen rather than the unseen ('that our kings may . . . go out before us and fight our battles, 1 Sam. 8:20).' Amazingly God went along with His people in their wrong request and gave them kings, some of whom were a blessing but others who proved to be a sore affliction. When God's people want to run their lives and work in the way worldly people run their businesses, it is only a matter of time before disaster comes. The church must learn that no amount of reorganisation, no matter how efficient, will bring back spiritual life unless there is first a heart-felt seeking after God. Individuals, churches and nations can choose their own way and God will not necessarily prevent them. But Psalm 106:15 (AV) needs to be pondered. 'He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.'

[Back to Top](#)

13:9-13

These verses are so stark and solemn that we must ponder them well, not least in order to grasp the glory of the Gospel of God's grace in the final chapter. God is taking His people to task and shaking them to the foundation

of their beings. God tells them that their iniquity is bound up, or stored up, and their sins are kept in store or on record. The picture is of unforgiven sin about to set in motion a sequence of troubles. It is like a dam about to burst and to flood people's lives, or a conveyor-belt set in motion to carry people along with no possibility of getting off. The second picture is of a pregnancy running its course and then the birth not taking place, or taking place in a disastrous way. The emphasis is on opportunity having come and gone. In human terms, there was no one of the calibre necessary to lead the people into a way of hope. Of course, there was one leader, Hosea by name, but he was devalued and his ministry and leadership largely ignored. When we sit lightly to God's Word and become complacent, recognising the authenticity of the Word preached but not responding to it in obedience, it is very possible that God will remove that Word. He may remove the messenger or remove the people geographically to a place where the pangs of spiritual hunger will in time awaken repentance. We must remember that there is an immediacy and an urgency in all God's dealings with us. *Now* is the acceptable time, *now* is the day of salvation (2 Cor. 6:1, 2). Today, if we hear God's voice, we must respond, else His voice may begin to seem faint, not because God stops speaking but because our spiritual hearing becomes poorer (Heb. 2:1; 4:1,2). We do well to ponder Shakespeare's words, 'There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood leads on to fortune.' But, if we miss the tide, the voyage of life remains in the shallows, and shallows can often lead to going aground. Think well about what you are doing with your life and its opportunities in relation to God.

[Back to Top](#)

13:14-16

There is considerable debate as to whether v.14 should be read as a question (RSV), or as a statement 'I shall ransom them . . .' (NIV and AV). The whole of chapter 13, speaking of God's rebuke, discipline and judgment of His people, suggests that today's verses pose a question, with the inevitable answer in the negative. Israel was 'finished'. Certainly in terms of service, let alone fellowship with God, she was to be laid aside as of no further use (1 Cor. 9:27). In fact, as a people they were a shadow on God's good name and a hindrance to His work. In this translation the passage speaks of God calling the powers of death and hell to work His judgment. God declares that even if there are signs of the nation prospering, it will be temporary and the winds of discipline will demolish all that is achieved. The last verse speaks in final terms. The nation will know not only economic collapse but invasion. The invader will be Assyria, noted for its merciless cruelty as described in v.16b. The prophet points relentlessly to the root cause of all the nation's problems. They had rebelled against God (16a). When that is the case, a nation's economic prosperity, balance and prospects are very uncertain because they are vulnerable. Think of our own nation and how relentlessly the 'never had it so good' years gave way to grim recession. In view of the spiritual apostasy of the nation, is there any real ground for believing that prosperity will return? The principle that applies in the nation applies also in the church. Have we grounds for believing that revival will come? Do we look to that to solve all the church's problems? Yes, God is a God of love, but look at the end of v.14. There comes a time when love can no longer bless, or give, or make allowances, or forgive, but must discipline. But think what it must cost a loving God, who has loved so extravagantly and at such cost, to have to close His heart.

[Back to Top](#)

13:14-16

The ground for reading v.14 as a statement is the fact that Paul quotes a version of these words in 1 Cor. 15:54-55 where he links them with the affirmation of victory over death in Isa. 25:8. We could also link the passage with the statement of Jesus in Mk. 10:45 that He had come to give His life as a ransom for many. In many ways the glorious Gospel of salvation is seen best when it is set over against the totally undeserving nature and condition of sinners. God commended His love toward us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:6-8). It is thrilling indeed, if we read v.14 as a promise, to see the light of the Gospel of salvation and forgiveness shining in the context of the black darkness of human sin and failure. When we sing the hymn, 'To God be the glory,' we affirm with the glad hope of faith that 'The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives'. We are in fact being pointed towards the final chapter of Hosea where the promise of God is that of pardon, restoration and acceptance in spite of all. But at the same time, even if we read v.14 as an affirmation of God's intentions and a declaration of His triumph over sin, death and Hell, we

still have the last statement of the verse. Does this speak of the love that seeks us through pain, as declared in George Matheson's hymn, 'O Love, that will not let me go'? The God who says here 'I will have no compassion even though he thrives,' (NIV) and 'Compassion is hid from my eyes,' (RSV) is the God who said in Hos. 11:8-9, 'How can I give you up?' We are dealing here with the long suffering of God (2 Pet. 3:9,15 AV; Rom. 2:4 AV), the longing of God's heart, and the grief of His heart as He views what people have done to themselves and to His creation (Gen. 6:5, 6).

[Back to Top](#)

14:1-3

The sternness of the previous verses gives way to an astonishing sweetness as God calls His people back to Himself. This has been His desire and intention right from the start and all the strong words of rebuke and discipline have been working to this point. In 2:14-15 God had made plain what he was setting out to do. His love would indeed seek by painful means to win their hearts. In 11:7 God testified that His people were, in their blind and foolish perversity, determined to turn away from Him. Now He calls them, in spite of everything, to come back to the God whose love is unchanging, the God to whom they owed everything, the God in whom alone they had any hope of a future. At one stage (6:1-3) there had been what seemed to be a response to God and a desire to return to Him, but at best it had been a shallow reaction to difficulty and it had not lasted (6:4). But God's love is persistent and He continued to work in the experiences of His people, seeking to strengthen their flickering desires, and this final chapter begins with a glorious call or appeal to return, to turn right back to their God. That God should still want such graceless, disobedient children is amazing, and yet not amazing when we consider just how much time and energy and love He had expended on them over such a long spell of time. The very fact that God calls them to return indicates that even at this late stage, when everything seems to have gone completely wrong, there was still possibility of repentance, restoration and new hope. But there was urgency, something that we seldom seem to feel nowadays. Read Ezek. 33:10-11. The call was to turn back to God because the alternative was disaster. History testifies that within a few years of the end of Hosea's ministry the nation crashed and was no more. There is a deep poignancy in God's appeal to return.

[Back to Top](#)

14:1-3

When God pleads with His people He does so on a basis of realism. He does not say, as we tend to say when making excuses for ourselves or for others, 'Poor souls, you have had a hard time. Life has been difficult.' God makes plain that the people had brought about their own fall by their iniquity, their perversity and their persistent sinning. The people are told to take words, to express in coherent and specific terms how they proposed to deal with God. To give a 'show' of religion, to give a special donation to the church, to fast for a week, or to decide to read through the whole Bible in a set time is not what God looks for. Our words have to say the same as God says about ourselves, our sins and our way of life. We must not speak about our failings or weaknesses or shortcomings, nor must we put the blame on others, as Adam did in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:12). We must be honest like the Prodigal and say, 'Father, I have sinned, and am no more worthy to be called your son (Lk. 15:18,19). This is not just 'owning up' to wrongs done, but rather an expression of total agreement with God to the effect that we stand guilty and deserve to be rejected (Rom. 3:19,20). God gave the people the words to pray in v.2,3. It is a prayer for forgiveness and an expression of sincere worship (Heb. 13:15) that flows from a life lived in fellowship and obedience. It is plain from v.3 that there had to be a change in the pattern of life's activities. We cannot go with God and hold on to our worldly, sinful, indulgent ways. We must never forget Jesus' words about the strait gate and narrow way (Matt. 7:13,14). In the last phrase of v.3 we are told, in wonderful language, what God is like. The orphan, who has no-one to call 'Father', finds the One who will say, 'You are mine.'

'Today Thy gate is open, And all who enter in
Shall find a Father's welcome, And pardon for their sin:
The past shall be forgotten, A present joy be given,
A future grace be promised, A glorious crown in heaven.' (Allen)

[Back to Top](#)

14:4-7

If the first part of this chapter calls the people to draw near to God, today's verses emphasise that God will draw near to them (Jas. 4:8). It is astonishing that there is no word of reproach from God. He speaks of unqualified blessing in rich measure. It is not just forgiveness, wonderful as that is, but restoration to fullness of life, service and rejoicing. This is how it was with the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:20-24). The Father's love made it as if nothing had ever been wrong. Of course, the Prodigal would always have his regrets, not least the awareness of how he had hurt his Father's heart. There is a similar expression of the generosity of God's forgiving grace in Joel 2:25. It will be as if the loss of the wasted years had never taken place. This has a particular message of encouragement to many if we read God's words in v.4 as 'I will heal their backsliding'. What a promise! What a prospect of a new start with the slate wiped clean! What emphasis there is in the repetition of the words 'I will'! What a God we have! But, having regard to all that has been said about the collapse of the nation within a few short years, we must think of the response to God's invitation being made by a *remnant* of the people. In the southern kingdom of Judah at this time there was the work and influence of good King Hezekiah and there is indication in 2 Chron. 30:1-12 that the king did what he could to 'rescue the perishing' in the northern kingdom as well as in Judah. The response may have been small, but did not Jesus speak of rejoicing in Heaven over one sinner coming to repentance (Lk. 15:3-7)? We have often been moved by words of Samuel Rutherford, words of great encouragement for those who feel they can see little result from their ministry. 'Oh, if one soul from Anwoth meet me at God's right hand, my heaven will be two heavens in Immanuel's land.'

[Back to Top](#)

14:4-7

Consider well the description of the blessings God promises to the penitent, returning sinner. Dew is deposited on surfaces colder than the surrounding atmosphere, and we are told here of the warmth of God's love having this effect on cold hearts. Dew is not a once-for-all thing, but often repeated. It is quiet, not ostentatious, and it acts as a gentle, refreshing reviving agent. The effect will be to make life blossom like the lily. Jesus said that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these lilies (Matt. 6:28). The picture is one of beauty and serenity. This is what God can do with our personalities and lives (Acts 4:33). How we need to pray, 'Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me, all His wondrous compassion and purity. O, Thou Saviour divine, all my nature refine, till the beauty of Jesus be seen in me.' God says He will do this. After all, for the Christian believers the mind of Jesus Christ and His very life are in us by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5; Phil. 2:5 AV; Eph. 3:17). The new life God gives will have roots going down deeply, keeping it in touch with life-giving water and having strength and stability to stand in gales and storms. There will be dignity as well as stability and strength. There will be vigour, like the spreading roots of the olive tree, a tree producing fruit and always new shoots of life. There will be in such lives a fragrance and an attractiveness. That God should be prepared to do this for people who have sinned, rebelled, been unfaithful and scorned His blessings, is altogether astonishing. This is the love of the God of love. Do we not want to say, 'I give Thee back the life I owe, that in Thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be,'? (Matheson)

[Back to Top](#)

14:4-7

By way of introduction, read Eph. 3:14-21 to be reminded of the sheer dimension of the possibilities of our lives in Christ and in His service. We have spoken of the dew, the lily, the roots of great trees such as the poplars or cedars of Lebanon and the rich fruitfulness of the olive tree, and its fragrance. Now we are told of life lived in the shadow of the Almighty. Read Ps. 91:1-4, 11-12,14-16. Read also Ps. 121 that speaks of God keeping our going out and our coming in. A paraphrase of Ps. 90, in the hymn 'O God our help in ages past,' has the words, 'Under the shadow of thy throne thy saints have dwelt secure.' The shadow of the Almighty speaks of protection from enemies and from the heat of the sun. It speaks of safety, rest, fellowship with God and life lived in the peace of His presence. It is the picture of the God of peace standing guard over our hearts and minds (Phil. 4:4-7). It is a care and protection described by Jesus in terms of wonderful tenderness when He spoke of a hen gathering its chicks under its wings. The life of the restored sinner will be like a garden with beauty as well as fruitfulness. The desert of life will blossom as the rose. Read the whole of Isaiah 35 without being distracted by too many details. Then think of the words of Jesus about living water springing up within

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Hosea

our lives (John 4:14; 7:37-39). All this God says He will do for His penitent, returning people, for no other reason than this, that He loves them with an everlasting love (Jer. 31:3).

[Back to Top](#)

14-8-9

We have heard God's cry, 'O Ephraim' already in Hos. 6:4 and 11:8 and we hear the echo in Jesus' cry, 'O Jerusalem' in Matt. 23:37. In v.8 God could be speaking and saying, 'What have I in common with idols?' as if the people were being rebuked for bringing God down to the level of bits of wood or stone. It could be that God is saying, 'With a God who blesses as I have promised to bless, you do not need anyone but Me.' Perhaps we should understand the verse as Ephraim saying, 'With a God like this, what do I need any more with idols?' What are idols? They are things or people who steal the heart away from God. They can be self-righteousness, laziness, lack of discipline which is allied to indulgence, secret sins, wrong relationships, pleasures, hobbies, money, career, family, fear of man. What we have to recognise is that whatever takes us away from God takes us away from the source of life and usefulness: usefulness as a person and perhaps as a parent, as well as in Christian service. The last verse is an epilogue or final application to all who read Hosea. It is an appeal to consider our lives and our walk with God and a reminder that it is those, and those alone, who walk with God who find themselves blessed and are made a blessing to others. Read Psalm 1. We said at the start of studies in Hosea that this book reveals the heart of God. At the end of our studies the statement we need is in 1 John 4:9-10. What of our response?

I would not give the world my heart,
And then profess Thy love;
I would not feel my strength depart,
And then Thy service prove.

I would not with swift-winged zeal
On the world's errands go,
And labour up the heavenly hill
With weary feet and slow.' (T.H.Gill)

'Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.' (F R Havergal)

[Back to Top](#)