

COME, LET US RETURN TO THE LORD

Hosea 4:1-6:3

Key Verse: 6:3

“Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth. “

Hosea begins with a love story--a painful, personal love story, the prophet's very own. Hosea had married a woman who acted like a prostitute. Yet the more she went out on him, the more Hosea loved her. He gave her everything a good wife deserved: his love, his home, his name, and his reputation. She responded by sleeping around with other men. He warned her, he pleaded with her, he punished her. She humiliated him until he wanted to cry, yet still he clung to her.

Why did Hosea begin with his personal life? Because God had expressly told him to relate it to another, more tragic love story: the painful love of God for his people. God could have simply declared, “Israel is like a wife to me--an adulterous wife.” Instead, he used Hosea to act out the treachery in real life--and to show in living color God's fury, his jealousy, and above all else, his love for his people. God doesn't want to be only “master” to his people. He wants to be a husband, giving all of himself in intimate love.

Hosea saw idol worship as the root of Israel's problems, which he referred to as adultery. Israel tended to mix religions freely, thinking that everybody's religion had a little truth in it, and the more religion you got, the better off you would be. Hosea shows that God's concern about idolatry is no fussy, religious matter. It is terribly personal. God, the lover, will not share his bride with anyone else.

In today's passage, God expresses his disappointment, anger and jealousy in such an emotional way, and warns Israel with impending judgment. He bluntly uses offensive and unpleasant languages. In actuality, however, God's anger and jealousy reflect his powerful love. Sin does not merely break God's law, but it breaks his heart. He punishes to get his lover's attention. Yet even when she turns her back on him, he sticks with her. He is willing to suffer, in the hope that someday she will change. God longs not to punish, but to love. He is determined to persevere with his unfaithful wife and restore her.

May God help us to repent of sin of idolatry in our hearts and press on to acknowledge him through today's passage. Moreover, may God enable us to learn God's long-suffering patience and his love.

I. THE CHARGE AGAINST ISRAEL (4:1-19)

Chapter 4 starts with God's prosecution against Israel like in the court. Look at verse 1a. “Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites, because the LORD has a charge to bring against you who live in the land.” God demands full attention from the entire population to his message of indictment. They like to hear when God speaks nicely. But are they

willing to hear when he has a controversy with them? Yes, they must hear him when he pleads against them. They should give up the habit of hardening their hearts; rather, they ought to soften their hearts for repentance. Otherwise, there is no remedy for their sin-sickness but the rage of God. When we hear the word of God, however, there is a solution for any problem and every problem.

Then, the indictment read: the whole nation stands charged with crimes of a hideous nature, by which God is highly provoked. What accusations does God bring against them? Look at verses 1b and 2. "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed." The Israelites abandoned three key virtues God wanted them to possess as a priestly nation. Instead, they recklessly committed 7 crimes which God abhors. Faithfulness, love and acknowledgment are essential elements in any relationship. When these qualities are gone from people's hearts, they become lovers of themselves, lovers of money, dishonest, boastful, abusive, disobedient, ungrateful, unholy, unforgiving, slanderous, brutal, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. Losing all the images of God, their mind becomes that of beasts. In Hosea's time, these became evident as despicable felonies in the society: swearing, lying, killing, theft, sexual immorality, sheer anarchy, and assassinations. For example, in just over 20 years six kings took the throne--four of them by murdering the previous king. These sins were found in all corners of the land, and among all orders and degrees of men among them. Their transgressions were utterly evil and immoral breaking all bounds of reason, conscience, and the divine law. Here we learn that we should not take our relationship with God and with other fellow men for granted. Instead, we must keep it sound and sincere in faithfulness, love and acknowledgement.

Verses 3-5 depict the devastating impact of Israel's sins. The whole land is infected with sin, and therefore the very land itself shall sit in mourning under God's sore judgments, being stripped of all its wealth and beauty. And all who live in it waste away with overwhelming grief and anguish when by war and famine the land is made desolate. Not only people but also creatures are suffering and dying. Because of sins of human beings, even the whole kingdom of animals groan in pains. But instead of repenting of their own sins, people begin to look for someone else to blame. They like to finger-point others rather than examining themselves. They even malign and attack the spiritual leaders rashly. In actuality, however, for at whatever point they judge the other, they are condemning themselves because they do the same things. Hypocrisy, mistrust and mutual accusation prevail and destroy the unity and well-being of the nation. In their sin, they stumble day and night and even the prophets, who were supposed to lead the people with God's vision, also stumble with them.

Then, what is the fundament of nationwide guilt and tragedy? How does God, the prosecutor, point out? Let's read verse 6 together. "My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children." They are descended from Patriarchs of faith. They are the people whom God foreknew and had chosen for a glorious purpose. They have the history of God's great salvation like Exodus and his victory like defeating invincible Canaanites to possess the Promised Land. They

are the ones who have been entrusted with the very words of God. Although they knew God, they refused to acknowledge God, neither glorifying him as God nor giving thanks to him. Then their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. They do not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God: they think there is no practicality in seeking God and studying his word. God can not but reject such insolent and ungrateful people, giving them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to impurity, shameful lusts and to a depraved mind. As they ignore him, God ignores them to their own degradation and to their ruin. Here we learn what grievous and deleterious sin it is not to acknowledge God. In the midst of forceful culture of ungodliness and pragmatism, it is painstaking to study the word of God and live according to it. But we are not ignorant but aware of this word of God: “God will give to each person according to what he has done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.” (Ro 2:6,7) May God help us to acknowledge him in all our ways.

In verses 7-19, God exposes their repulsive sins fact by fact in great detail. God rebukes priests who stop ministering the people in God’s way. Rather, they exploit common people who are overcome by their carnal desires and commit same sin again and again. The priests are fed on their guilt offerings. Thus, they promote people to continue their wicked conduct. No one can tell the priests from the ordinary people. They all engage themselves in pleasure-seeking: eating, drinking and sexual debauchery, but without finding any satisfaction, instead being left with emptiness, exhaustion and guilty feelings. In their dissipation, they turn to foreign gods to fill their discontent and relieve their frustration. But idol-worship leads them to deeper moral decay and breaks down the basic relationship even in the family: their daughters and daughters-in-law engage in prostitution and adultery, and men in indecent acts with harlots and sacrifice with shrine prostitutes. The Israelites are like a stubborn heifer, refusing God’s tender care. So God doesn’t restrain them from chasing after their sinful cravings until they are swept away in shame. Before God’s accusations fact by fact, every mouth shall be shut and silenced and the whole nation held accountable to God. They are found to be guilty and deserve the due penalty.

II. “I WILL DISCIPLINE ALL OF THEM” (5:1-15)

Look at verse 5:1a. “Hear this, you priests! Pay attention, you Israelites! Listen, O royal house! This judgment is against you” God awakens them and draw their attention again. From religious figures, leaders of the nation to ordinary inhabitants, all are cited to appear and answer to their charges. For they have all contributed to the national guilt, they shall all share in the national judgments. God pronounces the final verdict against their evil deeds. But what is God’s real intention and purpose of punishing the Israelites? Look at verse 2b. “I will discipline all of them.” It is God’s training to get rid of all impurity and sin-sickness and mold them into a holy nation people.

Look at verse 3a. “I know all about Ephraim; Israel is not hidden from me.” Witness is produced against them, one instead of a thousand; it is God himself who knows everything about them. They have not known the Lord, but the Lord has known them, knows their true character however disguised, knows their secret wickedness however concealed. Men’s rejecting the knowledge of God will not secure them from his

knowledge of them; and when he contends with them he will prove their sins upon them by his omniscience, so that it will be in vain to plead “not guilty.” Every single sin of theirs is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of the Lord. There is no place for them to hide before the fierce wrath of God.

In verses 1-7, the scope of their sins is summarized once again: they misled and draw people either into sin or into trouble like a snare or a net (1). They commit prostitution: they have defiled their own bodies with fleshly lust and their own souls with the idol worship (3). The piercing eye of God sees a spirit of prostitution that is in the midst of them. Under the power of a spirit of prostitution, their every inclination and disposition is toward evilness, violence and corruption, keeping them wandering away from God endlessly (4). Because of their obstinate persistence in their misdeeds, they could not return to God. It is true that we cannot by our own power turn to God. Only by the special grace of God in Jesus, we can be restored to God. Last of all, they are guilty of notorious arrogance and insolence in sin (5). In their pride, they confront the prophets God sent them, reject the message they brought and say no to renounce their wrongdoings. So they stumble in their sins. They have dealt treacherously against the Lord as a wayward wife, showing utter contempt of the marriage covenant, forsakes her husband and lives in adultery with another. They departed from God to idols and bred up their children in idolatry (7).

Verses 8-15 proclaim God’s ominous judgment against Israel. God is coming forth to contend with them to their doom. Look at verse 8. A loud alarm sounds, giving notice of judgments coming. The battle is about to begin through the invasion of Assyria. Warning sounds go into the air throughout the whole nation, making people ready for the coming war. Ephraim, namely, Northern kingdom of Israel, will be laid waste, oppressed, and trampled in judgment. Among tribes of Israel, God proclaims what is certain to come. The destruction of impenitent sinners is a thing which shall surely be; it is not mere talk, to frighten them, but it is an irrevocable sentence. God will pour out his wrath on them like a flood of water. Every inch of their bodies is going to feel his anger. The severity of God’s judgment is progressive in a gradual manner. Initially, God will be like a moth to Ephraim, like rot to the people of Judah. They perceive their sickness and their wound. But they see it as political and economical crises, not as spiritual idolatry. After a while they find themselves going down the hill, and their estate is sensibly decaying, and then they send to the Assyrian, to come in to their assistance. But he is not able to cure them, not able to heal their sores. Rather, the Assyrians begin to exploit and distress them. Next, God will bring greater judgment upon them. He will be like a lion to them, tearing them to pieces and carrying them off. He will abandon them to dissipation of their sins until they come to their senses. When they finally hit rock bottom, in their misery they will earnestly seek God. They will acknowledge their offence and humble themselves before God. When men begin to be sensible of their guilt more than they complain of their afflictions, then there begins to be some hope for them. This is what God requires of us when we are under his correcting hand. When we are under the convictions of sin, and the corrections of the rod, our business is to seek God’s face in sincerity that he may show us mercy and restore us. Therefore, God for a time being turns away from us, that he may turn us to himself, and then return to us.

III. "LET US PRESS ON TO ACKNOWLEDGE HIM" (6:1-3)

First, God heals and restores (1-2). Let's read verses 6:1,2. "Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence." "Come, let us return to the LORD." This can be paraphrased as follows: "Let us go no more to the Assyrian; we have had enough of that. But let us return to the LORD, return to the worship of him from our idolatries, and to our hope in him from all our false confidences in flesh and idols." This is their repentance.

What encouragement and assurance do they have that they make such a decision and stir up one another? In reality, the experience they have had is the unpleasant punishment of God. They have been torn to pieces and injured. It was God who tore them and injured them. It is because they come to understand that it was for their revolts from God that he has torn and smitten them in anger. They realize that it was God's hand that was stretched out against them so as for them to repent. In their repentance, they have expectation for God's favor: "He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds" as the skillful surgeon with a tender hand binds up the broken bone or bleeding wound. The same providence of God that afflicts his people relieves them and the same Spirit of God that convicts them of sins comforts them. This is an acknowledgement of the power of God and of his mercy: "he can heal though we are ever so ill torn, he will certainly do this despite all our iniquities."

This is their further trust in God, "In a short time, in a day or two, he will revive us. On the third day he will restore us to brand-new people, that we may live in his presence." Though he forsakes for a moment, he will gather with everlasting kindness that they may see his face with comfort. They will serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all their days.

Second, let us acknowledge the LORD (3). Let's read verse 3. "Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth." When God returns in mercy to his people, the knowledge of God will be increased: all become ready to study God, eager for knowing him in personal and deeper relationship. Their spiritual eyes become opened to God's holiness and grace, to his wisdom and revelation, to his blessed promise for world salvation and even to the eternal kingdom of God in heaven. When we live in his sight, then he gives us the privilege to know him; for this is life eternal to know God. We must value and esteem the knowledge of God as the best knowledge. We must press on to acknowledge and know God. In our endeavors, we must follow on to improve in it.

Then, we have divine consolation and blessed assurance. God will appear as surely as the sun rises to dispel the darkness of the night; he will come to us like the spring rains that refresh and revive for the whole earth to be prosperous and fruitful again. Let us come to God in repentance. Let us press on to acknowledge him so that God can bless us and use us for his good purpose.

(by John Y. Jun)