

“I DESIRE MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE”

Hosea 6:4-8:14

Key verse: 6:6

“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.”

Hosea’s ministry spanned the last fifty years in the life of the northern kingdom of Israel. The history of that time is summarized in 2 Kings 14-19, which describes a nation that was spiraling downward into political chaos and economic confusion. The people of Israel continued to worship idols and didn’t show any signs of repentance. Everywhere Hosea looked, there was increasing oppression among the people, injustice, and moral and spiritual decline. And yet as we have been discovering from the book of Hosea, the amazing thing is that God never gave up on his people. Hosea’s favorite word to describe God’s commitment to them was *hesed*, which means unconditional love, faithful love, mercy, or loyalty.

God loved his people with great compassion. But his people didn’t know how to respond to that love. “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.” (6) What does God want from us? Is it a big church building or fantastic worship service with great music? No, he wants our hearts. He wants us to know and understand his love and love him back as much as he has loved us. May God help us to be loyal and committed disciple of Jesus. May God bless our small ministry to be full of God’s love and compassion.

I. “YOUR LOVE IS LIKE THE MORNING MIST” (6:4-11)

Look at verse 1. “*What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.*” Here God is like exhausted and disappointed parents who say to their children, “What am I going to do with you? Nothing I try works. What’s left?” God knew the repentance that Israel offered God was not genuine. Israel’s loyalty was as brief and changeable as a morning mist or dew that evaporates when the sun comes up. There might have been some tears and passionate promises that the people made. However, they failed to back them up with real actions. When the feelings of remorse wore off, the commitments to change were soon forgotten. God even sent his prophets to confront and expose their hypocrisy and sin so that they might repent and come back to him. (5) However, their unrepentant hearts rejected the correction and the tough love.

Let’s read verse 6 together. “*For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.*” NRSV translates this verse little differently: “*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*” What did God want from his people? God wanted to see steadfast love, *hesed*, from his people. God wanted to see their faithfulness, commitment, mercy, loyalty and unchanging love for him rather than meaningless or self-justifying religious activities.

Recently I read a beautiful love story about one old Thailand man. Every early morning this 86-year-old grandfather walks a long distance to his wife’s grave carrying one bowl of soup and a bamboo violin. He has been doing this for the past 30 years because he wants to play music for his dead wife. Before their marriage he made a promise to his future wife that as long as he has life, every morning she would get from him one bowl of hot soup and music of her choice.

How about your love? Is your love faithful, loyal, steadfast like his? How about your love toward God? God saved us from our terrible sins and gave us eternal life. We didn't do anything to deserve God's mercy or seek him first. Rather we were destined to die in our sins and eventually pay the price in hell. To save us from our sins, he had to crucify his one and only son on the cross. How much God will suffer if we don't respond to such great love and grace? How heartbreaking his heart will be if we come to him just to meet basic requirements and then get on with our own life? Let us give our whole heart to God, struggle to know him and respond to his love by obeying his word. *"For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."*

Verses 7-11 describe the tragic consequence of being unwilling to repent. In the Garden of Eden, God provided everything that Adam and Eve needed. However, instead of being thankful, Adam listened to the serpent and doubted God's love. Eventually he disobeyed God's command and was kicked out of the garden. Sin makes us doubt God's goodness and provision. It makes us think that what God gives us isn't good enough and we are cheated out of everything that life has to offer. But it is not true. God gives us the best and doesn't spare us anything even his Son Jesus.

Look at verses 8 and 9. Gilead was known for its production of aromatic gums and resins used for making healing balms and ointments. However, Gilead now became a city full of wicked men and blood shedding. If we don't deal with our sin, we end up wounding people instead of healing them. Shechem was one of the cities of refuge. It was to be a place of security, safety and sanctuary. However, it now became a place of violence and sexual immorality. Recently we saw many religious and priests are repeating the sin of Shechem: sexual abuse and emotional violence carried out against vulnerable people who came to seek help.

II. "EPHRAIM IS A FLAT CAKE NOT TURNED OVER" (6:1b-7:16)

Look at 6:11b and 7:1a. *"Whenever I would restore the fortunes of my people, whenever I would heal Israel, the sins of Ephraim are exposed and the crimes of Samaria revealed."* Here we can see God's wonderful and merciful heart toward his people. First, God wanted to restore the fortunes of his people. Israel was like a priceless antique that had lost beauty and had fallen into disrepair because of neglect, abuse or misuse. But God was committed like a skilled restorer and a craftsman who can restore them to the original beauty and glory. Secondly, God was committed to healing. Israel was spiritually and morally ill. However, God wanted to be like a doctor who heals their wounded body. God wanted to show mercy to his self-destructive and sin-sick people. Finally, God wanted to expose and reveal sin. If you think about it, it sounds like bad news. No one likes to be exposed. And yet that is the only way real healing can begin. God has to tell us how bad things are before he can change and heal us.

Look at verse 7:8. *"Ephraim mixes with the nations; Ephraim is a flat cake not turned over."* Here the dough is baked only on one side; the baker never gets around to turn it over. So one side is overcooked and the other is uncooked. What does it mean that Ephraim is like a half-baked cake? The problem started with flour that is not mixed right. Instead of being mingled with the oil of the Spirit of God, Israel mixed their lives with idolatrous dependence on other power nations or with many idols such as Canaanite fertility god Baal. Their hearts were over-cooked and even burned as they pursued power, idols and sexual pleasures. However, their hearts were stone-cold toward God and paid no attention to him. How about us? In times of pressure, stress, or difficult decision-making, what do you do? Do you quietly meditate on God's word and

pray like Jesus did or you rather race around gathering human opinions and pursue your own solutions? Let's pray that we may not remain uncooked on the side of depending on the Lord to renew our strength but seek God and his wisdom faithfully.

Look at verses 7:11-13. Here Hosea says that Ephraim is like an easily deceived and senseless dove. We may have heard the term "bird-brain." Ephraim was like a silly and simple-minded bird because they were without sense and lacked spiritual discernment and the ability to make decisions. Israel abandoned their source of strength, their God. Instead they placed false hope in the great international powers -- Egypt and Assyria. Israel's kings were back and forth, allying themselves with different nations when they should have allied themselves with God.

What would be the results and consequences of their idolatry and sinful life? Look at verse 7:16. *"They do not run to the Most High; they are like a faulty bow. Their leaders will fall by the sword because of their insolent words. For this they will be ridiculed in the land of Egypt."* A faulty bow is unreliable. Its arrows miss the target and make its owner venerable in battle. Life without God is as unreliable and useless as a faulty bow. Without God's direction and help, we will be lost and powerless before sin and become an object of ridicule.

III. ISRAEL HAS FORGOTTEN HIS MAKER (8:1-14)

Let's read verse 8:1 together. *"Put the trumpet to your lips! An eagle is over the house of the Lord because the people have broken my covenant and rebelled against my law."* Here the eagle refers to Assyria coming to attack Israel and take the people into captivity. Destruction was coming to those who thought they were doing so well.

The people would call to God and ask his help, but it would be too late because they had stubbornly refused to give up their idols. The first king of the north, Jeroboam I, set up calves of worship in Bethel and Dan. Because of his bad influence, people began to worship many false idols and foreign gods. Even when they were facing destruction and judgment, they didn't want to give up their idols. We, like Israel, often call on God to solve our problems without really repenting our sins and correction our behavior. However we must repent before it is too late to avoid the painful consequences of sin.

Look at verse 8:7. *"They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind. The stalk has no head; it will produce no flour. Were it to yield grain, foreigners would swallow it up."* To harvest good crops, seeds need to be planted in good soil and given the proper proportions of sunlight, moisture, and fertilizer. A single seed can produce multiple fruit in good conditions. Israel, however, had sown its spiritual seed to the wind. Here wind represents the vain and helpless effort of Israel's idol worship. When they sought the wind and vanity of idol worship and foreign power, Israel brought upon itself a hurricane of disaster. Like Hurricane Katrina, later Assyria attacked and totally destroyed Israel that it existed no more. When we seek security in anything except God, we will end up with nothing. However, if we plant his words in our hearts and struggle to obey them, we will reap God's abundant blessings and eventually eternal life. How are you sowing your spiritual seeds? Whatever we do has consequences and we will reap what we sow.

Hosea summarizes his message in verse 8:14. *"Israel has forgotten his Maker and built palaces; Judah has fortified many towns. But I will send fire upon their cities that will consume their fortresses."* Israel had placed its confidence in military strength, strong defenses, and economic stability, just as nations do today. However, they had lost constant attention to their Creator and Lord. Without God there is no lasting security.

All those magnificent buildings that Israel and Judah built were eventually destroyed by Assyria and Babylonian army.

As you study these passages, you may be getting a little impatient with Hosea's hammering on the same message again and again. But he does it because God knows how hard it is to get through to us, how stubborn and resistant we are to truth. So he keeps coming at it from different angles and hitting it repeatedly. When we forget God, when we misplace our loyalty to him, God has to use whatever means necessary to get our attention and bring us back to a crucial relationship with him.

In this passage we learned what God wants from us. He wants us to know him and love him deeply. He wants our undivided attention and obedience rather than superficial religious activities. May God help us to love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength.

(by Caleb Lee)