

OUR FRUITFULNESS COMES FROM GOD

Hosea 13:1-14:9

Key Verse: 14:8

“O Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols? I will answer him and care for him. I am like a green pine tree; your fruitfulness comes from me.”

Today’s passage is the conclusion of the book of Hosea. Once again Hosea reminds us of the terrible consequences of the sin of idolatry. Once again he reminds of God’s great compassion and hope for his people. He urges us to return to God so that we may be truly fruitful in our lives. May God help us to accept one word of God as we study this passage!

I. THERE IS NO SAVIOR BUT GOD (13:1-16)

Look at verses 1-4. *When Ephraim spoke, men trembled; he was exalted in Israel. But he became guilty of Baal worship and died. Now they sin more and more; they make idols for themselves from their silver, cleverly fashioned images, all of them the work of craftsmen. It is said of these people, “They offer human sacrifice and kiss the calf-idols.” Therefore they will be like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears, like chaff swirling from a threshing floor, like smoke escaping through a window.* How strong was the nation Israel before she fell into idol worship? When Ephraim spoke, men trembled. When Israel worshiped God she was a powerful nation. For example, when the Israelite spies came to her house, Rahab, a prostitute living in the city of Jericho, told them the following: “I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (Jos 2:8-11).

However, by Hosea’s time, Israel was no longer strong. Politically, Assyria’s invasion of the country was imminent; it was a matter of time. So what happened to the nation? How did the chosen people become like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears? People were probably wondering themselves of this question. Political pundits probably discussed the threats coming from the nuclear arsenal or long range missiles of Assyria. But Hosea’s diagnosis of their situation was different. Look at verse 2 again. *But he became guilty of Baal worship and died. Now they sin more and more; they make idols for themselves from their silver, cleverly fashioned images, all of them the work of craftsmen.* The Israelites worshiped Baal and they died spiritually. They lost their conscience and God’s purpose for them. They began to do unthinkable things such as offering human sacrifices and kissing the calf-idols. They put their trust in the Canaanite gods of fertility and reproduction, thinking that they would prosper without God. They were like today’s people who put their trust in the material gods of our society. They set aside the God who gave them their life and all the blessings, and chase

after the things of this world and the pleasures it offers. So what happened to the Israelites when they turned to idols? They didn't become stronger. In fact, they became like the chaff that the wind blows away, like smoke escaping through a window. They had no firm foundation to stand on.

When the Prophet Hosea proclaimed Ephraim's guilt, he could hear grumbling coming from his people saying, "What has God ever done anything good for us, other than sending drought, hurricane and famine?" They were like some people today who blame God for every bad thing. At this point, God grabs the microphone from Hosea and interjected. Look at verses 4-6. *"But I am the LORD your God, [who brought you] out of Egypt. You shall acknowledge no God but me, no Savior except me. I cared for you in the desert, in the land of burning heat. When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me."* God reminded his people that he is the Savior. He brought them out of Egypt, the land of their slavery. He cared for them in the desert. He sent them manna from heaven when they were hungry. He gave them the quail meat when they complained about the protein deficiency in their diet. He gave them water when they were thirsty. He led them to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land that was flowing with milk and honey. They were satisfied. They were well fed. Then they became proud. They forgot their only Savior. They forgot God when they were satisfied in the Promised Land. It was their pride before God. Perhaps they said, "Well, we are pretty good; we deserve it."

We live in a materially abundant society. We are well fed. Our per-capita GDP is higher than that of most other countries. Sadly, many people forget God in their affluence. Many people become proud before God. It wasn't used to be like this. The Pilgrims who came to America didn't have much. But they had God in their midst. They built churches before building their own homes. God blessed America because of their faith. Now we are well fed, and many people turn their backs on God. This breaks God's heart. Let us pray for this nation not to forget God in her pride. The Bible says that "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1Pe 5:5).

In verses 7-16, God announces his punishment for the sins of Ephraim. God's punishment would be like a lion that attacks and tears apart (7-8). He would destroy them. They would seek help from their king or rulers, but help would not come (9-11). Likewise, we shouldn't expect President Bush to solve all our problems. Look at verse 12. Some people think whatever secret things they do will stay only with them, like the slogan of the city of Las Vegas ('What happens here stays here.') They bet no one will find out. But God maintains a huge database that keeps the record of all the details of our life. We should not take our sin lightly.

Ephraim, which literally means 'fruitfulness,' used to be fruitful in God (Ge 41:52). But he pursued Baal, the god of fertility, for better crops and more money. Now he would have nothing. No children. Their storehouse will be plundered (15). Their children will be dashed to the ground. Their pregnant women would be ripped open (16). These are terrible images we don't even want to think about. Everything would be lost. This would happen in 722 B.C. when a war broke out as the country would be invaded by the powerful Assyria. But God couldn't wait to express his love for his people even as he announced his punishment for their sins. As is the trademark of the book of

Hosea, God's love and compassion is expressed in the middle of his warnings and punishments. Even his most terrible punishment was intended to lead them to repentance. God longs to redeem and restore his people. Look at verse 14. *"I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?"* St. Paul quoted this verse to plant the hope of resurrection (1Co 15:55). No matter how bleak things may look, we can find hope for our future if we have the hope of resurrection and meeting our Lord Jesus in the kingdom of heaven.

II. TAKE THESE WORDS WITH YOU AND RETURN (14:1-9)

Look at verses 14:1-2. *Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: "Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips."* What does Hosea encourage sinners to do? He says we should return to the Lord our God. It means to repent our sins and follow God in his ways. Why should we do this? It is because Assyria cannot save us (3). Nor can war-horses or man-made idols. How can we return to the Lord our God? We can come to the Lord with the prayer, "Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips" (2). These are the words we must take to the Lord. This is basically what we should write in our personal testimonies.

How does God welcome us when we return to him with repentance? Look at verses 4-7. *"I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily. Like a cedar of Lebanon he will send down his roots; his young shoots will grow. His splendor will be like an olive tree, his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon. Men will dwell again in his shade. He will flourish like the grain. He will blossom like a vine, and his fame will be like the wine from Lebanon.* Only God can heal our waywardness and love us freely. God's love is like the dew that waters the lilies; he is like a great tree in whose shade his people can dwell. Lebanon was the envy of the Israelites for their fruitfulness. God promises that he would take the glory of Lebanon and give it to Israel. If we return to God and follow his ways, we will be like an olive tree, and our fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon. These are wonderful promises of God for us.

The problem is that we are just like the Israelites in Hosea's time who turned their hearts away from God and tried to find their things in some place else. They tried to rely on Assyria for their future security, as we try to rely on people and things of this world for our security. They wanted to mount war-horses, as we try to rely on ourselves or modern technology. They turned to man-made idols, as we depend on our self-made career, relationship, achievement, and so on. But these things cannot make us truly fruitful. Let us read verse 8 together. *"O Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols? I will answer him and care for him. I am like a green pine tree; your fruitfulness comes from me."* Fruitfulness comes from God. God is the source of the blossoming. We can come to him for our fruitfulness.

Our fruitfulness comes from God. Jesus elaborates this important truth in John 15. Specifically he says, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me*

and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). Why can we do nothing apart from Jesus? Why can't we bear fruit apart from Jesus? Some people do try to bear fruit in this world without Jesus. They work hard to make money and to advance their education and career. But no accomplishment in this world will matter for them in the end if they still remain in sin and condemnation. In the end, they will end up with the fruit of sin and eternal death. We must realize that we cannot bear good fruit apart from Jesus.

Why is fruit bearing so important? By bearing fruit in Jesus, we can glorify God. Our greatness is measured not by our human achievements or material possessions but by our spiritual fruit. When we bear fruit, we can show ourselves to be his disciples. We human beings are like fruit trees. We should bear much fruit, as God blessed us when he created us in his own image and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number.”

What kind of fruit does God want us to bear? 1 John 4:16 says, “God is love.” Therefore, the children of God must bear the fruit of love. We can say that winning souls for the Lord by sharing the word of God with others is certainly one way to bear fruit before God. In Galatians 5, the Apostle Paul says that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (5:22-23). On the other hand, the fruit of a sinful person includes sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. Paul warns us that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (5:19-21).

We can learn an important lesson about fruit-bearing life from Abraham and Lot. Abraham took God at his word and struggled to the end to abide in his word of promise. Because of his faith, Abraham became a source of blessing for all of us. His nephew, Lot, also began his life of faith with Abraham. However, he believed in God in his own way. He believed in God, but at the same time he could not shake off his sinful desires for this world. His family--his wife, his two daughters and their fiancés--learned from him only situation ethics. Lot's compromising life bore tragic fruit. Some people may say, “I live my own life my way. Don't bother me; and I won't bother you.” But we don't live in our own island. Our lives are intertwined. We are like the branches of a vine. One person's life can have a great influence on others. We must help one another to bear spiritual fruit by returning to God. Abraham did so by holding on to God's promises.

Look at verse 9. *Who is wise? He will realize these things. Who is discerning? He will understand them. The ways of the LORD are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.* This is Hosea's conclusion. The wise man is the one who realizes that repentance is the way of life. He discerns that the way of the Lord is right, and leaves the path of rebellion in order to walk in God's ways. There are only two kinds of people--the walkers and the stumblers. Who do we want to be? Let us pray that God may help us to have a right relationship with God and walk in the ways of the Lord. May God help us to return to him and be fruitful in the coming fall semester! Let us read the key verse once again. *“O Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols? I will answer him and care for him. I am like a green pine tree; your fruitfulness comes from me.”*