

'God's Restorative Justice'

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Date: 04 October 2026

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[0:00] Well, in the legal world, there is a type of justice called restorative justice, which seeks to repair and heal the harm done. In other words, to restore the relationship. At least that's how I understand it. Are there any lawyers in the room who can tell me? No, you're not going to put up your hands anyway, are you? That's okay. But one legal scholar says that this can be actually done through punishment. And so punishment is not just about bringing justice against the perpetrator and for the victim. It also has the purpose of restoring relationship as well. It's kind of what parents or grandparents, aunts and uncles do when they punish a child, isn't it? You know, they do it because the child does wrong, yes, but also in order to teach and help the child grow up for their good.

It's kind of what we call tough love. It kind of reminds me of an online advice column where written by a mother called Abby, who spoke about the need to show tough love for children's good, to help them learn and grow and, you know, restore relationship and so on. And a grandmother responded to her advice column writing, Dear Abby, I have taken your advice about the need to show tough love to misbehaving grandchildren. My grandson's parents do not allow me to smack him when he misbehaves.

And so now I just take him for a drive instead and he behaves better after that. I've enclosed a picture demonstrating my technique. And then she finishes her letter, Yours Sincerely, Tough Love Gran.

Now, I'm not sure that's the kind of tough love that we're to employ, nor the kind of tough love that God shows Israel in our passage today, but he does actually show some quite tough love to his people.

But again, it's not just to show justice for their sin. It's also to that they might restore their relationship with him. It's restorative justice. And I've started with this because it's the language of the courtroom, which is what we see in chapters four and five of Hosea. In chapters four and five, we're brought into the courtroom where God presents his charges against the people. And so we see it with language like verse one, the Lord has a charge to bring against you. Verse four, let no one bring a charge, but God has a charge for the priests. Even chapter five, verse one, where the word judgment or justice is used, but in the sense of this is God's verdict for their charges or because of their sin against him. And so God is like a prosecutor in these chapters and not just a prosecutor, he's also the judge of the courtroom because we'll also see him declare punishment for his people too. And yet this punishment has a twofold purpose. Yes, to bring justice for sin, but also to restore relationship with him because he loves them. But it begins with his charge of serious sin against all of them. Point one, verse one and two of chapter four. And so we miss this in our reading. So let me read it to you.

[3:22] Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land. And what is the charge? Well, there is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. There's only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery. They break all bounds and bloodshed follows bloodshed. It's a pretty depressing picture, isn't it? But here is the charge against the people.

And notice it begins with their relationship or lack of with God in verse one. There is no faithfulness to God, no love for God, no acknowledgement of God. These are all relational terms.

In fact, the last one summarizes all of them. The word acknowledge there is really about a relationship that is knowing God personally. The word acknowledgement is literally knowing, but they're forsaken knowing God as their one and only God in order to have other gods in their lives. And so they've walked away from that exclusive relationship with God, like a spouse walks away from their partner, which means they no longer love God nor are faithful to God. And when

you walk away from knowing God as your only God, then you also walk away from obeying God, which is why verse one leads to verse two, where there's all sorts of bad behavior towards people. You see, the vertical often leads to the horizontal, doesn't it? Which is why when people walk away from God, it lands them in all sorts of bad behavior because they're no longer following God's ways. I suspect we're seeing that here in Australia.

And not only does no knowing God, no relationship with God lead to bad things between people, it also impacts the land, verse three. It says, because of this, the land literally mourns and all who live in it waste away. The beasts of the field, the birds of the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away. And we see this in our world too, most clearly with war. You know, in war, bloodshed follows bloodshed. And in the process, the land is impacted, isn't it? There's all these environmental costs of war, from deforestation to water pollution to soil contamination to air pollution. How many places in our world have been ruined by war? I mean, just think of the Middle East, beautiful, but ruined. And so this charge is for serious sin, which starts with the people forsaking their knowledge of him, such that they no longer love God nor are faithful to God, including no longer obeying God.

[6:21] And it's not just the people, it's also the priests that God has a charge against in verse four. Verse four in the original Hebrew is quite difficult, but I think a slightly better translation is on the screen. Verse four, yet let no one charge, let no one accuse, for with you, O priest, is my charge. In other words, no one has the right to bring charges or accused because they are guilty themselves, but God has that right. And now his charge is with the priest, singular, probably the high priest at this point. And what is God's charge? Well, verse five and six, you stumble day and night and the prophets stumble with you. So I will destroy your mother, which is Israel. My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priest. Because you have ignored the law of your God, I will also ignore your children. You see, God's people will be judged and destroyed because of a lack of true knowledge of God, that knows God personally and follows God exclusively. But whose job was it to teach the people and to encourage the people to know God rightly? What was the prophets and the priests and the high priest in particular?

But because he himself has forsaken his own knowledge of God and failed to teach the people the law of God, God, then the people don't repent and sadly will face destruction instead. And so God will reject him as high priest, along with his children who are the other priests. This reminds us that those who lead and teach at church, whether pastors and ministers or Bible study leaders, whether kids and youth leaders, even those who teach children at home, we need to make sure that we teach God's word as faithfully as we can. Because it's God's word that helps us to know God personally and to live God's way.

It's why the biggest part of our church service is reading God's word and hearing it explained. But the high priest back then didn't do this and neither did his other priests. Instead, verse 7, the more priests there were, the more they sinned against me. They exchanged their glorious God for something disgraceful. They feed on the sins of my people and relish in their wickedness.

Here, the priests literally feed on the sins of the people for their own benefit. You see, the people would make a sacrifice for sin using animals or grain and the priests got a portion of most of those sacrifices, you know, a nice bit of steak and some bread. And so it seems the priests effectively said, oh, don't worry about worshipping other gods or sinning like that. Just offer some more sacrifices and you'll be right. And of course, the more sacrifices they offered for sin, the more steaks and bread the priests got. They literally fed off the people's sin for their own benefit.

But like the people, this all started with them forsaking knowing God as their only God, such that they no longer love God nor are faithful to God. And yet this charge is not just for the people and priests, it's also for the royal house or princes, if you like. And so we'll just skip over to chapter five, verse one, where we read, hear this, you priests, pay attention, you Israelites, listen, royal house. This judgment is against you. God's judgment or justice is against not only the priests and people, but also the royal house, the kings and the princes. In other words, his charge is against all of Israel, which is made clear by the following verses in verses two to seven, where he talks about Israel and Ephraim, Ephraim being another name for Israel because Ephraim was the biggest tribe in Israel. And notice in verse three, God knows all about them.

[10:38] All their sin is not hidden from him, which at the end of verse four at the bottom of the screen there includes no acknowledgement of the Lord. That is no literally knowing God as their only God, because they're worshipping other ones as well. But verse five, they arrogantly think that

this doesn't matter. And they've even led the southern kingdom of Judah astray to do the same.

In fact, in verse six, they go with their flocks and herds to seek the Lord, but he's already withdrawn from them. And yet they arrogantly think their sacrifices will still be accepted by him.

On the one hand, even though verse seven, they are unfaithful to him. On the other hand, it's delusional arrogance, kind of like a husband who cheats on his wife with another woman and then expects his wife not to batter an eyelid. What kind of delusional arrogance is that?

You see, our relationship with God really does matter. It's supposed to be the most important relationship in our lives. Our one and only God whom we love with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, which actually helps us to live rightly towards others. The loving God with all our heart means obeying God, including loving our neighbor as ourselves. You see, there is a logic to those two great commandments. The first, the vertical leads to the second, the horizontal.

But we often put other relationships or other things above God in our lives or even equal to God, such that he is no longer the one and only God. Whether that's things like family or money or friends or sport or comfort or health. But in the end, it's to forsake God as, well, God.

[12:38] The one who ought to be number one in our lives. There's an old movie called The Highlander and its big theme is there can be only one. And if you've got no idea about this movie, you'll still get the point.

There can be only one God by definition. God means the top, right? There can be only one, like only one driver's seat in your car. And God is meant to be in it, steering and directing our lives for our good. And so to put others above God or even equal to God is actually to forsake God as our one and only. And this is what Israel has done. And this was all of them from people to priests to princes.

And so God will punish all them. Point to verse eight. We read this before, so I don't have time to reread it again. But basically in verse eight, it's an alarm bell ringing, a trumpet, a horn, a battle cry, all referring to a call to arms because an attack is imminent. It's like a collision alarm that sounds in a submarine or a ship, you know, brace for impact. And this imminent impact is God's punishment, which verse nine is certain. It says, Ephraim will be laid waste on the day of reckoning among the tribes of Israel. I'll proclaim what is certain. And even Judah, we're told in verse 10, will have God's wrath poured out on them like a flood of water. In fact, part of God's punishment had even started to try and cause them to wake up and repent. Back in chapter five, verse six, we're told that God has already withdrawn from him. So when they come to seek him at the temple, it's too late. He's not there.

And in verse 11 and 12 of chapter five, it talks about present tense judgment. Ephraim is now oppressed, trampled in judgment. God is now like a moth to Ephraim and like rot to the people of Judah.

And yet, do they turn back to God in repentance and go, okay, we better get our act together? No, no. In verse 13, when they see their sickness and their sores, they don't turn to God. They turn to Assyria, which just happens to be the very nation that will end up destroying them.

[15:13] As such is their folly. And so God continues in chapter five by saying that they are not, that Assyria is not able to heal or kill them. Why? Well, verse 14, because he will, God will be like a lion to Ephraim, like a great lion to Judah. He will tear them to pieces and go away. He will carry them off with no one to rescue them. Then he will return to his lair until they have borne their guilt and seek his face. In their misery, they will earnestly seek him. Now, this may seem severe to us. I mean, God calling himself a lion who will tear them to pieces is pretty full on language, isn't it?

But we need to remember three things here. At first, this is just punishment for serious sin. And we get little glimpse of this throughout chapters four and five. Like in chapter four, with some verses we missed over before. In verse eight, they feed on the sins of the people, which we talked about. And so verse nine, God says, well, this is what's going to happen. Like people like priests, I will punish both of them for their ways and repay them for their deeds. The idea of repayment is something that is deserved. And we see it immediately in verse 10, where they will eat, but not have enough. And so the sin was abusing the sacrifices to get more food. Well, the punishment will be eating that food, but never having enough, never being satisfied.

You see how the punishment fits the crime here? It's fair. It's just. Or in the rest of verse 10 and 11, it talks about how they engage with temple prostitutes. And so they won't flourish or multiply in terms of having children. You see, since the sin is abusing God's gift of sex, then the punishment is not receiving one good thing that comes from sex, namely children. You see, this punishment fits

the crime. It's fair or just. Or even in verse 12, which we skipped over before, where they consult wooden idols and diviner's rods and are unfaithful to God. Verse 13, they sacrifice on mountains and burn offerings and so on. And because they're engaging with other religions, therefore, well, that forsaking God, that vertical leads to something really terrible. Therefore, your daughters turn to prostitution and your daughters-in-law to adultery. They become like temple prostitutes, literally. Their physical prostitution leads to, sorry, their spiritual prostitution leads to physical one. But here's the thing. In verse 14, God says, I will not punish your daughters when they turn to prostitution, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery. Why?

Well, because the men themselves have done it and have set them a bad example. And so it's these other unmarried men who will not be able to flourish and have children. You see, God's punishment is just and fair. He doesn't punish the daughters who have been led astray. He punishes those who have done the leading astray. And if this still seems too harsh for all us, then perhaps it's because we've forgotten how serious it is to commit spiritual prostitution with other gods. You know, to love the things of this world above God, such that we forsake our exclusive relationship with God. I don't know what you think the worst crime in the world would be. In our house, it's one sister wearing the clothes of another sister without asking. That can lead to World War III. But more seriously, perhaps you would say it's murder or child prostitution or Israel were doing both. And yet, whether we realize it or not, what was worse, what led to all of that was forsaking their relationship with God, effectively cheating on God with other gods when God was the one who made them and saved them and was to be their one and only God. This sin was serious. And so we're first to remember that this is just punishment for serious sin. And second, we're to remember that this is necessary punishment for stubborn sin. You see, it's been over 150 years where God has sent prophet after prophet after prophet and still no change, no repentance, just persistence in sin. In fact, in chapter 4, verse 15, the next verse, it talks about how the Jews not to become guilty like Israel, not to follow in their footsteps.

And then there's an indictment of Israel who is stubborn. Verse 16, the Israelites are stubborn like a stubborn heifer. How then can the Lord pasture them like lambs in the meadow? Ephraim or Israel is joined to their idols. Even verse 18, when their drinks are gone, they continue their prostitution and their rulers dearly love shameful ways. Do you see how stubborn they are?

[20 : 20] And so God is left with no other option but to completely punish them. It was necessary punishment for stubborn sin. And yet the third thing we're to remember is that this was also purposeful punishment.

It was not just to bring justice, but restoration. It was restorative justice. And so in chapter 5, verse 2, God talks about disciplining them. And when you discipline someone, there is punishment, yes. It's also meant to teach and train them for their good, isn't it? It's tough love. And in chapter 5, verse 15, which is how our passage ends, it has the same hope that this punishment will lead to restoration, that God will return to his lair until they have borne their guilt and seek his face. And in fact, in their misery, they will turn to him and earnestly seek him. There will be restoration. The point is this punishment had a purpose. It's God's restorative justice. Yes, it's tough because sin is serious and stubborn, but it's also love because he's seeking their good and restoration. And so what about us?

Well, the bad news is that God's charge is similar. We may not have done the exact same things as Israel, like murder. At least I hope not. But we have all loved other things above God, haven't we? Whether family or money, friends or sport, comfort or health, they've become more important to us than God. And by doing so, we've turned away from God, being our only God. In the words of Romans 3, as it is written, there is no one righteous, not even one, no one who understands, no one who seeks God, all have turned away. And as we saw, this kind of sin deserves punishment. That's justice.

But the good news is, as you know, God has taken it for us through his son, Jesus, so that we can be restored. Romans 3 goes on to say, God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time so as to be just, but one who brings justice for sin, rightly so as the judge, yes, but also one who justifies or restores those who have faith in Christ. Here is God's restorative justice for us, you see. For us, though, who have faith in Jesus, and so do you. Do you have faith in Jesus? There is no other name that saves, no other one who atones, no other way for there to be both justice for sin and restoration for us. For us, do we continue to follow God faithfully above all others

in our life as the one and only God of our lives? That was the big sin for Israel, remember, forsaking God as the one and only God, which meant being unfaithful to God. And while there are lots of things that might help us follow God exclusively and faithfully, like meeting with God's people, reading God's word, relying on God's spirit in prayer, there are two things from this passage that are worth considering. First, when we suffer, it's worth considering if this is God's discipline for us, for some unrepentant sin that's preventing us from faithfully following him.

[24:00] You see, we always have forgiveness because of Jesus, yet God still may sometimes discipline us, you know, show us some tough love, like he did with Israel, to wake us up from persistent sins so that we won't end up walking away from him. And we saw this in our second reading, where the Corinthians were sinning against each other. Back then, it was with the Lord's Supper, which was a whole meal, but some didn't wait. Some of the church didn't wait for others to get off work. Instead, verse 21, then they're eating. Some of you go ahead of your own, with your own private suppers. And as a result, the person has to work late and turns up late, remains hungry. Another one gets drunk, he says.

This ought not be the case. And in fact, they're humiliating those who come later and have nothing. They're humiliating the body of Christ. And so he goes on to say, those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ, which is actually the church, one another, those who come late, eat and drink judgment on themselves.

And here's the tough love. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and a number of you have fallen asleep, which means died. That's some pretty tough love, isn't it? And yet, it ends by saying, nevertheless, when we are judged this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

The point is, God sometimes uses our suffering or hardship as a form of discipline. But let me be clear, and please do hear, this is important, most of our suffering will come because we live in a fallen world.

But sometimes, just sometimes, it might just be God's discipline to us for some unrepentant sin. And so when we suffer, it's worth at least asking ourselves, is there some unrepentant sin in my life that God's trying to wake me up to, that I might repent from it and more faithfully follow him?

[26:06] That will help us to follow him more faithfully. And the second thing that's worth remembering is the big idea of God's restorative justice for us in Christ. We do remember how serious our sin is and how unworthy we are.

I mean, if it wasn't that serious, do you really think God would send his son, Jesus, to die for us? Don't you think he would get, oh, don't even worry about it yet. Look, you can ignore me and be unfaithful to me.

We'll just, you know, sweep it under the carpet. No big drama. No big drama. But he sent Jesus to pay for it. That's how serious it is. That's how unworthy we are. And yet at the same time, God's love is seen in Christ, that he would give his only son for us to die in our place.

What other God has done that? We're to remember these two aspects of God's restorative justice for us in Christ, that we might be encouraged and motivated to live more faithfully for him.

In fact, it's these two aspects that John Newton famously said, although my memory is fading, I remember two things very clearly. I am a great sinner and Christ is a great saviour.

[27:20] And so when we suffer, perhaps consider if this is God's discipline to us, but even if not, remember those two aspects of God's restorative justice, that we might not follow Israel's sin, but more faithfully follow him.

Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you so much for your restorative justice towards us in Christ, that through Jesus there is justice for our sin, but also restoration with you through him. And so Father, help us to remember these great truths that we are great sinners, and yet Christ is a great saviour, that we might joyfully and more faithfully follow you. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.