

'God's Restorative Justice

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[0:00] Well, as Harry mentioned, we're continuing our series through the book of Hosea, and we're up to chapters 4 and 5 today. But let me start with a phrase that's used in the legal world, as I understand it, called restorative justice, which seeks to repair and heal the harm done.

In other words, restore relationship. I'm sure that the lawyers in the room might be able to correct me later. Are there any lawyers in the room? You're not going to put up your hands, are you? But anyway, one legal scholar says this can be done through punishment.

And so that punishment is not just about bringing justice for the victim, but it's also about bringing restoration for the perpetrator. So it has this twofold kind of purpose.

And it is kind of like what Michelle was saying happens with parents and grandparents or uncles and aunts when kids do the wrong thing. Their kids are punished because it's wrong, yes.

But there's another purpose, isn't it? It's to teach and train for their good. It's what we call tough love, isn't it? Which reminds me of an online advice column written by a mother called Abby who spoke about this need for tough love with kids.

[1:13] And a grandmother responded to Abby by writing this. 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 the picture demonstrating my technique. And then she finishes the letter, your sincerely tough love, Gran.

I'm not sure that's the kind of tough love that we're supposed to show, just for the record, nor the type that God shows Israel today. But he does actually show some pretty tough love in our chapters.

But he does that because he loves them. It's actually restorative justice. And the reason I'm starting with restorative justice is because chapters 4 and 5 actually bring us into the courtroom where God is the prosecutor and the judge.

And we see this like the way the word charge is repeated in verse 1. The Lord has a charge to bring. Verse 4, there's a charge. No one else can bring a charge except God, but he has one for the priests.

[2:23] Even chapter 5, verse 1, where it talks about this judgment or justice is against you. It's in terms of God's verdict because he has charged them or will go on to charge them with sin.

But he's not just the prosecutor. He's also the judge. And so we'll see him announce punishment too. And yet that punishment has that twofold purpose. Both to bring justice for sin, yes, but restoration for his people because he still loves them.

And so let's begin with his charge against all of them, point 1 and verse 1 of chapter 4. So come back to chapter 4, which we haven't read. So let me read it to you. Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land.

And so what is this charge? Well, there is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. There is any cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery.

They break all bounds and bloodshed follows bloodshed. It's not a pretty picture, is it? And so he begins, though, verse 1 with a charge. It all begins with that forsaking God.

[3:35] In fact, they're forsaking their relationship with God as the only God. The terms, no faithfulness to God, no love for God, no acknowledgement of God, they're all relational terms.

And in fact, the last one summarizes all of them. The word acknowledgement at the end of verse 1 there is literally knowledge of God. There's no knowledge of God in terms of knowing him personally.

They're forsaken knowing God as their one and only God, and instead chased after other gods as well. And so they've walked away from their exclusive relationship with God.

Like a spouse might sadly walk away from their exclusive relationship with their partner. Which means they no longer love God, nor are faithful to God.

But it all flows out of no longer knowing God as their one and only God. And when you walk away from knowing God as your only God, then you also walk away from his way of living, from obeying him.

[4:37] Which leads to verse 2, and all the sorts of bad behavior we see. You see, the vertical often has implications for the horizontal. How we treat God often impacts how we treat others, isn't it?

And that bad behavior then in turn impacts the land. Verse 3 literally says, Because of this the land 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. You see, the behavior that stems from forsaking God even impacts the environment.

And we can see this in our world, can't we? I mean, most clearly with war. There's all sorts of environmental costs of war, aren't there? From deforestation, to water pollution, to soil contamination, to air pollution.

How many places in our world have been ruined by war? And so this charge is for serious sin. Which all starts with the people forsaking their knowledge of him.

[5:45] Such that they no longer love God above all other gods. And no longer are faithful to God as their only God. And no longer obey God.

And yet it's not just the people, it's also the priests, verse 4. Verse 4 in the original Hebrew language is very difficult, but I think a better translation is on the screen. That says, 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 charge others because they're just as guilty. But God can. And now his charge is with his priest.

Singular. And so what is this charge? Well, verse 5. You stumble day and night and the prophets stumble with you. So I will destroy your mother, that is Israel. My people are destroyed from a lack of knowledge.

Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests, should be singular. Because you have ignored the law of your God, I will also ignore your children who are the other priests.

[6:48] You see, God's people will be judged and destroyed because of a lack of true knowledge of God. You know, that knows God personally and follows God exclusively.

But whose job was it to teach the people that? To encourage them to have only God? You know, to obey the first commandment, you should have no other gods but me. Or was it the prophets and the priests?

And particularly the high priest. But because he himself, the high priest, has forsaken his own knowledge of God and failed to teach the people the law of God, then the people don't repent. But will sadly face destruction instead. And God will reject him as high priest along with his children who are the other priests. This reminds us that all who teach the Bible, whether at church or in the home or wherever it is, we need to do our best to teach it faithfully.

Because it's by God's word that we get to know God personally. And are encouraged to live God's way, which is good for us. That's why the biggest part of our church service is reading the Bible and hearing it explained.

[7:57] But the high priest back then didn't do this. And neither did the 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 fed on the sins of my people and relished in their wickedness. Here in verse 8, where it says, They feed on the sins of my people. It's probably literally feeding on the sins of their people for their benefit.

You see, the people would make a sacrifice for sin with animals or grain offerings. And the priests got a portion of most of those sacrifices.

So they got some really nice steak and some, you know, baker's delight bread or something like that. And so it seems the priests effectively said, Look, don't worry about sinning and worshipping the other gods, guys.

Just make some more sacrifices to Yahweh, to this God, and you'll be right. Of course, more sacrifices meant more portions, more steak, more bread.

[8:55] And so they literally fed off the people's sin for their own benefit. But like the people, this started with forsaking knowing God as their only God, which meant they no longer loved God, nor were faithful to God.

But this charge is not just for the people and the priests. It's also for the royal house or the princes. So we'll jump across to chapter 5, verse 1, which we heard before, where we read, Hear this, you priests.

Pay attention, you people, Israelites. And also, listen, royal house. This judgment, this verdict is against God. You. And then he goes on to capture all of Israel.

I mean, if you've got people, priests, and princes, I mean, that's everyone, isn't it? And so that's what we see in the following verses, where Israel is also called Ephraim, after the largest tribe, Ephraim, in the northern kingdom of Israel.

And so they mean the same thing. So verse 2, God knows all about them and all about their sin, which at the end of verse 4 includes the fact that they do not, again, acknowledge the Lord.

[10:14] What's more, verse 5, they are arrogant about it. They arrogantly think it's okay and even lead Judah, the southern kingdom, astray.

Judah stumbles with them. And we see their arrogance in verse 6, while they go with their flocks and herds to still seek the Lord. So they still go to God's temple sometimes, as well as the other temples, thinking that, you know, it's just business as usual.

Not realizing that God has withdrawn, because, verse 7, they are unfaithful to him. And yet they arrogantly think it's all okay. It's kind of like a husband who cheats on his wife with another woman, and then expects his wife just not to bat an eyelid, not to care at all.

I mean, it's delusional arrogance, isn't it? And it reminds us, though, that our relationship with God really does matter. It's supposed to be the most important relationship we have in our lives.

Our one and only God, whom we are to love with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, which in turn then helps us to love our neighbor as ourself. Because as we love God, we'll obey God, including his commands to love our neighbor as ourself.

[11:30] You see, the two great commandments, there's a logic to it. The second flows from the first. But we often instead put other relationships above God, or put other things equal to God, such that he is no longer our one and only God.

Whether those things are family or money, friends or sport, comfort or health, you know, not willing to give up a bit of our comfort. But in the end, that's to forsake God as, well, God.

The one who ought to be number one in our lives. The one who, by definition, ought to be number one. It's kind of like that old Highlander movie. I don't know if you've seen this one. The theme is, there can be only one.

And if you have no idea what the movie is about, you can still get the point. There can be only one true God, by definition. It's like there's only one driver's seat in the car, and God is meant to be the one sitting in it.

Driving, steering, directing our lives for our good. And so to love or put others above God, or even equal to God, is to no longer treat him as our one and only God.

[12:43] And this is what Israel had done. And this was all of them, from people to priests to princes. And so, sadly, God will punish them. Point to verse 8. We heard this read before, so I won't reread it again.

But in verse 8, there's a battle cry for an imminent attack. There's the trumpet, the horn, the battle cry. It's kind of like the collision alarms that you might hear on a submarine or a ship.

You know, brace for impact, because it's imminent. Well, this imminent impact is God's punishment. Which also, verse 9, is certain.

Now, Ephraim will be laid waste on the day of reckoning. Among the tribes of Judah, I will, sorry, I proclaim what is certain. So also for the southern kingdom of Judah, down the bottom of the screen, I will pour out my wrath on them like a flood of water, because they have followed Israel's footsteps. In fact, part of God's punishment has even started to try and cause them to repent. Back in verse 6, he's already withdrawn himself, past tense. And then in verse 11, the next couple of verses, it's present.

[13:53] It's happening now. Ephraim is, right now, oppressed, trampled in judgment, intent on pursuing idols. I am, like now, like a moth to Ephraim, like rot to the people of Judah.

And yet, do they, you don't listen to the wake-up call? Do they turn back to God and say sorry?

Well, verse 13, when Ephraim saw its sickness and Judah his sores, then Ephraim turned to Assyria and said to the great king for help, but he's not able to help.

Which is madness, isn't it? And the irony is that Assyria are the very ones who will end up destroying Israel.

And so it continues. Here is pretty severe language, isn't it?

I mean, God calling himself a lion who will tear them to pieces sounds pretty harsh, doesn't it? And so we need to remember three things about this punishment.

[15:18] First, it is just punishment for serious sin. And we get a glimpse of this justice throughout, in different parts. And so I'll have to skip around a bit, I'm sorry. But so, for example, back in chapter 4, where the priests feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness, the next verse, which we didn't look at, says, and it will be like people like priests, I will punish both of them for their ways and repay them for their deeds.

The idea of repaying is giving someone what they deserve. And here, verse 10, they will eat but not have enough. And so the sin was, you know, abusing the sacrificial system so that they could get more steak and bread.

And so the punishment is, well, yeah, you'll eat, but you'll never have enough. You'll never be satisfied. Notice how the punishment kind of fits the crime. It's fair. It's just. Or we get this idea as well in the next bit where they engage in prostitution, but the punishment is they will not flourish with children.

And so, again, the sin is abusing God's gift of sex. And so the punishment will be not having one good thing that comes from sex, that is children. The punishment fits the crime.

Or verse 12, they consult wooden idols and diviner's rods and do all these things in verse 13.

[16:41] And as a result, their own daughters down the bottom turned to prostitution and your daughters-in-law to adultery. But 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 that and led them astray. And so here we see God even taking into account people's situation and holding those who are responsible accountable.

This punishment is just and fair, you see. And if this all still seems too much for us, too harsh, then perhaps it's because we've forgotten how serious it is to commit spiritual prostitution with other gods, 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 without asking. That can lead to World War III. But more seriously, perhaps you'd say it's murder or child prostitution.

Well, Israel were doing both. And yet, whether we realise it or not, what was worse, what led to those things was them forsaking God.

[18:01] Yet cheating on God with other gods when he was the one who made them and saved them. This sin really was serious. And so we're to remember, firstly, that this is just punishment for serious sin.

And second, it is necessary punishment for stubborn sin. You see, it's been over 150 years by this point, and God has sent prophet after prophet after prophet, and they still stubbornly refuse to repent.

And we get a sense of this in chapter 4, verses 15 and 19. It's a bit of a warning to Judah not to become guilty like them. But it goes on to describe what Israel is like.

Israelites are stubborn, like a stubborn heifer. How then can the Lord pasture them like lambs in a meadow? Ephraim is drawing to idols. Leave him alone. Even when their drinks are gone, they continue their prostitution.

Their rulers dearly love shameful ways. You see, their sin was so stubborn that God is left with no other option but to completely punish them.

[19:07] It's necessary punishment for stubborn sin. And yet, thirdly, we're to remember that it was purposeful punishment. It was not just to bring justice for sin, but restoration to them.

It was restorative justice. And so in chapter 5, verse 2, we get this word that's almost a throwaway. I will discipline all of them. But the idea of discipline is, yes, it involves punishment, but it's also meant to train and teach for good.

And the whole passage, the whole two chapters, ends with this same hope that punishment will lead to restoration. Then I'll return to my lair, says God, until they have borne their guilt and seek my face.

And in fact, in their misery, they will earnestly this time seek him. There will be restoration. The point is, this punishment had a purpose.

It was God's restorative justice. Yes, tough because it was serious and stubborn sin, but also love because he was seeking to restore them.

[20 : 14] And what about us? Well, I guess the bad news is, God's charge is similar. We may not have done exactly the same things as Israel did, like murder, but we've all loved other things above God.

You know, whether it's our family or money, whether it's friends or sport or our comfort or health. And by doing so, we've all turned from God, being our only God.

The New Testament puts it like this in Romans 3. There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away.

And as we saw, this is serious sin that deserves serious judgment. And yet the good news is, God has taken it for us through his son, Jesus.

And so 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. And he did this to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time.

[21 : 15] So as to be the one who is just, yes, who punishes sin justly. But also the one who restores, justifies those who have faith in him.

And so I guess the first question for us this morning is, do we 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.

Do you have faith in Jesus? And for us who do, then do we continue to follow God faithfully above all others in our life?

Other relationships, other things. Is he the one and only God of our lives? Remember, that was a big sin for Israel, forsaking God as their one and only God, which meant they were unfaithful to him. And there are lots of things that might help us to follow God more faithfully and exclusively, like meeting with God's people or reading God's word or relying God's spirit through prayer.

[22 : 24] But there are two things that I wonder if worth pointing out from our passage. And the first is that when we suffer, perhaps consider if this is God's discipline for us.

That is a discipline for perhaps some unrepentant sin that is preventing us from being faithful to him. You see, we always have forgiveness because of Jesus.

And yet the Bible teaches that God may sometimes still discipline us, show tough love towards us, like he did with Israel, to wake us up from some persistent sin in our lives so that we can more faithfully follow him.

And that's what we saw in our second passage. In our second reading, the Corinthians were sinning against each other. Back then the Lord's Supper was a whole meal, but they didn't wait for each other.

When they were eating, some went ahead with their own private suppers. And as a result, one person remains hungry who came later after work and another person gets drunk. And so they're despising those who have nothing in the church.

[23 : 34] And because of that, those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ, that is without thinking about those in the church who come later and don't have much, well, by doing that, they drink judgment on themselves.

And what is this judgment? Verse 30, well, many of you are weak and ill and some of you have died. That's what fallen asleep means there, died. That's pretty tough love, isn't it?

But again, the purpose is being disciplined so that they will not finally be condemned with the world. The point is God may sometimes use our suffering or hardship as a form of discipline.

But let me be clear, and please make sure you hear, that most of our suffering in this world is because we live in a fallen world, right?

