

The Accused

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[0 : 0 0] Please be seated. I encourage you to turn again in the Pew Bibles to page 732 to Hosea chapter 4.

This is the third of our six sermons on the prophet Hosea. And let's pray as we begin. Our great God and Father, we pray that your powerful word will penetrate to the depths of our heart, be written there by your powerful spirit, and change us to be faithful and loving and loyal to you, knowing you as our Saviour and Lord.

Amen. What do you think in the world is the most dangerous thing? The most dangerous thing in the world.

Some might say that it's nuclear sites in North Korea. Some might say that it's climate change. Martin Luther King said, nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance.

Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance. To be ignorant of one's ignorance is the malady of the ignorant.

[1 : 3 0] Said somebody else. If you can get your head around that on a Sunday morning, you're doing well. To be ignorant of one's ignorance. And that actually is, in a sense, an exposition of what ignorance is.

Sometimes we are aware that we're ignorant, but even worse and maybe more dangerous, is when we are ignorant of our ignorance. Often our world tends to operate as though ignorance is bliss.

That being ignorant of all sorts of things just means that we can enjoy life and not have too many cares and worries. But in fact, ignorance is not bliss. Ignorance is lethal and, I think as Martin Luther King rightly said, in fact, very dangerous.

Consider our own justice system. Imagine that you are facing, in court, the charge of murder. And you, in your ignorance, think, oh, that's all right.

I didn't know that murder was a crime. And so you say to the judge, judge, you can excuse me, I didn't realise that murder was a crime. I did it out of ignorance. If I'd known that it was a crime that I would go to jail for, I wouldn't have done it.

[2 : 3 9] So please excuse my ignorance. I can go free. Well, we know you can't. You can't plead ignorance if you are caught speeding and you didn't see the speed limit.

You can't plead ignorance if you arrive in Singapore laden with drugs, for example. Ignorance is no excuse in the eyes of our law, even more so with God.

Ignorance is not bliss, but dangerous. Ignorance with God is no excuse. The opening of Hosea 4 envisages a court situation, where God is laying the charges.

He's the prosecutor speaking or accusing Israel, his own people, of a variety of things. For the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.

And here is his three point summary. There is no faithfulness, no loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land.

[3 : 43] We've seen especially the first two over the last two weeks. No faithfulness and no loyalty. Literally the word loyalty is steadfast love. That is in their relationship with God, who has redeemed them and brought them into his promised land.

They are not faithful and they are not loving. In fact, they are going after the other gods, the gods of the Canaanites, committing at least spiritual adultery, if not physically as well.

The third part of the accusation is, there is no knowledge of God in the land. That is, they are ignorant. And as we'll see in this passage today, they are ignorant of their ignorance.

And that is a terrible place to be. Their relationship with God has broken down completely. No knowledge of God.

Not simply head knowledge, although that's certainly part of it. But no relational knowledge with God either. They do not know God.

[4 : 50] And literally their ignorance is ignoring God. It's not that ignorance is an excuse for them. It is not. They've been given God's word in the past.

The first few books of the Old Testament, they would have known or should have known. The books of Moses and probably, I would say, the books of Joshua, Judges and Samuel at least. But it seems that they are completely ignorant of those books, that word of God, and therefore ignorant of God himself, and not in a relationship with him.

That ignorance is demonstrated, not by a mental ignorance only. It's not simply about head knowledge. It's demonstrated by immorality.

As verse 2 of chapter 4 tells us, swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing, and adultery break out, bloodshed follows bloodshed.

Do those things sound familiar? In a sense they ought to, because they're breaking most of the Ten Commandments. Taking the Lord's name in vain, bearing false witness, killing people, stealing, committing adultery.

[6 : 05] And not just once off, an occasional misdemeanor, bloodshed follows bloodshed. It's a persistent pattern in Israel's life. And because we're, and we've already seen over the last two weeks, that they are going after other gods.

They're having other gods beside, the God of Israel. They're bowing down to graven images. They're also breaking the first two commandments, at least. That is the very core, or kernel of the law of God, is completely disregarded by them.

And remember this is God's own people. The people of Israel, the northern part of the people of God, in the middle of the 8th century BC. As a result, verse 3, the land mourns.

Therefore, the land mourns. And all who live in it, languish, which includes animals, birds and fish, who are perishing. They ought to have known why.

Because languishing, perishing, the land in grief and mourning, it's all there in the word of God, that they are so flagrantly disregarding, and are ignorant of.

[7 : 21] In fact, one of the things in Hosea, is that all the statements of God's judgment, in effect, are things that are threatened, way back in the book of Deuteronomy.

There in chapter 28, a very long chapter, most of it is in the context of, if you disobey God, then this will happen, and that will happen, and this and that, and this and that, and the other.

And all of those things that are happening, are predicted in Deuteronomy. They're happening now to Israel, threatened again by God here, and yet in their ignorance, Israel does not see the connection, with their moral behaviour, though they ought to.

Their ignorance is culpable, not bliss. Their ignorance is dangerous, because it's dangerous to fall into the hands, of the living God.

Their religion is far from biblical, far from what God determined. They do not know God. They do not know His ways or plans.

[8 : 29] Ignorant, immoral, syncretistic, worshipping all sorts of other gods with God, downright pagan, startlingly similar, in fact, to many aspects of our own society.

But there is a particular group singled out. Yes, the people are to blame. They are culpable.

They are responsible. Every single person in the people of Israel. But as well as that, you can imagine the court scene, and the leaders of God's people are there, representing the nation, and God is laying out His charges.

And then a bit like a sort of Hercule Poirot in the drawing room at the end of an Agatha Christie novel. As you're trying to work out who's to blame here for this murder, he points his finger at the priests.

Verse 4, Yet let no one contend, let none accuse, for with you, emphatically, is my contention, O priest. We might think of the Old Testament priest as being the one who offers up the sacrifice, and they did, on behalf of people.

[9 : 45] But that was just a few of the Levitical priests in the temple. The main role of the priests of the Old Testament was a teaching role. They were to teach the law and word of God in the villages, in the family connections, scattered all around the land.

Sacrifices were only to be held in the central place. That later was Jerusalem. Other than that, the Levitical priests all around the nation were largely teachers to teach the word of God.

All through the Bible, the leaders of God's people are held to higher account by God. It doesn't exonerate or excuse the general people.

They are culpable for their ignorance and sin as well. They cannot simply say, oh, well, it's the priest's fault. No, it's their fault too. But the priests and leaders of God's people are held to higher account, for theirs was the responsibility to teach God's word.

That same higher accountability applies through the New Testament and to today as well. Those of us who are ministers, Bible study leaders, Sunday school teachers, leaders of children's and youth groups, anyone who has some responsibility for teaching others the word of God, including parents of their children, are held to higher account by God on the day of judgment.

[11 : 11] It is an awesome responsibility that those of us in those categories face. And the priests in particular stand accused by God.

The people as well, but the priests in particular, they had failed. You shall stumble by day.

The prophet also shall stumble, not Hosea, I think here, but the false prophets of whom we know of many through the story of the Old Testament who tried to mislead the people of God.

They shall also stumble. And I will destroy your mother. Might seem a bit harsh on poor mum, but the priesthood was hereditary. What I think it's saying is that the whole tribe of Levi stands under judgment for its failure to lead the people of God.

The previous generation of parents, the current generation, and as we see in verse 6 as well, the children. My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.

[12 : 18] There is ignorance again because you have rejected knowledge, not because they have no excuse. They've never had the opportunity to find out. They have rejected knowledge and are therefore ignorant.

And I reject you from being a priest to me and since you've forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children. That is, the end of the priesthood is being warned here.

It's coming to an end. The next generation will end. The 8th century BC is a complicated piece of history.

The first half of the century, the people of God were fairly prosperous. Not a major nation, but relatively comfortable and well off after a long reign by King Jeroboam II.

Not a good reign, but a long and prosperous one. And what we see in Hosea and his contemporary Amos is the reflection that we are fairly well off, we are fairly prosperous, God is obviously blessing us.

[13 : 22] But in their ignorance, they do not understand that material prosperity does not necessarily equal God's blessing. That's actually a mistake that many of us make.

How often when we receive some reward or some promotion or some blessing or rather some good thing or prosperous thing in some way, we say, oh, it's a blessing from God.

As though somehow God is saying, well done, you're doing well. It blinds us to our moral state before God very often. That's a dangerous place to be.

And so it was, it seems, with ancient Israel. Their comfortableness, their wealth, their prosperity was in fact blinding them to the real state of their sin.

See in verse 7, the more they increased, the more they sinned against me. That is, as they grew prosperous, they continued in their sin, they became blinded to it, thinking, oh, God is blessing us.

[14 : 24] We must be okay. And they changed their glory into shame. It's a terrible indictment of the people of God. Their glory is God.

And they've exchanged the living God for man-made worthless idols and images. What a shameful thing to do.

What people still do. As Paul says, much the same in Romans chapter 1. About the priests, they feed on the sin of my people. They are greedy for their iniquity.

Literally, the priests would eat part of the sacrifices, some sacrifices, that were offered. That was a legitimate thing to do and it's part of the way of providing for the priesthood.

But it's been manipulated and corrupted because they're encouraging people to sin by not teaching them and therefore there must be more offerings for sin and therefore the priests are actually having more and more food and indulgence.

[15 : 26] It's a bit like the indulgence system of the medieval Catholic church as well. Corrupt and feeding the priests and the leaders. And so it shall be like people, like priests, under judgment.

The blind leading the blind as Jesus said in Matthew 15. And people and priests alike will be punished by God. The end of verse 9.

They shall eat but not be satisfied. As eating was part of their sin, part of the punishment will be the lack of satisfaction that comes from that. Not unlike Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden who ate the forbidden fruit but were not satisfied with what they'd hoped for.

They shall play the whore but not multiply. That is, God is handing them over to continue in their path of sin but leaving them with futility, frustration and dissatisfaction because they've forsaken the Lord to devote themselves to whoredom.

Perhaps the end of verse 11 is a quote of a proverb or a saying at the time. Sort of stands alone in a way but it sums up their apostate religion.

[16 : 42] Wine and new wine take away the understanding. That is, for ancient Israel, in their comfortable well-off state, they're enjoying the fruit of the land, wine and new wine but in that wealth and comfort, they're actually dulling their minds, maybe even literally getting drunk because their understanding or knowledge of God is void, empty indeed.

when people exchange true belief for something else. G.K. Chesterton once said, it's not, when people give up believing the truth, it's not that they believe nothing but rather that they believe anything and many of us who are Christians will often be amazed at the stupidity of people in our world at the things they actually believe in and get fooled by.

That's what Chesterton was saying earlier last century and that's what I think Hosea is reflecting as well in verse 12 with an element of mockery and amazement.

He says, my people consult a piece of wood. Can you imagine it? A lump of wood, a dead bit of a tree.

they consult it. That is, the way it's written with such bluntness is sort of parroting their stupidity. Instead of consulting the living God, the one who made the world, sustains the world, knows everything, they've turned from him to a piece of wood to consult a piece of wood.

[18 : 29] Now the actual operation that's being reflected here is a piece of wood that would be like a divining rod. You would throw it up in the air and determine when you saw it land what direction you should be doing.

Does it point that way or this way? It's sort of a bit like a heads and tails sort of thing and that would give you guidance as though somehow a piece of wood would guide you better than the living God.

What folly? But that's what happens isn't it? People in our world who are guided by a page in the newspaper each day that says don't get out of bed or do get out of bed depending on whether you're a Gemini or a Leo or whatever it is.

It's bizarre that people believe such stupid things and yet sadly there are even Christians who get seduced and stuck into that sort of ridiculous pagan occult practice.

So it was for ancient Israel. They've exchanged the glory of the living God for the shame of consulting a mere piece of wood. The divining rod gives them oracles.

[19 : 39] No it doesn't. Hosea is mocking them for their stupidity. The reason why they've been captivated by this verse 12 goes on to say is a spirit of whoredom has led them astray and they have played the whore forsaking their God.

not a mere one-off mistake or misdemeanor a little peccadillo as some might excuse it but the spirit of whoredom has captivated them.

They're entranced by this. They have been captured and seduced into such pagan worship. They sacrifice on the tops of mountains make offerings on the hills under oak poplar terebinth because their shade is good.

what's wrong with that? It expressly contradicts what is commanded in the early part of the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 7 and 12 sacrifices can only be made at the central place not on high places on hills or mountains or under every green tree.

Exactly what Israel now is doing six or seven hundred years later completely breaking the law of God but they're ignorant of that but that's no excuse and therefore daughters and daughters in law and indeed verse 14 says the sons and sons-in-law in effect men and women will be judged by God for their idolatry.

[21 : 03] It uses the language of adultery and whoredom because spiritually that's what they're doing they've abandoned and forsaken God to whom they should be betrothed and married in effect for another God but no doubt as well there is physical promiscuity as well here the pagan religions were sexually promiscuous and immoral you would engage a prostitute at the temple to try and get the God to bring you favour and produce rain or a child or animals or whatever you wanted so there's both the physical and the spiritual promiscuity and adultery going on here and the end result at the end of verse 14 a people without understanding that is an ignorant people come to ruin the greatest danger sincere ignorance and that's what Israel was culpable for there's an element of irony in verse 15 as Hosea addresses the northern people of Israel called Ephraim or Israel he says though you play the horror of

Israel don't let Judah the southern kingdom around Jerusalem don't let them become guilty it's mocking them of course they are so shameful it's exposing their stupidity by contrast with the people of Judah who are not all that much better let me say it says do not enter into Gilgal or go up to Betharven and do not swear as the Lord lives the last of those things is breaking the third commandment taking the Lord's name in vain they're saying as Yahweh lives we can do this or that or the other but of course they've really abandoned him in their pagan worship and when it says don't go up to Gilgal or Betharven it's probably saying don't go to these religious places of worship it's a bit like saying don't go to the church and sin the very opposite of what you would go to church for it's a bit of a parody on the hollowness and corruption of their religious practice again the idea is not that this is an ignorance that's just a little mistake

Israel we're told in verse 16 is stubborn literally stiff-necked the images of a heifer an animal a bull or an ox that is yoked and you would use it to plough your field but it's resisting the turning of the yoke to guide it in your field this stubbornness this stiff-neckedness shows that this is culpable responsible sin not mere ignorance they are resisting the guidance of God and so if they are in fact like a stubborn heifer how can they be like a lamb that God the shepherd will feed is the end of verse 16 that is they've rejected God the shepherd and his protection and provision for them Ephraim was one of the tribes of Israel and comes to stand as a poetic way of describing Israel the northern part of the kingdom of God

Ephraim is joined to idols joined in the sense of allied welded together they've made their bed and they're in it so the end of verse 17 says let him alone think how serious that statement of judgment is God is saying I'm not going to interfere I'm not going to intervene I'm not going to warn again I'm not going to try and change time is up it's too late let him alone he's made his bed he can sleep in it but judgment is coming and is now inevitable it's a very serious thing when God withdraws holds back says let him alone in his sin that's a very dangerous place to be because the attempts by God to stop to prevent to turn back they're over and Israel indeed at the time these words were issued was maybe 20 years away from complete oblivion the time was up it was over when their drinking is ended they indulge in sexual orgies they love lewdness more than their glory you see it's not it's not a simple slip a mistake we all sin we fail but here are people who are loving their sin more than the glory of God they've exchanged their love of God for the love of lewdness a wind or a spirit the same word has wrapped them in its wings a bit like verse 12 before the spirit of whoredom has led them astray they are captivated by this spirit and they shall be ashamed because of their altars having listed their sins as the prosecutor in the court

God now turns to the role of judge and he issues the sentence from chapter 5 verse 1 he begins chapter 5 by announcing to the priests hear this he goes around the nation and picks up a few places particular religious places that they had spoken of and worshipped in and he says at the end of verse 2 I will punish all of them you see I know Ephraim he says I know Israel and it's not hidden from me you can't fool me by being very religious I know your heart I know your corruption I know your sins and immorality and apostasy God is a perfect judge he doesn't have the wool pulled over his eyes by a sort of facade of religious piety they were very religious people actually but it was very corrupt and immoral and so Israel's defiled their deeds do not permit them to return to their

[27:12] God time is up for repentance is what that's saying just as he said Ephraim leave him alone time is up they will not return to God for the spirit again of whoredom is within them and they do not know the Lord they are ignorant this recurring theme through these chapters but in their ignorance they are actually ignorant of their ignorance verse 5 of chapter 5 says that Israel's pride testifies against him that is they're proud of their sin they're proud of who they are and what they're doing they are completely blind to their sin ignorant of their ignorance and pride often comes before a fall and so chapter 5 goes on to say that Ephraim stumbles that is as in falling in his guilt and Judah as well and with their flocks and herds they shall go to seek the

Lord but they will not find him I think what's anticipated in those verses is that judgment will come they will fall and stumble and then maybe pick up to try and seek the Lord but it's too late judgment has come and it's over for Israel they will not find God because he has withdrawn from them just as he said Ephraim let him alone the withdrawal of God his silence when he withdraws himself and his word is a terrible judgment indeed a just one a deserved one but a terrible one they have dealt faithlessly with the Lord the accusation that came at the beginning of chapter four and we saw in the last two weeks as well they've born illegitimate children that is children who are spiritually worshipping other gods if not physically illegitimate children and that means that they have no right to the land God's land is an inheritance from God to his real children and so they've lost their claim on the promised land it is a veiled threat of exile something that will happen within 20 years and then as an ancient city if they would keep watch over the night and look out for an enemy approaching and the person if they saw an enemy approaching would blow a horn that that village and maybe surrounding villages could be put on the alert for an enemy coming and lock up the walls and the gates now comes the announcement of war in verse 8 blow the horn in Gibeah in Ramah

Beit Arvin and Benjamin the announcement of war announcement of an enemy coming and what seems to be happening is that Israel is looking for help up north from Assyria the major world power but actually Judah in the south is now moving in something that happened in these years for a short time but actually behind all this the seriousness of it is that the real enemy is not Judah but God himself judging Israel for their sin the places that are listed are moving north from Jerusalem is why people think that this is talking about Judah encroaching on their land something that's picked up in verse 10 as well when it says the princes of Judah have become like those who remove the landmark that is they're moving the boundary of Judah north to claim back some of their land all of this is part of judgment because verse 9 says Ephraim or Israel that is will become a desolation in the day of punishment and in verse 11 it's oppressed and crushed in judgment because he was determined to go after vanity emptiness like a puff of breath that's gone vanity they think they're going after other gods but they are vanity nothing emptiness futility pointlessness instead of the living

God a piece of wood vanity or the living God they've exchanged glory for shame and therefore in this wonderful expression in verse 12 God says I am like maggots to Ephraim who wants maggots but the idea is that as God is withdrawing his hand and leaving them in judgment they are decaying and rotting on the inside as though maggots were bringing them about death internally and like rottenness to the house of Judah as well you see the stupidity and ignorance of their ignorance means that Ephraim Israel when they see their sickness they see they're in trouble they turn for help where do they go verse 13 says to Assyria they don't turn back to the living God they try to find political help with the world power Assyria they send to the great king but he cannot cure you verse 13 says and we know that in this very period of history in the 730s as Judah was attacking

Israel Israel went north to Assyria paying money to Assyria to try and get them to help them and strengthen them what a stupid thing to do because within a decade Assyria the ones to whom they paid all this money completely obliterated and wiped out Israel forever I will be like a lion to Ephraim and like a young lion to the house of Judah you see God is the real enemy and as a lion devouring and punishing them for their sin I will carry off a nun shall rescue and we might expect the chapter to end there this is the judgment that God has decreed in this heavenly court Israel will be wiped out deservedly for its terrible persistent sins for its ignorance its lack of knowledge of God and yet so often so surprisingly we get just a hint of hope and at the end of the chapter I will return again to my place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face in their distress they will beg my favour there is just this hint of hope this whisper of a future that God has for his people completely undeserved a statement of mercy that surprises us and shocks us yet again at the heart of

[33 : 50] Israel's sin is a culpable ignorance they've dismissed and rejected God's word chasing after dead wood and man-made idols senseless foolish hopeless and ruinous now we are not a nation like ancient Israel Israel the continuity from ancient Israel is with the church not modern Israel and not a nation like Australia or any other nation it's the church and even in this devastating critique of an atrocious people sadly we find surprising relevance in the 21st century ignorance of God is rife not just in our land it's not about people out there this is a word to us the people of God the church and sadly within the church ignorance of God is still rife we confuse prosperity with blessing and what it does is blind us to our moral state we think that

God is showering blessings on us because we are so comfortable and safe and wealthy and therefore we never assess our lives and think well maybe my life doesn't meet up to God's standards if I'm actually comfortable and prosperous well maybe God is saying you're okay you're doing well and that was Israel's folly because they're ignorant of God and so often are we his word to us lies more often than not coated in dust can you find your Bible readily in your home is it well thumbed and well read or in a drawer with dust the warning to Israel here highlights the seriousness and deception of sin Israel was arrogant yet totally ignorant and sin calcifies into stubbornness and resistance against God how important it is you see to know

God to know the living God as revealed to us in his word to study that word to take joy and delight in it to know God more and more as we build a closer and more intimate relationship with him as we know God's holy standards and what he requires of us as we understand God's will and purpose we have no excuse more than any other generation in history we have God's words so readily available to us dozens of translations so easily accessible and sadly so under read so let us take heed lest these words one day be said of us there is no knowledge of God in this church Jesus had a similar warning not everyone who says to me Lord

Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven on that day many will say to me Lord Lord did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many deeds of power in your name but then I will declare to them I never knew you go away from me you evil doers may that never be said of us may we heed God's word and know God amen to love and the water may not kas it will sorry let sc