

Love Like the Dew or Steadfast Love

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[0:00] Please be seated and I encourage you to turn in the Bibles in the pews to page 733, 733 in the Black Bibles. And as I said at the beginning, this is the fourth of six sermons on the prophet Hosea as a part of our series through these morning services.

And let's pray. Lord God, speak to us from your word this morning, write it on our hearts, make us wise for salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we pray in his name. Amen. They complained that he ate with sinners and tax collectors. And in response to their complaint, he said, go and learn what this means.

I desire mercy, not sacrifice. They complained that they had plucked grain to eat on the Sabbath day when they were hungry.

And in response to their complaint, he said, you don't know what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice.

[1:08] What does the Lord desire? How easy it is to lose the heart of the Christian faith.

How easy it is to shift and divert away from the core and replace it with rules and regulations.

How easy it is to move to the side and in fact become blinded by self-righteousness. How easy it is to veer off the center.

And so as our first priority, have religious rituals. But in all of that to forget that at the heart, at the core of the Christian faith, is loving God with all our heart, soul and strength.

That at the heart is relating to God. At the heart is God himself. For I desire steadfast love.

[2:17] Mercy sometimes translated. And not sacrifice. I desire the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. Like Jesus, centuries after him, Hosea the prophet both warns and woos the people of God.

Warns them of their behavior that is leading to judgment. And speaking from God to woo them back to God. Far from God have they gone.

As the center of their faith in relating to God and loving God has become hollow. Covered over by religious ritual.

As they indeed go prostituting themselves to other gods and idols. The book of Hosea is like a black sky that threatens lots of rain.

You may read about it in the history books of Melbourne. Because it's so long since we've seen it. Black clouds. But oddly in the midst of them just little shafts of light from pinpricks of blue sky above.

[3:33] Hosea is like the black clouds of God's judgment and warning of destruction to come. And yet almost incongruously throughout this book.

Little shafts of light. Of hope. Shine through. So it is at the beginning of chapter 6. Come let us return to the Lord.

For it is he who has torn. And he will heal us. He has struck down. And he will bind us up. It almost sounds as though Israel has suddenly heard the first five chapters. And turned back to God.

But sadly not really so. These are not Israel's words in the present. Most likely what we're reading here are words from God through Hosea.

Quoting what he's hoping for and longing for. Words of sincere turning back to God. Something that will be in the future. The last verse of chapter 5 said.

[4 : 35] I will return again to my place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face. In their distress they will beg my favor. That is after the judgment that is coming.

After the rain of these black clouds of warning have occurred. And then in their distress they might call out with sincerity to God.

In a sense these words here in verses 1 to 3 of chapter 6. Are modelling what repentance will look like. What turning back to God will look like. Notice that God will return to his place in verse 15 of chapter 5.

And now at the beginning of chapter 6. As a result of that. The people will return to God. God returns. They will return. The word is simply turn, turn around to return.

But it carries for Israel's spiritual weight. Because it's the word for repentance. To turn back to God. You see repentance is not simply saying.

[5 : 37] Oh God I'm sorry for doing that. Repentance is not that embarrassment of shame. Oh I wish I hadn't done that. But rather repentance is saying.

I don't want to do this again. I want to reorient my life from heading in this wrong direction. Back in the right direction to God. That's turning to God.

That's repentance. And that's what God is wanting from these people. That they turn back to him. From pursuing the gods and the idols. And all the immorality associated with those pagan gods and idols.

That they've been worshipping. They acknowledge that God has torn and struck down. In repentance this would be an acknowledgement of just judgment.

But they also acknowledge that the same holy God. Is the God who will heal. And bind up in verse 1. Or bandage up. The wound is the idea.

[6 : 37] You see they recognize here. That they need healing. They need help. We have this terrible quote. A self-righteous quote. That God helps those who help themselves.

That's not biblical actually. God helps the helpless. And that's what this true repentance will be. Turning back to God and saying. God needs to heal me.

I need to be bandaged up. As the old book of common prayer. One of the confession prayers says. There is no health in us. And indeed as the great hymn Rock of Ages says.

Helpless come to thee for grace. That's what repentance is about. Acknowledging our helplessness. Acknowledging our spiritual sickness.

Acknowledging our desperate need for God and God alone. To heal us and bind us up. God helps the helpless. That's why Jesus said to those self-righteous Pharisees.

[7 : 40] I came not for the healthy. But for those who are sick. Who know they are sick. At the point of Hosea. Israel does not know it's sick.

But after the judgment that is coming. God will bring them to their knees. In order that they may acknowledge their sickness. And utter helplessness.

And turn indeed to God. For healing. And help. This repentance would be a statement of faith.

That in response to their repentance. God indeed will do that. Indeed more than just healing. Verse 2 says. After two days he will revive us. On the third day he will raise us up.

God. It's an astonishing verse. Astonishingly prescient in a way. That God will heal and raise.

[8 : 37] Literally for Israel. On the second day or the third day. Means very soon. That is. As soon as I've repented. God will actually raise me up. A confident statement of faith.

And remarkably fulfilled. On Easter day. The third day. When God raises Jesus. I'm sure. That ancient Israel had no expectation.

Hosea had no expectation. Of the resurrection of Jesus on a third day. But speaking more than he knew. Under guidance from God's words himself.

We find this so remarkably fulfilled. That it's in the resurrection of Jesus. The powerful healing. And help. And raising. And revival. Really does come.

We saw last week. In chapters 4 and 5. That the key sin of Israel. Was an ignorance of God. There was no knowledge of God. In the land. But that will be corrected.

[9 : 38] After this raising by God. Verse 3 says. Let us know. Let us press on to know the Lord. They don't know. God.

The Lord. In Hosea's day. But after God works. And raises them up. And heals them. And binds them up. Then indeed. They will know the Lord.

Relationally. Lovingly. As indeed. They fail to do. So badly now. Remember of course. That eternal life. Jesus defined it. Is knowing God.

And his son Jesus Christ. Knowing God. Relating to God. In love. Lies at the heart of it all. The trouble is. These verses.

1 to 3. Is not the reality. And so reverting. Back to the current situation. God says. What shall I do with you. Oh Ephraim.

[10 : 32] They're the words. Of a frustrated parent. Loving their child. But the child is so. Rebellious. They are words of anger.

But anger that flows. From a heart of love. What am I going to do with you. Is what God is saying. About his people. The people of Ephraim.

And Judah. The two nations. Into which his people. Had divided. At this time. In the 8th century BC. What am I going to do with you. Because your love.

Is like a morning cloud. Like the dew. That goes away early. What a wonderful image. That is. Or something that's there. But as soon as the light.

Or the heat of the day. Begins to rise. It evaporates. Dissolves. And disappears. A love that's so fleeting. It won't withstand. It won't endure. It disappears.

[11 : 27] It dissipates. Some of you may have seen the dew. Or maybe even. Bits of frost yesterday morning. But by mid morning. Even in the weak. Winter sun. Had disappeared.

And dried up. That's what Israel's love is like. Is what's being described here. And for many. Sometimes many of us. Our love of God is. Fairly fleeting. Dries up.

And withers. And dissipates. As soon as there is some trial. Or temptation. That confronts us. What is God going to do? I've hewn them down. He says in verse 5. By the prophets.

I've killed them. By the words of my mouth. Not that the prophets. Are literally killing them. But they're issuing words. Of destruction. And judgment. And Hosea of course. Is the prime example. But not only. His contemporary is Amos.

And roughly contemporary. With Isaiah. And Micah as well. My judgment. Goes forth as the light. That is. As the light of day. Comes up. And their love dissipates.

[12:24] Judgment from God. Comes. And then comes that famous verse. Quoted at least twice by Jesus. For I desire steadfast love. And not sacrifice.

It doesn't mean that God doesn't want any sacrifice. He after all commanded them. In the book of Leviticus. The idiom is a idiom of preference. I desire steadfast love.

Rather than sacrifice. And we see that more clearly. In the second line. So often Hebrew poetry. Has two lines together. Saying a similar thing. I desire the knowledge of God.

Rather than burnt offerings. Here it's making the knowledge of God. And steadfast love synonyms. The same thing. And that's true. That as we know God. We demonstrate that knowledge of God.

Relationally by steadfast love. And that's what God requires. Rather than sacrifice and burnt offering. The people in Hosea's day. For all their apostasy.

[13:24] And chasing after other gods. Were very, very religious. They were very committed. And assiduous. In offering sacrifices. And at various shrines.

Wrong shrines mostly. But their religious practices. Were sort of covering up. A heart of lovelessness. Underneath.

God says. I desire above all. Top priority. Knowing me. In steadfast love. Steadfast love.

Is sometimes translated as loyalty. Long suffering love. Mercy. It's about a love. That will not let go. It's about a love. That is for better.

For worse. For richer. For poorer. In sickness. And in health. It's the love. That God demonstrates. For his people. All the way through the scriptures. Despite their rebellion.

[14:20] And perverse activity. But God's love. Keeps on keeping on. And that's the love. He requires. Of his people. A love. That will not dissipate. At the.

The merest. Whiff. Of a temptation. Or a trial. A love. Love. That endures. And endures. And after all. That's the great commandment.

As Jesus quoted. From another Old Testament book. Love the Lord your God. With all your heart. And soul. And strength. That's the heart. That's the core.

And if we divert away. From that. Into religiosity. Into religious rituals. Into rules. And regulations. Or other things. We've lost the core. And it becomes hollow.

A sham religion. If anything. This book of Hosea. Is challenging us. About our love of God. Do we love God. Above all things.

[15:16] With all our heart. Soul. And strength. Or do we love. Other idols. More. It may not be. Of course. That we are.

Putting up. Wooden or stone pillars. And bowing down. And worshipping. Those sorts of idols. The gods. Of the pagans. Of Hosea's day. But the idols. Of our society.

And world. And practice. Are just as bad. Are we worshipping. And loving. The idols. Of wealth. Health. Or comfort.

The idols. Of football. Or pleasure. Or entertainment. Or fun. Or thrills. The gods. Even of family. Of a spouse.

A friend. If we love those things. More than God. They've become idols. To us. I remember someone. Saying to me. Some time ago.

[16:12] After the death. Of his wife. I loved her. Very much. And I grieve. Her enormously. But I love.

God. More. And that's the right. Priority. Not an easy. Way. To get it right. But profoundly. True.

Love. God. More. And that's what. Hosea is driving us. As this book. Confronts us. And exposes. Our own heart. And our loves.

It should be. It should be. Correcting our. Lovelessness. And urging us. To love. God. More. With steadfast. Love. Through thick. And thin.

In grief. In good times. In bad times. In sickness. And in health. For the reality. Of course. Doesn't meet. God's desire.

[17 : 09] What follows. In verses 7 to 10. Is a little bit like. A lonely planet. Guidebook. It's a bit perverse though. This is the geography. Of Israel's sin. There are people. Who go to England.

And they. Go visiting. The places. Of Jack the Ripper. Or the Yorkshire Ripper. I remember. When I lived in England. Not far away. A few miles. In Gloucester. There had been this.

Atrocious couple. Who'd killed many young women. It was all exposed. While I was living there. And people were flocking. Down the street. To see the house. Where he buried. All these women. Under the courtyard.

And under the house. And so on. Well. In a slightly perverse way. This is like a little guidebook. Of Israel's places of sin. At Adam. In verse 7. They transgressed the covenant.

There's a place called Adam. It was mentioned in Joshua 3. And it seems that some. Terrible act. Had happened here. Some say that the way. Of reading this verse. Is that they are like Adam. In the garden of Eden.

[18 : 03] And that may be true as well. But either way. The place it seems. Is that there. They dealt faithlessly. With God. So it's a place. That you might go.

And it's a place. Of past sin. Gilead. For example. In verse 8. The people of Gilead. Had been. Participants. In the assassination. Of the king. In 740.

Pekahiah. Here. Is another place. That's tracked. With blood. God. And let's move. More centrally now. Into the land. In the middle of the north. Place called Shechem.

Very central. The place where. Abram was promised the land. In Genesis. No doubt. There was some form. Of remembrance. Of that there. Probably a. A false shrine. And so on.

Nearby. Is Mount Gerizim. Where the people of the north. Still worshipped. And as robbers. Lie in wait. For someone. So the priests. Are banded together. To murder. On the road.

[18 : 57] To Shechem. A terrible thing. Maybe it's only speaking. Figuratively. That the priests. Are leading pilgrims. To false religion. Which is therefore. Deadly. And in fact.

They're killing them. Spiritually. May even be physically. That they're killing them. On the road. The priests. Remember. Accused. Very clearly. In chapter 4. Of Hosea.

So around the country. Here are. A sample. Of places. The summary. In verse 10. In the house of Israel. In the whole of the nation. Of Israel. And in Judah. To follow. I've seen a horrible thing.

Ephraim's whoredom. Is there. Israel is defiled. And for you Judah. Also a harvest of judgment. Presumably. Is appointed. That is throughout the land. Israel has gone after other gods.

That's the word of whoredom. Adultery. That's used. Spiritual adultery. It's a place of sin. All the way. Through the land. And then again.

[19 : 56] Just a brief. Very brief. Pinprick. Of blue sky. In the dark cloud. The end of verse 11. The beginning of chapter 7. When I would restore.

The fortunes of my people. When I would heal Israel. And then. The cloud covers over again. The corruption. Of Ephraim's reveal. The wicked deeds. Of Samaria. For they deal falsely.

Their thief breaks in. And the bandits. Raid outside. Yes. There's spiritual going after other idols. But there's corruption in their marketplace. In their economy as well. People are stealing from each other.

There's fraud. And so on. Is what's referred to there. And the people think they're immune. They think they're safe. Which is. One of the tragic places. When we are.

When we are sinners. We're like this. We think we're safe. That God has not yet intervened. That somehow God's mercy will prevail. I can keep on in this sin. Israel does not consider.

[20 : 51] That I remember all their wickedness. God says in verse 2. But now their deeds surround them. They are before my face. You know. If you see someone.

Passing by. And there's something. Slightly odd about them. The one feature that you notice. Is their oddness. Yesterday I saw someone in the street. Who had. His hair dyed green at the front.

Can't remember anything else. About the person. But you think. Oh my goodness. What a strange colour for your hair. What verse 2 is saying. God is saying.

Is that when I look at Israel. The thing I notice. Is their sin. It's before my face. It's in my face. I see their sin. And their wickedness. That's all I see.

Is what God is saying. In verse 2. These last years. Of Israel's life. During the time of Hosea. Were particularly turbulent.

[21 : 46] Turbulent. About 750. Just before. A king who'd reigned. A long time died. And the nation was. Fairly stable. And relatively prosperous. But over the next 30 years.

There were six kings. Four of them assassinated. One taken into exile. And quickly the nation. Disintegrated. Until it was obliterated.

By the Assyrians. In 722 BC. That background. Or that history. Lies in the background. Of these verses. That follow.

Verse 3. By their wickedness. They make the king glad. And the officials. By their treachery. The sense is. I think. That there are. Coups and counter coups. So they're.

Killing off people. Who might be a threat. To the throne. The king is glad. Or they kill one king. So the next king is glad. That he's now the king. Might be a terrible job to have. Your life insurance payment.

[22 : 41] Would be enormous. During this period. I would have thought. They are all. Adulterous. And then comes a sequence of. Wonderfully vivid imagery.

To describe Israel. They're like a heated oven. The sense of heat. Lies through these next verses. It shows the intensity. Of their.

Deliberate sin. Of worshipping other gods. And the corruption. And immorality. That flows from that. This is not just a fleeting. Thing of Israel. They are intense.

About this. And so heat. Becomes the image. That's used. They're like a heated oven. Whose baker. Does not need to stir the fire. That's how hot they are. You don't need to stir the coals.

To get a bit more flame. It's intense heat. In their sin. So from the kneading of the dough. Until it's leavened. Well you don't need to touch the flame. They are hot with sin. On the day of our king.

[23 : 36] Maybe the day of coronation. The officials became sick. With the heat of wine. Well I'm not quite sure. Why wine is so hot. But the idea is here.

Of a drunkenness. That is a depravity. Possibly to orgy. If that's the meaning behind. Stretching out his hand with mockers. If it's something lewd or rude.

That's being alluded to there. For they are kindled like an oven. Their heat burns within them. All night their anger smoulders. And in the morning it blazes like a flaming fire.

I remember when I was a teenager. And we'd be on scout camps. And we'd be on scout camps. And have a bonfire at night. And sometimes if it had been a big fire in the morning. There were still war members there. So intense is the heat of their desire for sin.

That it burns all night. And blazes all day. It's hot. They are committed. In this sinful practice.

[24 : 37] All of them are hot as an oven. Verse 7. And they devour their rulers. Four assassinations remember. In these 30 years. All their kings have fallen.

But maybe worst of all. At the end of verse 7. None of them calls upon me. That is. As they fight against each other. As they flee to other nations for help.

Not one of them. Turns to God for help. Ephraim. The poetic name for these people of Israel. Mixes himself with the peoples. The idea is.

He's making alliances with them. Political alliances for help. And certainly in this period. That marked the nature of Israel.

We might think. Well a political alliance is neither here nor there. But their political alliance. Is at the expense of being in alliance with God. During this time.

[25 : 37] From about 7.50 to 7.20. One king. Menahem in the 7.40s. Paid a huge amount of money to Assyria. To try and buy their friendship. So that they would protect Israel.

And not conquer it. And that lasted for a while. Although he sort of exhausted the treasury. Of the nation. He was followed a couple of kings later.

After a few assassinations. By a king Pekka. Who turned away from Assyria. Down to Damascus. In an alliance with Syria. From there he turned to Egypt for help.

After him came Hoshea. Who turned back to Assyria. Changed his mind and went back to Egypt. And then changed his mind again. And went back to Assyria. In an alliance. And none of that worked. Because in 7.22.

A year after he died. And was assassinated. The whole nation was destroyed by Assyria anyway. You see. As chapter 5 verse 13 said. The king of Assyria.

[26 : 33] Or any other political king. Cannot cure them. The political alliances. Are nothing. And Israel has been going from one to the other.

To try and find stability and security. But they're looking in the wrong place. They have not turned to God for help. None of them calls upon me. The end of verse 7 says.

And as a result. Verse 9. Foreigners devour his strength. That is their energy. Their money. Their reserves. Their resources. They've just all been spent futilely.

In some political alliance. But he doesn't realise that. Grey hairs are sprinkled upon him. But he does not know it. Well I know my grey hairs.

They began when I became vicar here. Let me say. And I'm hoping that they'll go dark again. After November. Israel is blind in its sin.

[27 : 30] And if it looked in a mirror. It would not see. Its true state. And whilst in a sense. There's nothing wrong with grey hairs. The point is saying. The Israel is coming into its old age.

And it's about to die as a nation. But they don't realise that. They don't see what's going on. They don't see the stupidity. The folly. The futility.

Of abandoning God. And looking for saviours elsewhere. Pride has blinded them. Israel's pride testifies against him.

Yet they do not return to the Lord their God. They're so proud. They are blind in their sin. What they've been practising is.

What you might call pigeon politics. A brilliant image comes in verse 11. Israel is like a pigeon or a dove. It's silly and without sense. They call upon Egypt.

[28 : 25] They go to Assyria. And it's like a silly bird. The flood is in that direction. And that direction. And it's trying to make alliances to be secure and stable. But it's a stupid brainless bird.

Can't get out. Can't save itself. And it's going in all the wrong directions. And as a result. Verse 12 says. God will cast his net over them. And bring them down like birds of the air.

He'll capture them. They'll be captive in exile. And that of course is what happened. Politics of course can be very deceptive. It's not bad to be politically alert and aware to vote responsibly.

To pray for our governments. And hope that our governments have wise leadership that creates peace and stability. But politics can become an idol. If we think that somehow someone might be our saviour.

That Obama or Mandela. Or Turnbull or Rudd. Or the United Nations or ASEAN or something is going to save us all. It's not. It cannot cure us. There's a danger to elevating politics into the place of idolatry.

[29 : 33] That we exchange the love of God. In the end for an idol. So as a result God announces woe. Woe and destruction in verse 13.

Because in chasing after political solutions. They have strayed from me. God says. They've rebelled against me.

God says in verse 13 both times. I would redeem them. Buy them back. But they speak lies against me. They offend God.

By their political pigeon pursuits. And God announces woe. And destruction. And it came. And in 722 the nation was totally destroyed.

Their love has been like the morning dew. Not steadfast. Not enduring. Their cries to God in verse 14.

[30 : 33] Are not from the heart. They wail upon their beds. They gash themselves for grain and wine. It looks all very extravagant in calling out to God. But it's just religious pretense.

It's not from a heart that loves God. They rebel against me. The end of verse 14. It was I who trained and strengthened their arms. But they're plotting evil against me. God who actually strengthened the nation and established it.

But they're abandoning him as they look to other nations. In fact they're turning to that which does not profit. There's no gain in a political alliance. Not at all. Just loss.

And so they've become like a defective bow. Imagine firing a bow and arrow but the bow is twisted and bent. You'll never hit the bullseye. It'll veer off. So Israel is weak.

It's impotent. It's inaccurate. Defective. Their officials shall fall by the sword as they did in 722 BC. Because of the rage of their tongue.

[31 : 34] And then in a final statement of mockery of all of their political pursuits. So much for their babbling in the land of Egypt. That is so much for going to Egypt to give them help.

Egypt doesn't fight against Assyria to protect Israel. It's all a waste of time. It's all no profit. Politics holds no solution at all.

One of the dangers of reading Hosea today is that we somehow lift it and place it on another nation today. That Australia should do this, this or this politically.

Or whatever country we apply it to. But the continuity from Hosea today through the people of God comes to the church, not to the nation. But having said that, we do find warnings here.

That politics should not be our idol. Politics will not save us. Politics will not save our world or our nation. And whilst it's right to vote responsibly, to pray for governments, etc.

[32 : 39] We must not elevate that to the place of idolatry. But having said that, Hosea's words are still apposite for us.

As Jesus made clear when he quoted them, at least those two times in Matthew I began the sermon with. For God has no desire in religious ritual that papers over a Jew like dove.

If we think we can deceive God by practicing on the outside lots and lots of religion, he is not fooled. God has no desire or joy for pretend piety while we lie immoral or apostate underneath.

God has no desire for rules and regulations. As Jesus quoted these words back to those self-righteous Pharisees on at least two occasions. See, God has no desire that his people should be half-baked, like a scone or bread half-turned, is the image he used earlier in chapter 7.

God has no desire that our piety is like a pigeon, fluttering stupidly to and fro. For I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice.

[34 : 01] I desire the knowledge of God, not burnt offerings. That's the heart, knowing God. That's the core, loving God with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength.

But it's easy, blindly, stupidly, perversely, to veer off centre. To replace the centre with something that might look good, but is profitless.

Don't pretend. Get your love with God right. Love Him above all things. Love Him above any other thing that is good or any other thing at all.

Make sure they are not your first loves, but the love of Almighty God alone. For I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice.

I desire the knowledge of God, not burnt offerings. Amen. Amen.