

Turn back

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[0 : 00] Gracious Father, as we come to your word now, we pray that you would send your spirit and that you would bless us with soft and tender hearts to your word. Rescue us, we pray, from hard hearts where your word just washes straight off.

Bless us with repentance, we pray. Give us that gift tonight. In the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen. I'll be honest with you, I felt sorry for myself when last Monday I began to read through the final three chapters of Hosea in preparation for tonight's message.

I thought to myself, not again. Another passage about sin, another passage about judgment. They have been the dominant themes throughout the three messages so far in Hosea.

Sin and judgment, sin and judgment, sin and judgment. And then I thought for a moment, if that's how I feel, spare a thought for poor old Hosea. I mean, which is actually what his original name means.

It actually means Hosea. It's no wonder we call him Hosea. For about 30 or 40 years, this was his message to the northern kingdom. God summoned Hosea to tell his people that they have rebelled against him and that they would face his judgment.

[1 : 23] And Hosea must have groaned at times. It's like the CDs stuck day after day after day after day. Sin and judgment, sin and judgment, sin and judgment.

But the message couldn't change because the people had not understood. Israel hadn't accepted the seriousness of their sin.

It's like with their hard hearts, it just washed straight off. And so I wonder whether or not that is true of us too.

For three weeks now, we have looked at the catalogue of Israel's sin. They were cavalier about it. But we've seen how serious God takes sin. We've seen his heart exposed, broken. We've seen the damage that our sin does to his heart.

[2 : 22] So has anything changed for you? Has your life changed in light of what God has been saying to you through the prophet Hosea?

Through his word. How quickly we forget. How quickly we hear it and then just push it to one side. We might nod in agreement and say, yes, I agree with that. And even wonder at times how Israel could have been so stupid. And then go and put someone down behind their back within 10 minutes of leaving the building.

Or in fact, not even leaving the building. And so we need to hear it again. And again. And again. And again.

So have your Bibles open. We're up to chapters 12, 13 and 14. And it would be great if you could have God's word in front of you to come with me on this.

[3 : 26] We're looking at the end of chapter 11, verse 12. We get introduced again to Israel's sin. This is another bit to add to the catalogue of sin.

Chapter 11, verse 12. Ephraim has surrounded me with lies. The house of Israel with deceit. That's God's charge against them. They're dishonest.

That's it in a nutshell. They can't be trusted. They say one thing. They mean another. They're deceitful. The evidence there is in their foreign policy. Chapter 12, verse 1. Ephraim feeds on the wind.

He pursues the east wind all day. It multiplies lies and violence. He makes a treaty with Assyria and sends olive oil to Egypt. And so what's happening here is Israel is trying to be allies with two powers, two superpowers, if you like.

They're at each other's throats. And so Israel's over here trying to form a partnership with Assyria against Egypt, while all the time sending gifts to Egypt to say, hey, we're on your side, guys.

[4 : 33] They're trying to keep them both happy. They're trying to sit in the middle, keep the balance there, sit on the fence. It's a foreign policy which is driven by self-interest. Any sense of truth or conviction is just pushed to one side.

They tell either side whatever they want to hear, all to serve their own interests. They are untruthful and they are deceitful. They were just like their forefather Jacob.

See it there in verse 2. Quite noticeably, God doesn't call the ten tribes of north Israel or Ephraim or Samaria, which is what he's been doing right throughout this prophecy.

Here he calls them Jacob. Jacob was one of the founding fathers of Israel. His 12 sons formed the 12 tribes of Israel. His name was later changed to Israel.

But at first he was named Jacob, which means deceiver. That was Jacob. That was his character.

[5 : 50] He deceived his older brother out of his inheritance and he deceived his father-in-law out of a massive wealth. And God quite deliberately calls his people Jacob.

Doesn't call them Israel here. He calls them Jacob. You are just like your forefather. You're deceptive. And they're also deceptive in their business practice.

See there in verse 7. The merchant uses dishonest scales. He loves to defraud. And so Aunt Mary is assuming she's buying a kilo of flour. But in actual fact she pays for a kilo of flour but gets about 900 grams instead because the scales have been adjusted before she gets there to rip her off.

They're lying and cheating their own people. And the word merchant there in the original text is the same word as Canaan. You see, Canaan was the name of the land that God gave his people.

As their special place. And the Canaanites were so well known. The people who used to inhabit it were so well known as travelling merchants that the word Canaan became synonymous with the words trader and merchant.

[7 : 08] And it's very significant here for Hosea to use this word. God's people are not just deceptive like their forefather. They're even worse than Jacob. They are in fact just like the pagans.

Just like the people that I judged and cast out of the land you were the same as those people.

You're no different. But you know, it just gets worse.

Because verse 8 I think is shocking. There is no sense of guilt for the people of God. Ephraim boasts, I am very rich.

I have become wealthy. With all my wealth they will not find in me any iniquity or sin. You see, but God on the other hand, remember we're looking at this from God's perspective.

He sees it. He's a God of truth. He sees the lies. He sees the deceit, the hypocrisy, the dishonesty, the sin. He expects his people to be people of truth. And the life of God's people here in Hosea is one big lie.

[8 : 14] They are not who they say they are. One big lie. Now apparently lies typically take place in a fifth of all conversations.

Have a think about that, how many conversations you've had today. The figure rises to one in three if the people talking are university trained. So be careful of university trained people and especially us.

I'm assuming the more qualifications you've got, the bigger lie you are. Maybe, I don't know. But I wonder if Christians are any different. I mean, we should be.

We should take lying and whether truth is what comes out of our mouth seriously. How easy it is for us to say as Christians that we believe the truth, that we're a church that teaches the truth.

We have a certain sense of pride in being part of a diocese that's committed to the truth and known for that. And yet in our daily lives, in our conversations with one another, we play fast and loose with the truth.

[9 : 28] How easy it is to tell people what they want to hear, to embellish a story in conversation, or to withhold key information, to give the impression that's different than the original impression intended.

And the list can go on and on and on. That to be people of truth means that we are to be rigorously truthful in all of our lives.

not just to say that I am a person of truth. I believe the truth. Of course, the worst kind of deception is there at the end of verse 8, what I read out before.

This is the biggest lie of all. They will not find in me any iniquity or sin. The worst kind of deception is self-deception. This is the biggest lie here.

I'm okay. Is there anything worse than self-deception? You know, it's like, based on my assessment of my character, I'm okay.

[10:37] I mean, it's not really sin. When I embellish that story, it's not really sin. It's not that serious. God won't take it that seriously. Hosea says he does.

Really seriously. I wonder whether, as Hosea has been open in the last three weeks, whether you've been doing that.

You know, have you put yourself in Hosea's shoes rather than Goma's shoes? You know, that is, I can see how this word would apply to so many people in this room. You know, there's so many people here that really need to hear, yeah, they're Goma's all right.

Unfaithful people? Seriously. Or you know who Goma's are? One of the big points of this prophecy is that we are Goma.

God is Hosea. We are Goma. We are the people of deep and committed unfaithfulness. That is who we are. Has that hit you, brothers and sisters?

[11:54] Has it hit you yet? Let me read to you the best email that I've received in a long time. This was written to me from one of the members of our church family after the first sermon that I preached on this series in Hosea.

And particularly the sermon was focusing on the marriage of Hosea and Goma and all the ugliness of Goma's unfaithfulness. Let me read to you.

It was a sermon that cut me clean open and pricked the proud, arrogant part of my soul that deceives me the most. When you began the sermon, my pride diverted me light years away from conceiving the proposition that I could be Goma.

When you were halfway through the sermon, my pride kept me light years away from the possibility that I could be Goma. When you would nearly finish the sermon, my pride kept me light years away from the reality that I am Goma.

It was not until you directly stated the obvious that my pride had nowhere to hide. I don't normally get overly emotional about things, but I found myself in church about to cry.

[13:13] I felt acutely embarrassed at myself before God and sad that after being a Christian for 15 years, I had so effortlessly viewed myself as removed from the relationship between Hosea and Goma.

In particular, it was the lack of mental wrangling required to deceive myself into viewing Goma as someone quite different to me that disturbed me the most.

It showed me how strong my natural default inclination is to judge others before myself and to deny myself how really bad I am at keeping my part of the bargain in my relationship with God.

Just realising that I am Goma, particularly hit home to me the faithfulness of Christ that he sustains, protects, and nurtures me despite my shortcomings.

He paid a terrible price so that he and I could have a relationship. I cannot imagine why he persists, but he does as he promised. The sermon also forced me to re-examine my relationship with my family and my faithfulness to them, that the degree to which I am like Goma in my relationship with Christ is the degree to which that I am equally like that to my own family.

[14:29] It was hard medicine to swallow. The exquisitely beautiful thing in all of this is that there is no mystery for me in how to deal with all of this.

It is also scary because it follows that if there is no mystery, then there's no excuse either. To live and struggle to follow Christ with his help, to be obedient and humble before him, being mindful of what lies at the heart of why he purchased me, is surely restorative.

I read that email. We were on staff retreat at the time. I had to excuse myself. I went off away from the rest of the group, sat in the corner under a tree, and I just cried.

I cried for two reasons. My friend helped me see the sin in my own heart as they expressed the sin in their heart.

And I just cried. You know, just nailed it for me. That's the first thing. And the second thing was that I, in between crying, I was just laughing with joy at the same time of what Christ has done for me and the security that I felt and the security that this person felt at the same time as their sin was exposed.

[15:58] It was so beautiful. It was so beautiful. What has been your response as you've heard the word of God come to you?

This is the word of God through Hosea. Has it struck you yet that you are Goma? Hosea has helped us to see the seriousness of Israel's sin and our sin.

We're seeing sin from God's perspective and like no other book in the Old Testament and probably the new, let's just leave with the Old Testament. He rips open his heart to show us what his heart is like.

We make little of it. We explain it away. We excuse it. We call things like little white lies. God has no such category. We justify it.

But God is angry. He is a lover scorned as Hosea is the picture that Hosea gives us. His holiness demands that he must judge and God's judgment is inevitable.

[17:07] We see it there in chapter 13, verse 3. They will be like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears, like chaff swirling from a threshing floor, like smoke escaping through a window.

Back in chapter 6, verse 4, it was Hosea who likened Israel's love to the morning mist that vanishes so quickly. That's what their faithfulness is like to God.

It's like they're gone. And now it's shifted. It will be Israel themselves that will vanish in an instant like steam from a kettle.

It's an image that speaks of the effect of God's judgment. They had forgotten God and so God here, in verse 3, chapter 13, says, I will forget them. And that's what happened when Assyria came in 722 BC.

God said it was going to happen. He meant it. In the same way, when he says that the Lord Jesus will come and judge the living and the dead, he will judge everyone who's ever lived and he will judge everyone who's in this building.

[18:09] It will happen. He said it. It's going to happen. And yet, as we saw last week, God's judgment isn't the end.

We are sinful people. He is a holy God, but he is a God of infinite grace. And so it's not surprising in amongst all the gloom of sin and judgment in these chapters, there are just like shafts of light.

which just come down. They just give you just a bit of hope that it's not all gloom. And one of the shafts of light there is in chapter 12, verse 6. You must return to your God, maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always.

What it's saying there is that there's an opportunity here, Israel. There's an opportunity to turn back. It's not a done deal yet. Turn back. And that is how the prophecy ends in chapter 14.

Chapter 14 is a call to return to the Lord before it's too late. See it there in verse 1. Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall.

[19:27] Sin is always your downfall. The word return there in verse 1 literally means to turn. It means turn. In other words, just turn. Turn and face God.

It's one of the great covenant words. It's used 25 times in Hosea. Not always positively, mind you, but it's used 25 times in Hosea. The great call of Hosea, and in fact all of the prophets in the Old Testament, is turn, turn, turn, and face your God.

Stop putting him to your back. They consistently call God's people to covenant faithfulness. Stop turning away from him.

Stop turning to religion. Stop turning to other security. Stop turning to wealth. Stop turning to sex and physical desires. Stop turning to personal ambition. Stop turning to comfort and indulgence. Stop turning to sin. Stop turning to anything else. But turn and come. Come to your greatest treasure, your God, your lover.

[20:42] And as verse 2 says, take words with you and return to the Lord. You see, God isn't wanting you to come back to him with a whole list of things that you must do.

He's not interested in, you know, looking for you to do some more religious ceremonies, looking for sacrifice. He wants you. This book of Hosea is all about a relationship with the living God.

And the image here takes us back into chapter 3. Remember it, if you can cast your mind back to the first sermon. Hosea goes out and he pays a price to redeem his unfaithful wife out of the arms of another lover.

He actually has to buy her back and he gives everything that he's got in order to buy her back. And he's brought her back out of the arms of another lover. He brings her into the family home but he has no intimacy with her.

It literally says in chapter 3, I will wait for her. Hosea has done the work of purchasing his wife and now he waits for her to come to him.

[21 : 52] And he doesn't want her to come to him and cook his favourite meal or to clean the house to try and somehow make it up to him in some way. He wants her to come with words like verse 2.

Forgive all of our sins and receive us graciously that we may offer the fruit of our lips. Sorry. You see, God's saying return and come to me.

I'm not interested in your money without your heart. I'm not interested in your worship without your heart. I'm not interested in your service without your heart. I'm not interested in your prayers without your heart. He wants our heart because when he has our heart, he has our money and our worship and our service and our prayers and our hands and our feet and all of our lives.

you see return to fellowship with the father here requires exposure of my heart expressed in words of heartfelt admission confession and acknowledgement of the lord you see genuine repentance is turning away turning to god and away from other gods that's the picture of verse 3 of chapter 14 they have now turned their backs on a cereal that's what the call is turn your backs on assyria turn your backs on your idols and turn to me you see repentance is not mere words repentance is a daily decision it is a moment by moment decision it's an all-of-life decision for the person of god to turn to him rather than other loves and in returning to god daily we are making commitment to faithfulness to love and acknowledgement of god the three things that god accuses israel of not having towards him faithfulness love and acknowledgement of god so friends what what sins have you committed what sins are you committing if i can put it in the hosea image which gods are you in bed with how about that for an image which gods are you in bed with are they priorities that displace god so that you don't love the lord your god with all your heart soul and mind is there a small part of your life that you want to keep control of he could have most of it but this bit here is pretty much untouchable i need to keep control of that do you claim personal relationship with god but you slander his name by the way you live are you busy with personal personal ambition and self to ever let go and find rest with god are they your sins then they'd be the sins that break the first five commandments or are they the sins against god that are against your neighbors perhaps the abuse of privileges and the lack of honor to your mother and father maybe it's a savage rejection of another person in the way that you speak about them think about them and put them down are your sins sexual has greed given way a deception so that you take more than your that is yours and you think it's by right are lying lips and slanderous tongue you're failing or is it the internal motions of envy and jealousy that have you tearing yourself and others apart because you cannot have what god never intended for you to have all i've simply asked you to reflect upon in just that moment is the ten commandments given to israel at sinai have you broken the commandments of god if you have then join with me and return to the living god that's what hosea is calling us to do return to him our confidence in turning to god is there in verse four these are magnificent words and and for you who might be feeling conscious stricken right now feeling guilty these are tender hearted words for the pricked conscience

i will heal their waywardness and love them freely for my anger has turned away from them you see remember what we saw last week god has turned all of his centuries of pent up held back anger he's turned it away from us and he's unleashed it on the lord jesus christ on the cross jesus is the one who paid the penalty for our sin he's the one who has dealt with all the consequences of our sin and if you put your trust in jesus god accounts righteousness to your account his righteousness to your account so there is no sin in your account and when there is no sin there is no anger from god directed at you where there is no sin there is no anger there is no condemnation from god to you my friends he is a fearful god but he is safe and he is good come to him there is only blessing for those who turn to him in faith and repentance that's the point of verses 5 to 8 of chapter 14 your gracious father will pick you up and he will restore you and so will you that's the point of the very last verse of this prophecy hosea ends with a question what are you going to do it says who is wise he will realize these things who is discerning he will understand them the ways of the lord are right the righteous walk in them but the rebellious stumble in them and so the word of god through hosea has spoken and this word from god has helped us to see our inclination towards sin and the intensity of god's emotions towards the unfaithfulness of his people it has nailed for us the universality of rebellion against god hosea has also revealed the uncharted depths of god's love and his commitment to love his people the god whom everyone in this room should meet in wrath and anger has turned to meet us in mercy isn't that magnificent and so we're left with a choice it

says heed the warning be wise and turn to god through the lord jesus or ignore it and continue with a cavalier attitude she'll be right seems like a pretty simple choice but israel didn't do it see chapter 13 verse 13 see the awful picture here pains as of a woman in childbirth come to him but he is a child without wisdom when the time arrives he does not come to the opening of the womb the picture here is an opportunity for for israel to be born into new life they're going through all the pain of their sin new life is the option they have a look and they go no we'll stay put and hope to don't want to have to gross you out here but in my former life on a farm

[30 : 46] we had many issues where a a cow or a sheep or something like that could not give birth and you either gave it a c-section or you shot it because to leave the baby inside the mother would cause an excruciating death for both death is the only option no other option and israel chooses death it's astounding their hearts were hard and centuries later the writer to the hebrews was concerned that the christian recipients of his letter learnt the lesson of god's people past who hardened their hearts and did not listen or obey the word of god it is a concern god has for every generation of his people it isn't just the writer of this letter penning some thoughts in hebrews chapter 3 it is the holy spirit who says to us today if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts that's the central issue here god doesn't want us to be asking first and foremost well what do i need to do now to make it up with god the issue is the heart our friends just reflect upon this for a moment a hardened heart might no longer love or have a love for christ as it used to a hardened heart might not love christ's word and prayer and worship and missions and generosity and living for the glory of god a hardened heart finds the fleeting pleasures of this world more attractive than things of the spirit you know once upon a time you had a passion for those things and over time you're still here and you're going through the motions but you're just doing it prayer life has become formal and dry still praying but it's prayerless praying still reading the bible but god hasn't spoken to you for years it's like a verse a day keeps the devil away god hasn't spoken to you for years worship is no longer driven from the heart we're just fulfilling what we need to do and i think what hebrew says which is what hosea says in verse 12 it says seek to it brothers that none of you has a sinful unbelieving heart that turns away from the living god see to it it says take heed take care look at your heart put the word of god against your heart and look don't be careless or apathetic or dispassion or attentive or i'll get to it next week be attentive to the condition of your heart we need to hold the practical mirror of god's word to our hearts so that we take an accurate reading of our spiritual pulse and keep turning to god and repentance and faith keep doing it day in day out day in to stop making excuses for sin if your prayer life has come to all of a sudden it's formal and it's just haphazard and doesn't feel anything don't stay there your prayer should be god give me a tender heart so brothers and sisters if you have heard god's

voice dig deep into your heart through hosea it is your merciful god and father and husband and saviour calling to you to come back he's just calling you to come back do not harden your hearts wake up to the deceitfulness of sin turn away from it and turn to god and hold fast to your confidence and your hope in him he is a fearful god but he is good he is good he is good come back to him