Return

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[0:00] just to pin in its context, or at least chapter 14 in particular, that what we're about to read, if you'd like to turn there in Hosea 13 and 14, we're actually going to take a reading out of chapter 14, just the first two verses. And as you read this, this is an appeal, and it's not an evangelistic appeal in the sense that God is speaking to people who don't belong to him, or Hosea is speaking to God's people, they already belong to him. And so we mustn't think of this appeal as evangelistic, it's an appeal to God's people. And therefore, as you read it, it's asking the underlying question of implementation. And just if I can, I can remember, I've spoken at Hamilton Baptist Church a number of times, and they do keep inviting me back. And I don't know if you know the story for a while, because you know, there's a minister by the name of Alistair

Begg who was there. And many people don't actually know why he left. I know why he left. But one of the reasons why he left, or the reason why he left is because Derek Prime went, he didn't leave because of Derek Prime. Derek Prime went across to the church. And he did, I don't know if you've ever read Derek Prime's book on leadership, but he wrote a wonderful book on leadership. He also wrote one on Bible questions and answers, I think it was called, something like that. And in fact, I actually met Derek Prime's son the other day. He lives down in London. And he's trying to get me in contact with his dad. Anyway, I'm diverting, which is so unusual. Derek Prime did a Friday to a Sunday on leadership, based on the book, or the book came out of the sessions. I don't know which way around it was,
I don't know. And Alistair Begg said to the church, the deacons and the elders on the Monday, what do you think about what you learned? He said, just amazing. Just fantastic. We, it was just so good. We, you know, these, these, all, everything, it was all on leadership. So Alistair Begg said to his elders, and when are we going to implement? And they said, oh, we're not going to implement. And he said from that day, he knew that his time was up. And then not long after he went to America. For me, I don't think I could take no for an answer. I'm patiently, I've asked for a few things to be implemented. I'm just patiently waiting. Probably because I've got nowhere else to go, or because I actually don't want to leave you. No, I couldn't leave you.
No, I really couldn't. Honestly, I really couldn't. I mean, you know, when you, when you have that will of God set on you, you, you realize you cannot, I don't, I don't, I don't, I understand in Alistair Begg's situation, it was quite unique. But I don't, I don't understand how people can walk away from something that isn't right. I mean, I don't actually understand how that's possible. If it's not right, and it needs to be right, how can you, how can you not sort it out? I just don't understand that. I mean, you know, anyway. Hosea, two verses. Now hear God's word. Return, O Israel, to the Lord, your God. For you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words and return to the Lord. Say to him, take away all iniquity, accept what is good, and we will pay with bulls the vows of our lips. And that last bit there is just so impressive and important, the vows of our lips. And we'll see why when we come back to it after this next hymn.
[4:20] Well, please, would you turn again to Hosea 13 and 14? This is where we conclude the book of Hosea.

But the conclusion is really an appeal. And the appeal is for us to come to a conclusion. So we're concluding the series in one sense. But the series concludes with a call and appeal for us to arrive at a conclusion. How have we got this far and God's people have still not returned to God? That's the question that this last chapter is pushing for. Why is it taking so long for God's people? For God's people, not for an unbeliever, but for God's people who know God and know his blessings and know his goodness to return to God? Why is it taking so long? Why does it take so long? God would have his people work out the connections between their spiritual sowing and reaping? And that's the one thing that they haven't done and they're not doing. They look at consequences as a

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way of life rather than a response from God. And therefore, they're not connected to any type of sowing and reaping. Their actions are their actions. And what God does is what
God does. God sees the connection because he's responding to the way his people are, but his people don't see it. And the reason they don't see it is because as we learned last week, and it took us some time to learn it. I appreciate that, but that's because the chapters themselves were lengthy and deep.
But the lesson was clear that sin blinds us from seeing our mistakes. And so we make the same mistake over again. The reason why God's people commit the same type of sin again and again is because that sin blinds them and they don't see where they went wrong. And so they commit the same thing over again.
They don't learn from their, not mistakes, they don't learn from why they committed the sin. And the reason is as simple as, though it does take some explaining, but the reason is as simple as this, that sin blinds believers. It blinds followers. You just cannot get through to them with reason.
[7:12] You cannot get through to them with emotional, a sense of feeling and a sense of urgency. You just, sin utterly corrupts the spiritual senses. And therefore, it becomes very, very difficult.

But God is dealing with them, not us. And Hosea is God's messenger. Hosea doesn't have to deal with the people of God as such. God is dealing with them. And so in chapters 11 and 12, the message was deep and wide because that was the content. It was very deep and it was very wide. We learned of God's love and we learned of the depth of their sin. Here in chapter 13 and 14, it's short and to the point.
And therefore, the message again will be shortened to the point. Very simply because there's very little to say at this point. All has been said. Anything that can be said now over the past is just going to be a repetition of the past. And so we're not going to go there because we've laid out all that ground. We've, so much has been spoken and you've reached the point in your relationship with God where any further word that you hear is simply going to be a repetition of the words that you have heard because no more can be spoken. Because there's nothing more to say at this point.
Therefore, when you hear the phrase, I am not the person I was, you recognize that this can be understood in two different ways. It depends on who's saying it and it depends on what point in their life they're saying it. If you imagine a person who becomes a Christian who then says, I am not what I was, you can take that phrase as a change for the good. They've moved out of sin and death and they've come into life in relationship with God. And so when they say, I am not what I was, you can interpret that as that this person has gone through a change for the good.
But when God's people in Hosea come to their senses and say, I am not what I were, I'm not what I was, we recognize that's because they have changed, had a change for the worse. Because they are God's people and they've moved away from God. And they can look back to better days, but the day that they are in, like the prodigal son in the far country, I'm not what I was. Well, of course you're not.
[9:39] Because you've left your father, you've left the home, you've left the place of blessing, you've gone out into the far country, you've tried to make a go of it out there and enjoy yourself, and you realize that it only ever ends up in bankruptcy, almost of every type of kind, spiritual bankruptcy, moral bankruptcy, financial bankruptcy. So depending on who's saying it, I'm not who I used to be, depending on who's saying those phrases and at what age and stage of their life that they're saying it, can have totally different meanings. It can either be a change for the good or a change for the worse. For God's people here, when they actually come to admit it, that what they're admitting is not a change for the better, but actually a change for the worse that they have actually gone through.
So here's the summary of chapters 13 and 14. The first thing that God's people must do is come to the conclusion themselves that their substitute gods cannot save them. And that's where Hosea begins in chapter 13 in many ways, that they are to get rid of their substitute gods, whereas their actual God, who is both living and active, sovereign, powerful, can actually do good to them, is the one who stands by his people. But his people have trusted in substitutes. And a substitute, as you well know, being Christians and knowing Christ is your substitute, is something in place of another. And so a substitute God is something in place of the one true God. And therefore, idolatry has always been their main sin. But when you actually look at what their idolatry is, it's not just the case of bowing down to a silver image made with human hands, but their idolatry is seen in political alliances. It would be a bit like you trusting in the prime minister, thinking that your life depends on what he says, or the political powers. That would be a form of idolatry to trust in that more than God.

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To make your decisions based on what the leader of the country says rather than God. That would be a form of idolatrous practice. That's what idolatry looks like on the ground. It's where you seek strength in numbers, a community of your own, like those who built the temple so that they could reach up high and God had to come down, destroy it, the Tower of Babel, and confuse the languages. A community that sort of wants to become independent, strength in numbers. Well, that can't save you either. It's a substitute for God's authority. What about being wealthy and then trusting in that wealth? That's what idolatry looks like down on the ground. And God's people here have committed that. They've trusted in wealth.

They've trusted in their bank balance. They think that the church is determined by how much savings they have and how much people give and how much more they have to give. The church has never been determined by that, ever. It would be idolatrous to think so, to trust in that more than God himself.

So it's very easy to say idolatry and then not so easy to actually point out where the idolatry is. And so this is what we see throughout Hosea. He constantly points out idolatry. And ultimately, idolatry is seen in the phrase that I've been repeating at least for the last couple of weeks, that you love things and use God. When the call and the command is for you to love God and use things. God wants you to enjoy the world that he gave to you, for you to share in. Use it all.

Enjoy it all. Every bit of it. But love God. Don't love the world and use God. But this is what they have done. Now, when they make these idols, their sin is not just in the making of them, though that is a sin in itself. It's what actually happens once they have made the idol. And so their sin is double in this sense that when God gave his people skills to do things, I give you a skill to be a carpenter. I give you skills to be a builder. I give you skills to be a baker. I give you skills to be a homemaker. I give you skills to be a father, a mother. I give you skills to mow lawns. I give you all of these skills to build the tabernacle, to make cloth, to sew it, to stitch it. And then you use the very skills that God has given you to make an idol out of silver and gold. And so this isn't just the sin of substitution where you put something in the place of God, but the sin is amplified by that you have actually made that God with the very skills that God has given to you. It would be very much like God's people being given the skill of business and wealth creation and then being lost completely and utterly in the making of their own hands, that they begin to trust in, they've used the skills that God has given them, become incredibly wealthy and then trusted in that or trusted in their ability to do anything. And that there would be the very form of idolatry. It's not just the thing that you're trusting in, but it's actually using the very blessings and skills that God has given you to create those substitute gods in the first place. That's the depth of their corruption. And that is what we see in, well, that's what we see throughout the whole book. And the way to illustrate this might be the question that God asked Moses concerning who made man's mouth. Do you remember how Moses didn't want to speak? And he says, you know, I'm no good. I'm just not a good speaker. Stephen, by the way, if you read Acts, completely disagrees with Moses. He says that Moses was a man mighty in word and deed.

[16:12] So something went wrong in Moses's life for him to come before God and say, I can't speak. But the point that God makes is, well, who made man's mouth? Where does the skill actually come from?

It comes from me. You're just using what I have given you. And so what God's people have here is the skill to make things and they make substitutes for God. And so we see their sin in the full extent of it.

Now, once we've understood all of this in their sin, and we've understood the difference between saying, I'm not who I used to be, we can tell why chapter 14 begins with return rather than come. God doesn't tell his people to come. He tells them to return. And he tells them to return because he wants them to recognize where they are in relation to where they should be, but in a different kind of way. An evangelistic call is a call to tell people to come to Christ. They're far off, come to Christ. But God's people here are telling, God is telling his people here to return, which is an entirely different statement. Because to come to Christ is the initial call where you have never been to God before. You've never been to Christ. It's the first time of coming. But to return, it is indicating to you that your God is behind you. You've left him behind. You need to turn around and come back.

[17:57] The return here is a very strong word indicating to the people of God that they have left God behind them. It's not an evangelistic call where they've never been with God, but rather it's a call for people who have been with God who have been with God and then strayed into these

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substitute gods.

So it ends in chapter 14 with a final plea, a plea of understanding, a plea of implementation. Return and understand your ways so that you don't make the same mistake again.
And so we have two points. The first point is this, that God's people are to seek and to remove in order to return, which is the second point. The first point, seek and remove in order to do the second thing, which is return. So what do I mean by seek and remove? Well, Hosea is making the appeal to God's people that they are to seek God and remove all substitutes for God. So they're to seek God first and foremost, acknowledge their sin, but at the same time, they are to remove all substitutes for God.
Now, they are trusting in these substitutes and this is where the depth of their sin is found. Now, if God's people have one simple choice to make, and that is they will either choose, they will either choose to choose the safe path or the path that leads to their own destruction, then it should be reasonably obvious which one they would choose. But now we've got the added issue which we saw last week and the week before in different ways. That when a person sins, Jonathan Edwards says this in his book, Religious Affections, if you get the Banner of Truth copy, I can even tell you the page number, it's page 121. And he says this, and it's true, that wherever there is remaining sin in a believer's life, their spiritual senses diminish, meaning that they're unable to hear and interpret interpret the things of God properly understood. It's not that they can't do it at all, but they begin to make serious mistakes because they think they're walking close and with clear, with clarity with God, when in fact they're not. How is it that a person can think that they've heard from God and then in a matter of months get themselves into a terrible situation, and yet they claim to be moved by the Spirit, and yet they claim to be having heard God's voice, and they claim to all these things, which could be true. But the issue here is that God speaks through his prophet Hosea, God speaks to us through his word, God convicts us through his Spirit. We're very clear, and how is it that with it so clear, we can still not see it or hear it? Well, it's because there is remaining sin. And wherever there is remaining sin, we're trying to make sense of something that is clear, but unable, not because it's unclear, but because sin blinds us to its clarity. That's why sin is so terrible. And so the reason they must seek God is for clarity, and the way that they move towards God is by removing those substitutes. The substitutes. The substitutes have to go, because they're getting in the way of seeking
God. Now, why is it so hard to do? If you made an idol out of silver or gold, and it's sat there in your house, why is it so difficult to remove, to get rid of? Just to give you a little bit of background, I grew up, my mum remarried a man from India, and he was essentially Catholic, but he had Hinduism rooted in him from a young boy. And of course, when he moved into the house, he brought with him his Buddhas and pictures of Buddhas and stuff like that. There's one picture that was 400 pound, of, and all it was, was an idol of a Buddha. It was actually quite beautiful to look at, because it was gold inlaid and everything, but it was disgusting in the sense that this was somehow evoking worship. [22:43] Why was it so difficult to get rid of? Well, in that case, it was difficult to get rid of, because it was 400 quid. But why are idols that you can remove out of the house and throw in the bin, still remain in the house after you've got rid of them? How does that happen? Well, very simply, because the substitution that's actually happening is not in the physical silver gold idol, but it's in the fact that you're trusting in it. The issue is not so much that they've made an idol which they bow down and worship. That is an issue. But what is the greater issue, as we saw in Isaiah, is that many of the, when God's people made the golden calf, they actually thought they were worshipping God, not a different God. They actually thought they were worshipping the one true God through the golden calf. And that's why it was a breaking of the commandment, because God says, you are to make no graven. I can't be reduced to an image. And so when you read that event carefully, what you'll read, and you'll read it several times, is that God's people thought they were worshipping God through an image that they made with their hands. And of course, they're not.

But why is it so difficult to get rid of idolatry? Because it's not, the issue is not the image. The issue is the fact that you've trusted in the image. And what you have to get rid of is not the image, but your trust in it. And that's why it's so difficult. That's why it's so difficult, because people are not necessarily, people are, idols are not necessarily their houses.
People's idols are not necessarily their bank account. The idols that people have is not necessarily their health, but it is the fact that they trust in them to keep them safe, to keep them warm, to keep them protected. It's not the house which is the problem, but it's the trust in the house is a substitute

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security, which is the issue. And so when Hosea is saying, get rid of your substitutes, what he's actually calling God's people to do is get rid of the things that you're trusting in, in place of trusting in God. And that's why it's so difficult. Because we think when we've got rid of the badminton, or we've got rid of the swimming, or we've got rid of the football, or we've got rid of the cars, or we've got rid of the multiple holidays, or we've got rid of multiple properties, when we've got rid of those things, suddenly our idolatry stops. But it doesn't stop at all, because they're not the issue.
The issue is you're trusting in them to give you something that God's not giving you, or at least you think God's not giving you. And that's where the issue, that's why our idolatry continues, even when you get it out the house. Because it's bound up in the heart, it's not bound up in the object that you're trusting in. The issue is in your heart, and what you give over to it. And therefore, they're to seek God, they're to get rid of these substitutes, and seek God. Who could be more trustworthy than God? And it seems obvious that nothing can. So why do people then trust in a substitute? Well, this is where the answer is again, very clear and very simple. Why would any person trust in something else other than God, when they know that God is more trustworthy? And it comes down to this, that everything I trust in, other than God, I am seeking to receive something from it, that I'm not getting from God. Or at least I think I'm not getting from God.
And so a man who trusts in money is seeking additional comfort than the comfort God gives him. Is seeking additional space, is seeking additional sort of breathing space, as it were, rather than living in the day-by-day, daily tension of trusting God.
[26:58] God. There's the issue. That's what the issue is here. That when we trust in things other than God, we are seeking to get our own will. And when we're called to trust in God, we're called to trust in God's will. And that's why it's so difficult to get rid of idols. So difficult to get rid of our substitute gods, because we're trusting in them for a very good reason. We're wanting something in return. And that's why it's so, so difficult to get rid of idolatry out of the life of the church and out of our own life personally. Because it has such a tight grip. It's not the building. It's not the physical object. It's not that in itself. It's bound up in the heart. And it's a combination of trust and the desire of your own will. That's why idolatry is so strong. And when Hosea is saying, get rid of your substitute gods, he's including that. Your will and your trust in them also has to go.

Once it has, then they must return. And you'll notice in chapter 14, that when he tells God's people to return, O Israel, to the Lord, your God, he says to them, verse two, take with you your words and return to the Lord. And this is the most, one of the most impressive phrases in Hosea. And you, you know what it means. Even if you don't know what it means, I know you know what it means. Remember the story of the prodigal son. Do you remember how, when he's away from his father and he's away from the home, he's away from the place of blessing. And he says, before he goes home, he rehearses what he's going to say to his father before he goes and says it to his father. And when he goes to his father and says it, what is he doing? He's taking his words with him. And what Hosea is telling God's people to do is make sure you are absolutely clear what you're going to say to God before you say it to him. Know what you're going to say and then say it.
Take your words with you. Repent, believe, acknowledge your sin and take it and go to God and say it in exactly the same way the prodigal son does it with the father. In fact, the prodigal son would be a wonderful illustration of what is actually happened to God's people in Hosea. They were with the father, they had his blessing, they left a beautiful relationship for something worse in order to fulfill their own will and order to fulfill their own desires. They trusted in the money in their pockets, they trusted in their own ability to work, but they got themselves into a position where they were utterly bankrupt. And now they need to think through their ills and their sins and take their words with them back to the father and repent and believe. And so Hosea reminds his people, verse three, chapter 14, sorry, of verse three, that your substitutes cannot save you. Assyria, that political alliance, it cannot save you. But even if it could, let's imagine for a moment that your idols that you trust in to fulfill your own will could actually give you what you wanted.
[30:44] Let's just push that point because in many ways it can. You know, money can, money for instance, can actually solve a lot of problems. You know, a rich Christian will have less problems than a poor Christian because they can buy their way out of the issue. So we understand how it plays. But let's say that these idols can actually give you what you want. The money can actually buy you health to a certain degree. It can actually buy you comfort to a certain degree. It can give you what you want.

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You can actually fulfill your own desires with enough money. What Hosea is trying to get his people to understand is even if all of that is true, the money cannot protect you from God.
Even if all of those things are true, at the end of the day, none of it can protect you from God. And the reality is that whatever you're dealing with in life, you're going to have to deal with God.
And that's the point. That we are dealing with God all the time, whether we realize it or not. And so when Hosea tells God's people to return, you have that awful sense when you make up your mind to go, that what kicks in? Paul says it in Romans. It's that awful feeling of how much time you've wasted.
I don't think there's anything worse than feeling that knowledge of waste.
[32:21] Money that perhaps you've wasted. Time perhaps you've wasted. And so it becomes unbelievably apparent that God has given you these things of time, money and strength. And then you look back over a period of time where you have not walked close and clean with the Lord. And you feel that awful sense.

I don't think there can be many more things worse than it. Of waste. Utter waste. Time, money, resources, strength. And it's all being wasted by you.
By me. God's people waste what God gives them. We waste what God gives us every day. And that's the issue that God's people are to come and realize. Just how much we waste of God's blessings.
And so Hosea's call or his appeal is this. What do you think your response should be now that you know that God is behind you? Return. Now that you know that your God is behind you, that you have left him behind, what do you think you should do?
And he says to them, he's asking the question in the answer that he provides. Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God.
[33:47] Your God is behind you. Well, here's the exhortation as we close. Hosea concludes with an appeal and therefore it's kind of not reached its conclusion, is it?

We're still waiting for God's people to return. And even in the church today, we want many of God's people to return. We believe they are the Lord's.
But they're prodigals and prodigals exist. There's no doubt about it. That God's people can waste so much. And it takes that sense of bankruptcy before they come to their senses and return home.
But the one thing that must happen to all people if they are going to return is the removal of substitutes. Removing those things that you're trusting in instead of God in order to fulfill your own will.
And the reason why, as I said, they are so difficult to get rid of, why those substitutes are so difficult to get rid of, is because you're trusting in them for a reason.
[34:58] And that reason is to fulfill your own will in some way or other. Or at least your will concerning your worries about the future. So I trust in this because I'm worried about tomorrow or what I'll do in five years' times.

And you need to understand that as a pastor, where I'm sort of more into my ministry with less time to go than what I had on the other end, having started work at 15, of where I'm going to live when I retire.
And I wrestle with this all the time about what more do I need to do to be ready for that day? And what more can I do given the time that I've got?
And it's so tempting to go, I don't know what I'll do. I'll trust in my abilities. Now, don't get me wrong. I believe that God provides for us by enabling us to provide for ourselves.
But at the same time, there needs to be a balance at which we trust God for the future. And so idolatry creeps in, even in the best motives.
[36:03] That sense of idolatry can creep in, even when your motives are for the very best. And you begin to realize, hang on a minute. I'm not trusting God as I should.

And now I'm beginning to trust in the gifts that God has given me. And I'm trying to use them to secure my future. Forgetting that any security outside of God isn't actually secure.
And that idolatry, which started off with good and pure motives, a desire to look after a wife and children, suddenly becomes a sin before the face of God.
And you have to repent of it. Because it's so serious. Well, remember this. That as we close, that I hopefully have demonstrated in many ways, patience.

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Perhaps not every time. But patience. I can remember preaching four sermons on why we should have communion every week. No one's ever really responded.
[37:03] In fact, no one ever really responds all that much anyway. And yet I've not pushed it. And I have patiently waited. I have sought to implement it for the benefit and spiritual health of this church.

And yet I've never pushed it. But I do think that at least your response before God this evening, not before me, you don't need to take any notice of this. But we're at the stage with Hosea of, what are you going to do now?
Hosea is laying it firmly at our feet. When are you going to implement? When are you going to implement? I hope you don't say, oh, we don't do that here.
Because it's the implementation of this appeal which leads to change. And so I'll finish with this. Nothing changes for God's people.
Nothing turns around for God's people until God's people turn around. And everything turns around for God's people when God's people turn around.
[38:09] And this is why the appeal to the church is the same to the appeal to the people of God here. It's not an appeal for you to come. It's an appeal for you to return.

Because you've gone too far. And your God is behind you. And that there, I think, is the message. For not just our church. And not even perhaps you.
But perhaps others. But for the church at large. We seem to have left God behind. Some of us seeking to fill our own will of selfish desires.
And others mistakenly by seeking to do the right thing. We have left God behind. And what we must remember is that God is the only place that we are secure.
Amen. Amen.

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