

IV. “Like People, Like Priest”

28-Dec-03

Hosea 4:1-19

Bentley Chapters 6-7

Theme: God holds religious leaders accountable for leading His people astray; corrupt religion leads to corrupt living.

Key Verses: Hosea 4:1, 6, 9 – ¹Hear the word of the Lord, you children of Israel, for the Lord brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land: ‘There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land.’ ... ⁶My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children. ... ⁹And it shall be: like people, like priest. So I will punish them for their ways, and reward them for their deeds.

Review

Last week we looked at chapter 2 of Hosea. The chapter neatly divides into two sections: the first half (2:2-13) describes the Wayward Wife, while the second half (2:13-23) describes the loving Husband. This chapter can be seen on three levels. At the first level Hosea is the faithful husband and Gomer is the adulterous wife. At the second level, God is the one who is faithful to His promise, and Israel is the nation who has turned away from her God and prostituted herself with other gods. And at the third level our God is the one who is always faithful to His word, and we are those who have forgotten Him and have been disobedient to His commands.

The Wayward Wife introduces us to Gomer, and by way of analogy, to Israel and ourselves. Gomer was in it for herself. She was all about pleasure, sin and materialism. She didn’t even realize that all the good things that she had were gifts from God. But God had a different idea for her. He hedged her in, so she couldn’t sin as much as she wanted. He began to take away the things that she had established in her life as more important than God, so that she would repent and return to her Husband.

The Loving Husband introduces us to the active Love of our God in pursuing us, the Wayward Wife. God gives us a new hope, transforming the Valley of Achor – the valley of trouble – into a Door of Hope through Jesus Christ. He gives us a new purity of faith, purging us of our sinful tendencies and focusing on true worship. He enters into a new covenant with us through Christ, guaranteeing our peace and security. He pays the bride-price for a new betrothal, and gives us His attributes of righteousness, justice, lovingkindness, mercy, and faithfulness. He restores us to a new relationship with Himself, sowing us in fruitfulness rather than scattering us; showing us mercy when we had formerly not obtained mercy; and making us His people so that we respond, “You are my God!” This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; *who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy*” (1 Peter 2:9-10)

Achor and Jezreel were two valleys which spoke of Israel’s failure. We all have our valleys of Achor — times when our sin brings us into great trouble. But this is the good news: there is a door of hope. Jesus said, ‘I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved... I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly’ (John 10: 9-10). No wider door of hope could possibly be set before us.

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Introduction

So, we've finished the first section of the book of Hosea – chapters 1-3. We now begin our study of the rest of the book, and I'm here to warn you that it will not be as pretty as the first three chapters. For most of Hosea 4-14, we are going to go into the “judgment mode.” While there will be flashes of hope, most of the rest of Hosea (with exceptions in chapters 11 and 14) are rather negative. However, we can and must learn from these negative passages. For the things that Israel was doing wrong and received judgment in consequence will also result in judgment upon us unless we learn from their sins and repent of them. So, we have the opportunity to be “pro-active” and avoid the judgments upon ancient Israel for their disobedience if we commit ourselves to obey the word of the Lord.

Today, the passage we have before us has a solemn warning to religious leaders, whether pastors, elders, deacons, or teachers. It is a warning to guard the truth of God's word and maintain the purity of God's worship.

Exposition

A. The Indictment (4:1-3)

Verse 1 sweeps us up into the heavenly courtroom. This verse is a bit reminiscent of Hosea 2:2, where the children are urged to “bring charges against your mother, bring charges.” But this indictment is even more severe, because it is the Lord Himself who “brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land” (1a). While the children of Israel are the defendants in this trial, the Lord God is both the prosecuting attorney and the Judge. There is no shortage of crimes with which to charge the people. The second half of verse 1 lists three sins of omission, while verse 2 lists five sins of commission. Let's first look at the sins of omission.

What is missing from the people of God? “There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land” (1b). The NKJ translates the Hebrew words as *truth*, *mercy*, and *knowledge*. The NIV translates them as *faithfulness*, *love*, and *knowledge*, while the NASB translates them as *faithfulness*, *kindness*, and *knowledge*. You may recognize these as some of the items in God's betrothal dowry of chapter 2: “I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in *lovingkindness* and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in *faithfulness*, and you shall *know* the Lord” (2:19-20). In Hosea chapter 2, God grants faithfulness, kindness, and knowledge to His people. Why? Because, as is made clear here in chapter 4, these things are missing from their lives.

The people are not *faithful* to God. Instead of remaining loyal to Him because of all He has done for them, they have rejected the *truth* and have served other gods. The second word in Hebrew is our friend *hesed*, which is often translated as *lovingkindness* or *mercy*, and represents the steadfast covenantal love of God. God's people are not devoted to Him as they should be. This results in a lack of *knowledge* of God. It is not as though the people had forgotten everything about God; but rather that they lived a lifestyle where there was no room for a relationship with God. Bentley puts it this way: “Knowing God means having a constant, intimate, personal relationship with him, just as a truly loving husband has with his wife — only it is far, far greater than that.”

So, the first charge lists the sins of omission: no faithfulness, kindness, or knowledge of God. In their pursuit of materialism and the lifestyle of the pagans around them, Israel had no time for

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proper worship, no desire for a relationship with the Lord, and no time for God. They were busy with their other pursuits. And it is this emptiness, this abandonment of their covenantal commitment to God, these sins of omission, that lead to the more overt sins of commission listed in verse 2: violations of the third, ninth, sixth, eighth, and seventh commandments. Society had begun to break down. This breakdown continues in verse 3, until we begin to see a reversal of the creation order. The land mourns, and people, beasts, birds, and fish suffer. Hubbard says, "Hosea's holocaust resembles closely Zephaniah's (1:2-3) and echoes Genesis 1:30 in such a way that the appointed judgment for Israel's sin is nothing less than the 'reversal of creation.'"

So God levels His charge against the people. First there is a turning away from the acknowledgement of the true God, and then there are overt violations of the Decalogue, as all restraint is broken and violence becomes a way of life, resulting in a breakdown of society and a destruction of all that is worthwhile. Sound familiar? This is the pattern of a post-Christian society. Once a generation believes it has no need of God, it may still live an outwardly moral lifestyle. But their lack of true values is passed on to the next generation without the moral restraints of the previous generation. And the next generation has even less moral restraint than the previous one. A post-Christian society has no truth or mercy or knowledge of God, which leads to all sorts of gross violations of the law of God without any concern or consideration. That was the situation of Hosea's day, and I believe it describes our day as well.

B. The Guilty (4:4-10)

Who is responsible for this grave indictment of Israel? Who has led the people astray? Hosea first and foremost lays the blame at the feet of the priests, and in particular the chief priest.

1. The Priest (4:4-6)

Verse 4 is difficult to understand, but it seems that the sense of it has to do with a particular priest who has some great responsibility for the condition that the people are in. "Let no man contend" can also be translated "Let no man bring a charge" (4a). In this way, we can see the relation with verse 1 where God has brought the charge against the people, and now against this priest in particular. It is possible that this unnamed priest in Hosea is the same priest who contended against Amos. In Amos 7, Amaziah the priest of Bethel presided over the idolatrous worship of God. Amaziah challenged Amos' prophecy against king Jeroboam II; he was defending the status quo of the king. He didn't want to hear any words from a true prophet; instead he told Amos to flee to Judah and never again prophesy in Bethel. Of course, Amos refused to go along with Amaziah, and instead prophesied a terrible fate for this false priest.

So we can very well imagine that a false priest like Amaziah would be in cahoots with false prophets (5b) who foretold continued prosperity rather than preached words of judgment like Amos or Hosea. They would be natural allies in the pursuit of pleasure rather than in the diligent leadership of the people in true worship. What is the one failure of this priest and his allies more than any other which is cited here? It is a rejection of knowledge (6a). The religious leaders of Israel have rejected the knowledge of God. They have "exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever" (Rom. 1:25).

Knowledge of God is such a key concept for Hosea. It means having a close, personal, intimate relationship with God. And the leaders of God's people have rejected this relationship; they have rejected the knowledge of God, and by doing so have rejected God Himself. But this

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rejection has greater consequences than just their own sinfulness, for they are responsible for leading the people of Israel astray. The priests and the religious leaders are supposed to instruct the people, but the people are now “destroyed for lack of knowledge” (6a). The indictment of verse 1 – “there is no knowledge of God in the land” – can be directly laid at the doorstep of this wicked priest and others like him who have abandoned the truth of God for the lie. As a result, the priest has been rejected and forgotten by God (6b). What a terrible thing!

This is a word of warning to ministers, and elders, and deacons, and teachers. When seminaries stop teaching a high view of the Scriptures, they turn out men who begin to compromise. When enough men have been trained in the “new theology,” entire denominations can slide into liberalism. Let us stand firm for the Word of God. Let us not “pick and choose” which parts of the Bible we like and which ones we don’t. Let us not drift into liberalism and deny the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures. Let us not abandon the gospel of Jesus for a gospel of prosperity or accommodation with the culture around us. Let us not be like this priest of Hosea chapter 4 who has rejected knowledge and has destroyed the people because of lack of knowledge.

2. *Like People, Like Priest (4:7-10)*

The passage goes on in more detail to outline the atrocious and sinful behavior of the priesthood. It seems in verse 7 as if the priesthood was a popular profession – it continually increased. And as their numbers increased, their sinfulness also increased. Boice puts it this way: “Godlessness is not incompatible with religion. In fact, it goes along with it nicely. Here was a period characterized by cursing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery (2); but during this period the priesthood grew in numbers as those who were professional religionists moved in to capitalize on the debauchery.”

It seems as if these priests were having a good time. Professional religion paid well, or so it seemed. Business was booming. It seems as if these priests actually encouraged the people to sin (8b). In a spiritual sense, they approved of and relished the prevailing wickedness around them. But the phrase “they eat up the sin of My people” (8a) may actually have a literal meaning. Since the prescribed remedy for iniquity was a sin offering, and the priests received a portion of the offering as a meal, more sinning meant more B-B-Q dinners for the priests. “Y’all don’t worry about all that foolin’ around. Go on and have a good ole time. But make sure you drop by and leave a leg o’ lamb for us. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge.” Thus, the priests could sate their physical appetites by encouraging the people to sate their sinful appetites. All in all, it seemed like a win-win for the priests.

And yet it is God who has the final word. “And it shall be: like people, like priest. So I will punish them for their ways, and reward them for their deeds” (9). The priests are not exempt from the judgment to come on God’s people. They are not somehow removed from condemnation because of their position. On the contrary! They are held responsible for the calamitous state of the nation. Isaiah says the same thing in Is. 24:1-3. When the apocalypse comes, no guilty one will escape. Because they have stopped being obedient to God, the things they hunger for – physical and sexual appetites – will not be fulfilled (10). There is no satisfaction in seeking material pleasure – satisfaction only comes from seeking after the knowledge of God.

What can we learn thus far from this passage? Beware of church leaders who are more interested in pursuing a social agenda “than on obeying the clear teaching of the Word of God.”

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Bentley says, “It is a sad indictment on God’s people today that those who are in places of authority are in many cases not leading the people into the ways of God.” Sadly, I think of the Episcopal Church, which apparently is more interested in advocating a pro-gay agenda than in condemning sin. When church leaders embrace sin, then judgment cannot be far behind, in the form of the removal of God’s blessing and the frustration of their pursuits. But we must not rest on our Reformed laurels. We also need to be constantly vigilant against the creep of liberalism, of watering down of the great truths of the Scriptures in order to accommodate modern notions of equality, diversity, tolerance, or multiculturalism.

Eaton exhorts us this way: “What sort of leader is God looking for? He is looking for humility, so that ‘greatness’ can come into a person’s life without it leading him into sinful carelessness. He is looking for leaders who do not corrupt, but rather uphold, the worship and service of God. He is looking for those who will implement biblical standards, those who will be free from love of gain.” Let us look for and require these types of leaders. Because godly people will have godly leaders, while corrupt people will have corrupt leaders. As Hosea reminds us, “Like people, like priest.”

C. Corrupt Religion (4:11-19)

So far, we’ve seen God’s charge against Israel – that sins of omission have led to sins of commission and a general moral decay in the society as a whole. In one sense, the religious leaders have been held accountable for this sad spiritual state, because they have rejected knowledge of God and have failed to instruct the people in their religious duties. Rather, the religious leaders have encouraged the people in their sinful lifestyles, resulting in further societal decay and their own rejection and condemnation by God. In the second half of Hosea 4, we will see the moral decay of Israel up close and personal. When religion is corrupted, the result is a corrupt lifestyle.

1. Harlotry (4:11-14)

The condemnation of Israel here isn’t because they are not religious. In fact, they are very religious. The problem is that their religion is in vain. Instead of being fixed on the proper worship of God, their hearts are enslaved to “harlotry, wine, and new wine” (11). This takes us right back to chapter 2, where Gomer the harlot was obsessed with the pursuit of material possessions. They used all the pagan means at hand in order to get ahead, including seeking “counsel from their wooden idols” and “divining rods” (12). Lest we judge these superstitious Israelites too hard, let us remember that those who seek guidance today in horoscopes or by astrology are just as foolish and are just as in danger of incurring God’s wrath.

The result of this “spirit of the age” is a two-fold harlotry. First there is the spiritual harlotry of abandoning the one true God for the pursuit of other gods, such as pleasure, possessions, and power. Second there is the physical harlotry of a culture in sexual revolution that has thrown off the shackles of Biblical restraint. We can see these two expressions of unfaithfulness in verse 13.

“They offer sacrifices on the mountaintops, and burn incense on the hills, under oaks, poplars, and terebinths, because their shade is good” (13a). Here is a description of corrupt religion, pure and simple. Who are they sacrificing to? Who are they burning incense to? Not the Lord God, but some hollow replica. They are going through the forms of worship, but their worship is in vain. They are not worshipping God as He demands, and as a result, verse 12 says that “they have played the harlot against God.” Notice also that while they are religious, their worship is a

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matter of convenience. Instead of worshiping in Jerusalem at the Temple as God demands, they worship under any available shade tree. It was comfortable, close, and convenient to find a nearby shady tree. They could do what they wanted, where they wanted, when they wanted. It was a much more difficult proposition to worship God on His terms. When we compromise the worship of God for convenience, culture, or comfort, our religion is corrupt. This was the state of Israel in the 8th Century BC, and sadly this is too often the state of modern Christianity at the start of the 21st Century AD.

Furthermore, corrupt religion leads to corrupt living, as we see in the rest of verse 13. “Therefore your daughters commit harlotry, and your brides commit adultery” (13b). Ancient Israel had a sexual revolution. Kidner puts it this way: “This society had gone as sex-mad as our own, with promiscuous adolescents and with marriages violated from the start.” Verse 14 makes the point that it is not simply the promiscuous women who are guilty: it takes two to tango, and the men are not held innocent. Everyone involved in these activities is held accountable.

All you have to do is pick up a magazine at the grocery check-out stand, or watch a gossip-entertainment show on TV to see the parallels between our culture and theirs. Corrupt religion leads to corrupt living. When Biblical values are jettisoned, the first generation may still live an outwardly moral lifestyle. But the second and third and succeeding generations throw off those restraints as well. What drives a society in a downward spiral? Personal emptiness. When Christian leaders fail to teach the truth, Christianity becomes empty and meaningless. When religion is in vain, people seek to fill their lives with meaning from pursuits of pleasure, possessions, and power, but all to no avail. Welcome to the post-Christian society.

2. *A Stubborn Calf (4:15-19)*

Let me skip verse 14 for the moment and look at the downward slide of Israel. “Israel is stubborn, like a stubborn calf” (15a). Israel refuses to follow God’s word, to be corrected by the words of the prophets such as Hosea or Amos. And so God gives them a measure of what they want: “Now the Lord will let them forage like a lamb in open country.” Lest you think this sounds good – the Lord has given them freedom – remember what He says in Isaiah 53:6 – “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” Israel was a stubborn calf; Israel was a straying lamb. Faced with the choice of God’s way or the highway, they chose the highway, the highway to hell. The rest of the chapter shows that progression toward national ruin: they are joined to idols, they are rebellious, they commit harlotry continually, they are led by dishonorable rulers. What is the end result? “The wind has wrapped her up in its wings and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices” (19). The NIV puts it this way: “A whirlwind will sweep them away, and their sacrifices will bring them shame.” As Bentley puts it: “In other words, the Assyrian hordes would swoop down on them like a whirlwind and take them away.”

Let’s go back to verse 14, because it contains a somber warning and exhortation for us. It is a warning not to follow the example of Israel. “Though you, Israel, play the harlot, let Judah not offend” (14a). Remember, at this time, God’s people had split into two kingdoms. The larger kingdom of Israel or Ephraim to the north is the part that is under scrutiny in the book of Hosea. Meanwhile, the kingdom of Judah had enjoyed a larger measure of God’s grace, and thanks to the greater faithfulness of her kings, Judah had not yet slipped down as far the slippery moral slope like Israel. Hosea addresses a word of warning to Judah at this point. “Don’t be like your

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sister Israel. Don't follow her example. Don't offend God as she has offended Him. Don't be a stubborn calf. Don't join yourselves to idolatrous worship – leave Ephraim alone (17)."

In order to make this warning clear, Hosea adds three exhortations: "Do not come up to Gilgal, nor go up to Beth Aven, nor swear an oath, saying, 'As the Lord lives'—" (14b). Beth Aven is a mocking name for Bethel. Both Gilgal and Bethel were prominent places in Israel's past.

Gilgal was base camp for Joshua (Jos. 4:19-20); an early sanctuary of worship (Jos. 9; 1 Sam. 10:8); a center of judgment under Samuel (1 Sam. 7:16); and a place of royal coronation (1 Sam. 11:14-15). Gilgal had been the place where the reproach of Egypt had been rolled away. Gilgal literally means "rolling." But by the time of Hosea, Gilgal had become an idolatrous place of worship. Look at what Hosea says in 12:11 – "Though they sacrifice bulls in Gilgal, indeed their altars shall be heaps in the furrows of the field." Although the disgrace of Egypt had been rolled away at Gilgal, the people of Israel brought new disgrace upon themselves by their corrupt worship at this ancient site.

Bethel was where Abraham worshipped God (Gen. 12:8; 13:3-4); where Jacob saw his vision of the heavenly ladder (Gen. 28:18-22); where Jacob's name was changed to Israel and where he built a memorial pillar (Gen. 35:1-15); where God was worshipped (Jdg. 20:18; 1 Sam. 10:3); and where Samuel also judged (1 Sam. 7:15). Under the first king of Israel, Jeroboam I, Bethel along with Dan had become an idolatrous center of worship. Jeroboam I had placed golden calves at Bethel so that the people of Israel could worship Yahweh there instead of being "tempted" to worship God correctly at the Temple in Jerusalem, which was located in the southern kingdom of Judah (1 Kings 12:25-33). No longer was Bethel the "house of God." Instead, Hosea calls the place Beth Aven. Beth Aven means the "house of iniquity" for that is what it had become.

The worship of Israel had become empty and vain. Their oaths were meaningless, because they were not centered on the true God. Their worship was corrupt and unbiblical. Eaton calls Hosea 4:15-19 a "'Liturgy of the Lost,' a lamentation over a society moving to its final catastrophe, after a long period of decay. Despite its wonderful origins, shared with Judah, in which Jacob met with God [at Bethel], there is no meeting with God now. Despite Yahweh's rolling disgrace away [at Gilgal], they had turned to the 'freedom' of living without God."

And so, Hosea has a warning for us. We are to be like Judah, and not follow the example of Israel into sin. In modern terms, this is a warning not to follow other denominations into sin. Just because the Episcopal Church has chosen to embrace the sin of homosexuality, we must not follow suit. Just because other denominations have chosen liberalism and jettisoned Biblical authority, we must stand firm for the truth. Just because other churches no longer believe in sin or the need of redemption through Jesus Christ alone, does not mean that we can abandon the Savior. Like Judah, we are not to succumb to the spirit of the age, to compromise Biblical truth with a culture that is diametrically opposed to it.

James Boice puts it this way: "God's warning is to flee from these places: 'Do not go to Gilgal; do not go up to Beth Aven.' Is that not the warning He would give us? We live in a declining culture. Sin is apparent on every hand. But it may not be as late for us as it was for Israel. The word to Judah is a word of separation, not separation from the world (for she has a witness in the world), but rather separation from the worldliness of the world and particularly from the false and shallow religion that passes so easily as true.

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Conclusion

After Boice: The argument brought against Israel in Hosea 4 is precisely the argument that Paul brings against the race as a whole in the first chapter of Romans. We may even go further. The similarity of ideas and even verbal echoes between these two chapters indicate that Paul probably had Hosea's chapter in mind as he penned his own indictment of the Gentile nations (cf. Hosea 4:6 with Rom. 1:24, 26, 28; Hosea 4:7 with Rom. 1:23; Hosea 4:11 with Rom. 1:21-22).

Paul is saying three important things in Romans 1:18-23. First, God has given a revelation of Himself to all men from which, however, all men and women have departed. There is a difference here between Paul's words to the Gentiles and Hosea's words to the Jews, for the Gentiles had less knowledge of God than Israel had. Nevertheless, there is an important similarity, for each has departed from that knowledge, however little or however great it was.

The second of Paul's points is the heart of the accusation. Having been aware of God and therefore having had at least a rudimentary knowledge of Him (more in Israel's case), people have nevertheless turned from that knowledge and suppressed it lest the truth about God rise up to challenge them and lead them in ways they do not wish to go. This is the true nature of the problem. It is not that men and women have no knowledge of God at all and are condemned for what they "innocently enough" do not know. It is rather that they do have knowledge of God but have rejected it because they do not like the direction in which such knowledge takes them. In the case of Israel, it is the knowledge of God's righteous decrees and standards that the people rejected. They wanted sin: prostitution, adulteries, feasts, and ritual religions (4:10-14). Since these were incompatible with the worship of the true God, they rejected their knowledge of God and served idols.

Paul's last point is that because of their rejection of God through a suppression of the truth about Him, the wrath of God is being poured out from heaven. In Hosea the idolatry and immorality are also clearly seen, but in addition there is the specific promise of a future national catastrophe, compared to "a whirlwind" that "will sweep them away" (v. 19). This occurred in the overthrow of Israel and the subsequent deportation of its people.

God is the source of all good: so if an individual or people will not have God, they will have the opposite in increasing measure. Paul indicates this decline by a threefold reiteration of the phrase "God [He] gave them over"—to the sinful desires of their hearts, to shameful lusts, and to a depraved mind. Hosea describes the same process as: 1) moral depravity and societal decay (4:1-3); 2) the debasement of leadership, particularly religious leadership (4:4-10); 3) personal emptiness (4:11-14); and 4) ruin on a nationwide scale (4:15-19).

Hosea chapter 4 has given us a portrait of the post-Christian society. The decay starts at the top, when Christian leaders stop teaching the Christian faith. Within a few generations, rejection of knowledge by the leaders leads to a general lack of knowledge within the church. A post-Christian society has no truth or mercy or knowledge of God, and this leads to all sorts of gross violations of the law of God without any concern or consideration. What drives a society in a downward spiral? When Christian leaders fail to teach the truth, Christianity becomes empty and meaningless. When we compromise the worship of God for convenience, culture, or comfort, our religion is corrupt and useless. When religion is in vain, people seek to fill their lives with meaning from pursuits of pleasure, possessions, and power, but all to no avail.

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Welcome to the post-Christian society. Our challenge is the one given to Judah: we are not to succumb to the spirit of the age, to compromise Biblical truth with a culture that is diametrically opposed to it.

Next week: Lesson 5 – The Moth and the Lion – Hosea 5:1-15 – Bentley chapter 8

Close in Prayer.