

VIII. “*Sow the Wind and Reap the Whirlwind*”

25-Jan-04

Hosea 8:1-14

Bentley Chapters 12-13

Theme: Forgetting our Maker leads to corruption of religion, societal decay, and ultimately judgment.

Key Verses: Hosea 8:7, 14 – ⁷They sow the wind, and reap the whirlwind. The stalk has no bud; it shall never produce meal. If it should produce, aliens would swallow it up. ... ¹⁴For Israel has forgotten his Maker, and has built temples; Judah has also multiplied fortified cities; but I will send fire upon his cities, and it shall devour his palaces.

Review

Last week we looked at the cooking and flying lessons of Hosea chapter 7. We saw four different images that all spoke to various directions that Ephraim turned to instead of calling out and returning to the Lord. The first image was that of the burning oven. The burning oven speaks to internal politics or power struggles. Remember, intertwined with this image was a description of a royal assassination at a gala party. But trusting in political leaders or political processes is doomed to disappointment. When the Church substitutes political action for prayer we begin to lose our way.

The moldy, half-baked bread speaks to assimilation into society. Israel wanted to be like all the other nations around them. Their motto was, “If you can’t beat them, join them.” In their zeal to be like the other nations, they lost the one thing that set them apart and above the other nations: they were no longer separate, set apart, holy. This is not an abrupt change, but a slow, gradual, and imperceptible slide. As Judge Robert Bork puts it, it is “slouching towards Gomorrah.” The end result is inevitable: a sapping of the spiritual energy, strength, and vitality of the Church, as it embraces the pagan culture of the world that surrounds us.

The silly, senseless dove speaks to reliance upon external powers. Israel looked to Egypt and Assyria, Assyria and Egypt. But both nations symbolized a return to bondage in sin and darkness. There is no hope of salvation or redemption by running into the arms of God’s enemies. The Church must rely upon Christ for redemption, rather than on worldly powers.

Finally, the broken bow speaks to reliance upon our own strength. If we want the church to grow, we need to do so through prayer and faithfulness to the word, not slick advertising, watering down the gospel, or entertaining instead of worshiping God. We need to commit ourselves and the Church to the Lord through prayer. Anything less is a futile attempt to rely on our own strength instead of the Lord’s.

All of these strategies are doomed to fail. Ultimately, the remedy to finding fulfillment in politics or assimilation or external sources or internal strength is to call upon the Lord. It comes down to a personal relationship with a personal God. God is not a mechanical instrument to be used or manipulated. He is not some “cosmic deity” to call upon only when needed. He *is* the Lord God. He *is* the Most High. But He is also a “*Me*” that communicates with us. He is knowable. Hosea urges us to know the Lord. We must know Him personally and intimately, as a wife knows a husband. We must call on Him; we must return to Him; we must return to our loving Husband.

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Introduction

As we study Hosea chapter 8 today, we will see that there are really no new themes in this chapter. In many ways, Hosea 8 serves as a summary of chapter 4 to 7. We'll see many internal references back to earlier verses in Hosea. Although Hosea uses some new images in chapter 8 such as a bird of prey or a wild donkey, he continues to hammer home his main points. The northern kingdom of Israel has forgotten their Maker (8:14), and that leads to corruption of true religion and societal decay, resulting in judgment. Hosea weaves back and forth between corrupt religion and societal decay. Obviously there is a strong causal link between the two. And again that is the warning or lesson for us in the Church today: when the Church fails to maintain the purity of its faith, worship, conduct, and teaching, the Church and the society around it falls into sin and decay.

Exposition

A. Trumpet and Eagle (8:1-3)

The very first line of the chapter calls us back to chapter 5: "Set the trumpet to your mouth!" (1a). In chapter 5, the trumpet alarm was sounded because of the conflict between Judah and Israel (cp. 5:8). That was bad enough. But this time, the need is more urgent. "He shall come like an eagle against the house of the Lord" (1b). The word translated "eagle here may better be translated as "vulture." Eaton describes the meaning: "The house of Israel is like a dying man and a vulture is circling round waiting to swoop. The language is poetical; the encircling vulture is no doubt the Assyrian threat." This meaning is reinforced by the phrase "the enemy will pursue him" in verse 3. So, the chapter starts out with the specter of judgment hovering over Israel, like a vulture circles around its prey. Not a good beginning.

Next, the reason for the Assyrian judgment is given. "Because they have transgressed My covenant and rebelled against My law. Israel will cry to Me, 'My God, we know You!' Israel has rejected the good" (1c-3a). Three reasons are given, and they are all essentially the same thing. Israel has transgressed the covenant, rebelled against the Law, and rejected the good. No real new information here. Back in chapter 6 we read something similar: "But at Adam *they transgressed the covenant*; there they dealt treacherously with Me" (6:7).

I said that the reasons are all essentially the same, and that's true, although there are slight nuances between covenant and law. Boice explains: "The word *covenant* means 'agreement.' It is essentially personal. *Law* is an objective standard. In some circles it has been customary to set these two ideas over against one another as two conflicting definitions of sin. But these two ideas cannot be set over against one another. To break God's covenant is to break God's law. Similarly, to break the law of God is to offend against God personally. The problem with making a separation between these two definitions is that we can easily delude ourselves into thinking that our relationship with God is intact while we are nevertheless sinning, and this only adds hypocrisy and hardness of heart to our other sins. A self-confessed homosexual clergyman justified his life style. When asked whether the law of God did not condemn his sexual practice as sin, he replied, 'Sin is separation from God.' He meant that sin should not be defined by the law of God but only by relationships. This is false, though widespread. So when our text combines the breaking of God's covenant with rebellion against God's law it is saying something very timely and significant. It is saying that we cannot call God, God, without obedience."

We can see from the text in Hosea that this is exactly what the nation of Israel does. "Israel will cry to Me, 'My God, we know You!'" (2). This sounds exactly like they are relying on their

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inadequate repentance of chapter 6: “Let us know, let us pursue knowledge of the Lord” (6:3a). Israel is in effect saying, “Lord, since we know you, since we have a relationship with you, it doesn’t really matter what we are doing. Our behavior, our sin, our rebellion isn’t the important thing. The important thing is that we are related – we have a relationship. We have a connection. So, just don’t pay attention to what we are doing – You need to overlook that.”

The lesson for us is obvious. Corruption of religion begins when we start to dissociate our obedience from our relationship with God. The Scriptures are quite clear: Jesus says, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). We have a relationship to God through His grace, but that relationship is defined by our obedience. Our position in the covenant means that we desire to please God by obeying Him. Whenever we downplay the consequences and effects of sin, we are denying that Christ is our Lord. As Jesus says, “But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46). Israel was a nation of covenant-breakers and rebels. To be one is to be the other. We cannot have grace without obedience. Paul puts it this way, “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!” (Rom. 6:15). Let us return again to our loving Husband in obedience to His word and in purity of conduct.

B. Kings and Calves (8:4-6)

Verse 4 takes us back to Israel’s reliance on political power that we saw described in the burning oven image of chapter 7. “They set up kings, but not by Me; they made princes, but I did not acknowledge them” (4). In chapter seven, we saw a party of assassins taking down a king – “all their kings have fallen” (7:7b); here is the rest of the story – “they set up kings.” You can just hear them crying out, “The king is dead; long live the king!” One king is fallen, but another one has been put in his place. Israel may put their assurance in the rise and fall of kings, in the political power plays of their society, but they are doing so at a grave risk. For through all of the political machinations, they have not factored in God’s approval of their activities. And it is clear that God does not approve of their kings; He does not approve of their politics. “I did not acknowledge them” (4b). This is exactly the treatment that God has received from Israel: “There is no acknowledgement of God in the land” (4:1d, NIV). Eaton sums it up this way: “Just as a God-appointed leader was of no interest to them, so God’s appointment of Himself as their leader was also of no interest to them.”

This verse speaks to the necessity of choosing leaders in accordance with God’s revealed will. This is especially important as we choose leaders of the church. Remember what scoundrels the priests of Hosea’s day were – they were responsible for the lack of knowledge of God in the land (4:6). Bentley reminds us: “Israel forgot that one of the first qualifications for leaders among God’s people is that they should be godly. In the same way when we think of choosing pastors, elders and deacons in the church, then we should take very careful notice of the guidelines laid down in 1 Timothy 3.” Let us continue to examine our church leaders carefully for godliness, for purity of doctrine, and for purity of conduct. To do anything less is to open ourselves up to the condemnation of God.

Hosea then switches back to the subject of corrupt religion: “From their silver and gold they made idols for themselves—that they might be cut off” (4c). Again, this is not a new subject in Hosea. Hosea has already condemned the nation for idolatry in chapter 4: “My people ask counsel from their wooden idols” (4:12a); “Ephraim is joined to idols” (4:17a). We’ve already seen in Hosea 4:15 one of the idolatrous worship centers of Israel that Jeroboam I set up at Bethel, called Beth Aven (“house of iniquity”). This is the place, along with Dan in the north,

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that Jeroboam I established as a place to worship golden calves as a substitute for the proper worship of Yahweh in the Judah-controlled Temple at Jerusalem (1 Ki. 12:27-30).

Like Aaron and the children of Israel who made a golden calf in Exodus chapter 32, the original intent of these golden calves was not to corrupt the worship of God, but in fact to worship Yahweh. After all, there was a PLE (perfectly logical explanation) – “We have to give the people a place and way to worship God so they are not tempted to return to Judah and thus undermine and destroy the nation.” Boice explains further: “In theory the calves of the cult centers were not gods. They were actually calf-pedestals on which the true and invisible god was supposed to stand. But because the people could not see the invisible god while they could see the calf, it inevitably happened that the true God was debased and the ‘idol’ worshiped.” The inevitable destination on this journey of compromise was the corruption of worship until it was unrecognizable. The net result was that just as they believed they could set up their own kings independently from God, they believed they could establish their own worship apart from God.

But God is not so easily dismissed. “Your calf is rejected, O Samaria! My anger is aroused against them—how long until they attain to innocence? For from Israel is even this: A workman made it, and it is not God; but the calf of Samaria shall be broken to pieces” (5-6). Bottom line: God does not accept unacceptable worship. We cannot come to God any way we choose. Anything less than worship that God proscribes is idolatry. Bentley summarizes it this way: “Not only did the Israelites choose their own rulers; they also chose their own way to worship. But even though they may have thought that they were still worshipping the one true God, they were coming to him in a way which was an abomination to Him. They were conforming to the style of worship of the heathen people around them.” Boice concludes, “You do not have to say, ‘I am worshipping an idol’ to be actually worshipping an idol. It is a question, not of what we say, but of that to which we actually give our time and allegiance.” So, the question today for us is: Where do we give our time? Where do we give our allegiance? Where does the Church give its time and allegiance?

C. Wind and Donkey (8:7-10)

Hosea now reviews the message of the moldy, half-baked bread and the senseless dove with a new pair of images. First we have the folly of assimilation into the pagan cultures around them given to us in proverb form. “They sow the wind, and reap the whirlwind. The stalk has no bud; it shall never produce meal. If it should produce, aliens would swallow it up” (7). This is actually a three-part proverb regarding futility, which goes from bad to worse: “Bad sowing leads to even worse reaping (7a), grain that manages to grow at all produces little that is edible (7b), and the little that is edible will be wolfed down by strangers, who raid the field (7c)” (Hubbard). There is an inevitable progression down the slippery slope, and at the end of the slope, “Israel is swallowed up; now they are among the Gentiles like a vessel in which is no pleasure” (8). This language is reminiscent of the moldy, half-baked bread: “Ephraim has mixed himself among the people; Ephraim is a cake unturned. Aliens have *devoured* his strength” (7:8-9a).

Once again, Hosea has illustrated the futility of accommodation with the culture of the world. It’s like trying to farm tornadoes. There is no long-term future in that activity. The end result is to be swallowed up or devoured by the world. Israel should not have been surprised at the result. They wanted to be like the nations around them, so much so that they gave up their distinguishing characteristic – their covenant relationship with God. Like Esau’s disdain for his birthright, selling it to his brother Jacob for a pot of stew, Israel has given up what is most

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valuable to them in order to pursue that which ends up being worthless. If you sow the wind, you end up reaping the whirlwind.

Paul makes a similar argument in the book of Galatians: “Do not be deceived. God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life” (Gal. 6:7-8). But along with this warning, Paul also gives us an exhortation and an encouragement: “And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:9-10).

Second, we have the folly of seeking security in foreign alliances. Hosea reminds us of the senseless dove imagery of 7:11 with another picture from the animal world: a wild donkey. “For they have gone up to Assyria, like a wild donkey alone by itself. Ephraim has hired lovers” (9). The prophet Jeremiah uses a similar image about 100 years later to describe the idolatry of Judah: “How can you say, ‘I am not polluted, I have not gone after the Baals’? See your way in the valley; know what you have done: you are a swift dromedary breaking loose in her ways, a wild donkey used to the wilderness, that sniffs at the wind in her desire; in her time of mating, who can turn her away? All those who seek her will not weary themselves; in her month they will find her” (Jer. 2:23-24). Bentley explains this wild donkey imagery: “The female animals, when they are on heat, allow their scent to waft in the breeze in the hope that any passing male will come to them. The Lord uses this well-known behavior to say to His people, ‘In your craving after alliances with Assyria you are behaving the same way as you did when you turned to worship the Baals.’ This is the same kind of unfaithfulness that Gomer showed towards her husband, Hosea, when she chased after other men. The Ephraimites had wandered away from the rest of God’s people and had turned to their own way.”

What is the end result of this lust for foreign alliances, chasing after Assyria like a wild donkey in heat? “Yes, though they have hired among the nations, now I will gather them; and they shall sorrow a little, because of king of princes” (10). The NIV puts it this way: “Although they have sold themselves among the nations, I will now gather them together. They will begin to waste away under the oppression of the mighty king” (10, NIV). God “gathers” them for judgment. And they begin to feel some pain – they begin to waste away as they come under the cruel domination and oppression of the Assyrian king. And that’s exactly what happened: the Assyrian captivity of Gilead, Galilee, and Naphtali began in 733 BC; Samaria became a vassal state in 732 BC; and the final deportation of Samaria came ten years later in 722 BC. Once again, Hosea makes the point that alliance with the world results in disaster for the Church.

D. Altars and Buildings (8:11-14)

Hosea again turns his attention to corrupt religion in verses 11-13. “Because Ephraim has made many altars for sin, they have become for him altars for sinning” (11). The altar was the place of atonement. The altar was the place of substitutionary blood sacrifice for sin. The altar was the place of reconciliation with God. Having a lot of altars would be a good thing, right? Not if the altars were used to worship God improperly; not if the altars were actually used to encourage the people to sin further. Remember the priests of Hosea 4? “They eat up the sin of My people” (4:8a). It seems as if the wicked priests of Israel encouraged sinning in order for them to get more sin offerings. The more the people sinned, the more the priests prospered, and the more altars that had to be built to support this corrupt institution. Altars for sin have become altars for sinning.

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The subject of altar sacrifice is continued in verse 13: “For the sacrifices of My offerings they sacrifice flesh and eat it, but the Lord does not accept them” (13a). Hosea here confirms that the usage of these altars is not acceptable to God. This is nothing new. Hosea said essentially the same thing in chapter 6: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and *acknowledgement of God* more than burnt offerings” (6:6, NIV); and in chapter 5: “With their flocks and herds they shall go to seek the Lord, but they will not find him” (5:6). It appears as if they are trying to *appease* God with their animal sacrifices, rather than *please* Him with their heart attitude. Mindless practice of empty religious rituals accomplishes nothing. God is not interested in the external ceremonies of a vain religion; He is interested in the internal heart attitude.

I’ve visited many cathedrals all across Europe. They are glorious examples of architecture and monuments to the rich Christian heritage of that continent. But today, for the most part, they are nothing more than tourist attractions. Most of them no longer serve as centers of Christian worship. In a sense, they are like these useless altars of Israel – they no longer serve their original intended function.

“Ephraim not only twisted the meaning of sacrifice, but they also treated God’s law with disdain” (Bentley). We can see this in verse 12: “I have written for him the great things of My law, but they were considered a strange thing” (12). Bentley continues: “God’s indictment of them was that ‘they regarded [laws] as something alien.’ In other words, they said, ‘These laws are nothing to do with us’. How much this is like the attitude of many people today to the commands of God! They treat his laws as merely something which might *possibly* give them a little guidance if it suited them at the time. There are many people who claim to be Christians, yet they blatantly disregard God’s laws and see no need to repent of their behavior.”

The classic example of this is the debate that has been waged over the place of the Ten Commandments in our society, in our legal system. Judge Roy Moore of Alabama has lost that battle and lost his job because of it. And the movement is underway in our country to further restrict the public usage and display of the Ten Commandments. A post-Christian world hates the Ten Commandments because it reminds them of their sin. They particularly hate the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:4). That’s because it gets right to the heart of the problem – they don’t want to acknowledge God for who he is. Remember, that is one of the core problems of Hosea’s day.

What is the end result of the corrupt, empty, and vain religion of verses 11-13? “Now He will remember their iniquity and punish their sins. They shall return to Egypt” (13b). Chilling words – “they shall return to Egypt.” Assyria was mentioned in verse 9; now here in 13 is Egypt, its theological partner in the book of Hosea. Remember, the return to Egypt was theological, not literal; they actually were exiled in Assyria. Eaton explains: “Hosea is referring to something temporary, for we have seen rich promises in Hosea 2:14-23. And he refers to *national* loss-of-redemption rather than lost salvation for any individual. For the moment it will be as if they were un-redeemed. Not until Jesus comes will the people who sit in darkness (in northern Israel) see a great light.” The lesson for us is that churches and denominations that abandon God will be abandoned by Him. We must remain faithful and keep our religion and worship pure.

Finally, the message of the last image in Hosea 7 – the broken bow – is repeated again here in Hosea 8: “[Israel] has built temples, Judah also has multiplied fortified cities; but I will send fire upon his cities, and it shall devour his palaces” (14b-e). Temples, fortresses, cities, palaces. These buildings represent strength and reliance upon the builder for safety and protection.

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Kidner says, “The Old Testament does not despise fine buildings or strong walls: only the notion that they are in themselves fit to be one’s glory or security.” For example, “Walk about Zion, and go all around her. Count her towers; mark well her bulwarks; consider her palaces; that you may tell it to the generation following” (Ps. 48:12-13). But like the broken bow of 7:16, the people of God (both Israel and Judah) have forgotten that “unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it” (Ps. 127:1). They were trusting in their own strength, their own power, their own ability. But the Bible consistently teaches that it is not earthly fortifications that protect; rather “the name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe” (Pr. 18:10).

Boice gives us a modern perspective: “Having forsaken God, who alone was big enough for her need, Israel tried to compensate by the construction of big things without Him. This is so contemporary! Consider the preoccupation of evangelicals with bigness. Actually, we are a shallow movement—shallow in our commitment, knowledge, morality, and service. But lest this become apparent to others or even to ourselves, we launch bigger and bigger projects, build larger and larger churches, raise more and more money. If we could put it in a formula, we would probably say: ‘Bigness Equals Blessing,’ meaning that size is a proof of God’s presence. But it is not so. Sometimes God does bless in this way. But it is the equation that is wrong; for it is often in the smallest things that the greatest blessing is given.”

Conclusion

Ultimately, the entire message of Hosea 8 – corrupt religion leads to social decay and ultimately judgment by God – is summed up in these six words of verse 14: “*For Israel has forgotten his Maker*” (14a). Again, this is not a new message of Hosea. Way back in chapter 2 we read: “‘I will punish her for the days of the Baals to which she burned incense. She decked herself with her earrings and jewelry, and went after her lovers; *but Me she forgot,*’ says the Lord” (2:13). In chapter 4 there was this charge: “My 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 God*, I also will forget your children” (4:6). We will see this theme again in chapter 13: “When they had pasture, they were filled; they were filled and their heart was exalted; therefore *they forgot Me*” (13:6).

Boice explains: “What the word ‘*forget*’ actually means is ‘*neglect*.’ Israel knew God intellectually, but she had neglected Him by pushing Him aside. She had allowed other, lesser things to become central in the national life (cp. Dt. 4:23; 6:10-12; 8:10-14, 19-20). ‘Beware that you *do not forget the Lord your God* by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, lest—when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you *forget the Lord your God* who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage” (Dt. 8:11-14).’ These verses and others show that the problem involved was not an intellectual forgetting of God but a moral ‘forgetting’ in which a genuine worship of God and a rigorous obedience to His commands are neglected. A similar situation prevails today in many ‘Christian’ circles. It is not that God is denied. On the contrary, He is acknowledged, sometimes with great ceremony and by the most beautiful of services. The problem is that worshipers forget that God must be obeyed and that they must therefore live their lives differently.”

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The words of Deuteronomy 8 and the message of Hosea 8 are particularly applicable to the Church of the 21st century. We have received all of those blessings and more from the Lord. When we are in trouble, it is often easy to run to the Lord in prayer. But when we have received as many blessings as we have, it is easy to “forget” the Lord is the one who has blessed us. It is precisely when we have been so richly blessed that we are in the most danger of Biblical “forgetting.” That’s what happened to the post-Christian society of Israel. I pray that it does not happen to us.

Because Israel had forgotten his Maker, they transgressed the covenant, rebelled against the law, and rejected the good (1-3). Because Israel had forgotten his Maker, they set up wicked kings that the Lord did not acknowledge (4). Because Israel had forgotten his Maker, they established idolatrous centers of golden calf worship, perverting the true worship of God (4-6). Because Israel had forgotten his Maker, they sowed the wind, reaped the whirlwind, and were swallowed up by pagan culture (7-8). Because Israel had forgotten his Maker, they chased after alliances with Assyria like a wild donkey in heat, instead of remaining faithful to the Lord (8-10). Because Israel had forgotten his Maker, they multiplied altars for sinning, but had no appreciation for God’s law or righteous conduct (11-13). And because Israel had forgotten his Maker, they put their trust in buildings rather than the Builder and Maker of all (14). By sowing the wind, Israel reaped the whirlwind of destruction.

Next week: Lesson 9 – “Wanderers Among the Nations” – Hosea 9:1-17 – Bentley chapters 14-15

Close in Prayer.