

Knowing God

Hosea 4:1-5:7

The Book of Hosea has 2 major divisions: chapters 1-3 and 4-14.ⁱ The storyline of Hosea's family provides an illustration to help us understand the seriousness of the spiritual infidelity of the Northern Kingdom (NK). In chapters 4-14, Israel's infidelity is prosecuted: *for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land* (4:1b).ⁱⁱ

Understand something of the setting of Hosea is helpful to keep in mind as we work our way through the book. Two hundred years before the time of Hosea, the United Kingdom of Israel under a Davidic king divided, with the 10 northern tribes splitting off to form their own kingdom under their own king. In breaking away, they made a conscious decision to move away from the truth revealed in the Scripture.

Their first king, Jeroboam, the son of Nabat (not David), established a rival religion in the NK to keep the northern tribes from going to Jerusalem to the temple to worship (cf. 1Kgs 12:27).

He established high places at Dan and Bethel where the people could gather to worship. He appointed rival feast days for people gather to worship and offer sacrifices (1Kgs 12:32-33). He placed golden calves at those high places and declared they were the gods who brought Israel out of the land of Egypt (1Kgs 12:28). Does that sound familiar (cf Ex 32)? He established a priesthood to offer their sacrifices that was not of the tribe of Levi (1Kgs 12:31).

The NK willfully and blatantly walked away from the knowledge of God as revealed in the law. Two hundred years later, enters the prophet, Hosea.

J.I. Packer's classic book, *Knowing God*, takes on the issue of what it means to know God. To know God, Packer says, two things are necessary: we must have knowledge about God, and we must be in relationship with God. Packer put it like this: *we must turn our knowledge about God into knowledge of God.*ⁱⁱⁱ We must, Packer says, *turn each truth that we learn about God into a matter for meditation before God, leading to prayer and praise to God.*^{iv}

In our text this morning, Hosea's expands on the themes of Israel's spiritual

infidelity and the knowledge of God introduced to us in chapters 1-3.^v

If Hosea talked about Israel's spiritual harlotry in his introductory chapters (1-3), in 4:1-5:7, he doubles down on the theme, using various words describing Israel's infidelity 14 times.^{vi} He uses the theme of knowing God 7 times: there was no knowledge of God in the land (4:1), the people were destroyed by lack of knowledge (6), the priests rejected knowledge (6), they had no understanding (10, 14), and God knew them (5:3a) but they did not know Him (5:4b).

There is a connection between Israel's knowledge of God (or lack thereof) and their infidelity. Without a growing knowledge of God, it will be impossible for us to maintain faithfulness to God. Do you know the LORD? Are you growing in your knowledge of him and, as Packer said, turning each truth you learn into prayer and praise?

I want us to walk through the text and then, hopefully, make some applications.

God brings his charge against Israel (4:1-3)

The text opens with Hosea declaring the *controversy* the LORD has with his people (4:1a). He states God's case in terms the virtues they lacked (4:1b) and the resulting vices that ensued in their lives (4:2). *There is no such thing as a spiritual vacuum; if virtues are absent, they will be replaced by vices.*^{vii} There was *no faithfulness, no steadfast love, and no knowledge of God* in the land (4:1b).

Faithfulness and steadfast love are words that God uses to describe his own nature: *The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness* (Ex. 34:6).

You can see how *faithfulness* and *steadfast love* are tied inseparably to the *knowledge (da'at)* of God. This gets to Packer's point. Knowledge about God should lead to knowledge of God. Not only are we to know that God is *abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*, we are, also, to know by experience his love and faithfulness to us, which would lead us to love and faithfulness toward him.

When Israel abandoned faithfulness, steadfast love, and knowledge of God, they embraced commandment breaking: *swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery* (4:2). They *break all bounds*^{viii} is the idea is that their sin increases, moving from bad to worse: *bloodshed follows bloodshed*. When their love for God failed, their

love for their neighbor failed as well.

In short, they abandoned the covenant. As surely as Adam was exiled from the Garden because of his sin, the NK would be removed from the land because of their sin. Verse 3 is the un-creation of the Promised Land.^{ix}

God brings his charge against the priests (4:4-14)

Stating the LORD's controversy with the nation was met with pushback from the priests.^x The priests were in no position to contend with Hosea's preaching, no counter argument to make. Hosea, speaking the very words of God, says in effect, *You take issue with the LORD's controversy with His people, his contention is with you* (4:4). God has a quarrel with the priests.

The priests failed as teachers of the law (4:4-6)

The priests, fundamentally, were to be the teachers of the law, so that the people might know God. They failed. The result was there was *no knowledge of God in the land* (cf 4:1b), and the people were *destroyed for lack of knowledge* (4:6a).

The priests rejected knowledge, so the LORD *rejected* them (4:6b). They *forgot the law of God*, so the LORD *forgot* their children (4:6c). The forgetting here is intentional. It's not like forgetting where you put your keys. It's like throwing your keys into the weeds.

The priests used their office as a means of gain (7-9)

Rather than condemning national apostasy, the priests encouraged it and prospered from it.^{xi} More priests equaled more sin (4:7). They were glad the people sinned and brought their sin offerings (4:8).

These priests were the forerunners of Johann Tetzel, a Catholic priest and contemporary of Martin Luther, who sold indulgences to raise money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. He was exceptionally good at it. The ideal was you could purchase a pre-emptive pardon for sin you were going to commit or shorten the time of a loved one in purgatory. Tetzel would say, *As soon as the gold in the casket rings; a rescued soul to heaven springs*.

The priests and the people colluded in this matter: *Like people, like priest* (4:9a). The LORD would repay them for their deeds (4:9bc).

The result was the ruin of not knowing God (10-14)

Their idolatry led to a downgraded understanding of God. This section of text is framed by references to *understanding* (4:11b,14d). Two different words for *understanding* are used. The first refers to the inner man: the heart, the mind the will (4:11b, 11b). The second refers to discernment, prudence, and wisdom (4:14d, 14d). Their heart, mind, and will were darkened (4:11b), and that progressed to the point that they lost the ability to act in wisdom with discernment (4:14d).

The outcome of their ways (4:9bc) is outlined in 4:10-14. They would experience the frustration and futility of forsaking God (4:10a). Their indulgent lifestyle was a substitute for God the God they forsook (4:10b). They were looking for contentment in the wrong places. They had elevated the finite to the level of the infinite. They expected from things what only God can supply.

Assigning infinity to the finite takes away one's ability to think about God rightly (4:11b). Rather than inquiring of God, they talked to sticks and thought their walking sticks gave them prophetic oracles (4:12a). They would not hear the word of the LORD, but they would listen to sticks. This is what it means for idolatry to take away understanding.

Here is the first of 3 times the idea of a *spirit of harlotry* is used (cf. 4:19; 5:4). How did they downgrade to the place of talking to sticks? *A spirit of whoredom* led them astray (4:12b). No longer were they led by God, but they were led by a spirit of infidelity.

The *spirit of harlotry* corrupted worship (4:13a) and families (4:13b-14a). The only criterion for worship was shade (13a). God was to be the shade of his people (cf. 14:7a). They were not concerned for truth but for comfort. That would be like choosing your church on the basis of the air conditioning.

All the while, the undiscerning men were leading their wives and daughters to sin (4:13b-14ab). Disordered homes and disordered worship are the result of a lack of understanding that leads to ruin (4:14c). Such is not the work of the Spirit of God.

The contagious nature of Israel's sin (4:15-19)

We have to keep in mind that Hosea is preaching in the NK. He is pointing out the toxic and contagious nature of sin (4:15a). It's one thing for a parent to say to one

of his kids, *Stay away from that guy*. It's another thing for things to progress to the point that you say to that guy, *Stay away from my kid*. Hosea is saying to Israel, *Don't corrupt your neighbor*.

Judah should stay away from the lure of Israel's idolatry. Gilgal and Beth-aven (Bethel), both were near their border with Judah. Israel crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land at Gilgal (Josh. 4:19-24). At Bethel Jacob dreamed of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, with the LORD standing above it (Gen 28:18-19).

These places had history and were a draw, but Bethel, the house of God, had become Beth-aven, the house of iniquity.

Think of the contradiction of going to the *House of Iniquity* and swearing, *As the LORD lives* (4:15b). They were going to Beth-aven, sacrificing to a golden calf, and calling it by God's covenant Name, LORD (YHWH).

God was no golden calf, but Israel was stubborn heifer that could not be shepherded (4:16).

Ephraim should be left alone to avoid falling into their sin (4:17). The spirit (wind = spirit) of idolatry has wrapped them in its wings and was leading them to shame(4:19).

God's charge against Israel's leaders (5:1-7)

A summons like in 4:1 is given again. Only here the priests, rulers, and king are called on to *hear, pay attention, and give ear* (5:1).

The administration of injustice in the land (1-2)

These were the people responsible for the administration of justice, but they were a snare at Mizpah, a net on Tabor, and had gone deep into slaughter.^{xii} In contrast to their failure to act justly, the LORD would *discipline* them.^{xiii}

The spirit of harlotry and the knowledge of God (3-4)

Verses 3-4 are framed by the word *know* (3a, 4b). The LORD knew Israel, but they did not know him. Their deeds were not hidden from the LORD. He knew the very thing that kept them from repentance. *A spirit of harlotry* had permeated their minds and wills. They simply loved their sin and that kept them from returning to God.

The testimony of the Pride of Israel (5-7)

The *pride of Israel* is a reference to the LORD himself (cf 7:10). The LORD has made his case. Just as the priest and the prophet *stumble* (cf. 4:5), both Israel and Judah will *stumble* (5:5).

They will realize too little too late that the LORD has withdrawn, and no matter how many sacrifices they offer, they will not find him. From the beginning, they sought God on their terms. To seek God on your own terms leads to death (5:7).

Now for a bit of application: truths about knowing God

1. We must pursue truth, love, and the knowledge of God (4:1-3)

We must pursue truth, love, and the knowledge of God. God is looking for these qualities in his people. The three go together. It is not enough just to have truth, or just to have love, or simply to have spiritual experiences.

Perhaps you have known people who know a lot about God but are unloving and even legalistic with it. Rather than build others up, they are puffed up.

Paul said, *This [so-called] “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God* (1Cor. 8:1b-3).

On the other hand, we may have encountered the love and feel good people who have no appetite for the Word and doctrine. Faith is all religious cliches. It's a cultural Christianity that lacks depth and true commitment, and, perhaps even conversion.

God help us learn to discern the difference between truth and personal preference. We all want to canonize our likes and demonize our dislikes. If you have a preference that is leading you to judge your brothers and sisters harshly, perhaps, you are the one who needs to change.

Much of the weakness in the church today is centers on this point of the knowledge of God. We must know about God to the end that we know him. And each truth we learn about him, we must turn into prayer and praise.

2. We must be guided by the Word of God (4:4-14)

This is a warning today to the church today. How does the church get to the point it has *no knowledge of God* (4:1b), is *destroyed for lack of knowledge* (4:6), and it's leaders *reject knowledge* (4:6b)?

The Word must be front and center. We must prioritize the word in our corporate life together and in our individual lives as well. In the church, the simple exposition of the word must be insisted upon. When churches are not shaped by the word, it is both because of the failure of pastors to center their ministries in Scripture and the church to insist on it.

There is so much truth in *like people, like priest*. A church and the pastors must collude together to abandon the word.

The pressure is to try to be relevant to the culture, entertaining, not boring.

As a result, people are destroyed for the lack of knowledge of God. The writing is on the wall today. When people turn away from God, they are by default turning to something other than God (4:12a). We no longer have a basis to judge right and wrong, male and female, health and infanticide, marriage and hook ups, education and propaganda, truth and lies, holiness and heresy, etc. If you divorce yourself from God, to whom will you be married?

I know you see the importance of being a church that is centered on the Bible and is being shaped by the Word of God. This text helps us see what happens to a people not faithfully instructed in the Word. We will be guided by something (4:12b).

3. We must not toy with sin (4:15-19)

Brothers and sisters, we must not toy with sin. We are not as strong as we think we are. If you stay away from sin, you won't fall into it. Put some distance between yourself and sin (4:15b, 17).

We need to realize that there is a certain appeal, a draw, a pulling toward sin. We can see it in this text. Israel was being steered by a *sprit of whoredom* (4:12b). Then the spirit wrapped them in its wings (4:19a). *Wind* and *spirit* are the same word. Finally, *the spirit of whoredom was within them*, so that they did not *know God* (5:4b). There is a spirit, a drawing power that seeks to entrap you in sin.

The Bible addresses this over and over. We have an enemy who seeks to devour us (1Pet. 5:8-9). When you turn away from the LORD, you open yourself to the dominion of demons.

4. We must realize that God knows us, and we cannot hide from him (5:1-7)

If we could have gone to the NK, we would have found that they were a very religious people. We would have heard religious words and seen religious sights. But all of it was fakery. The priests were false, the shrines were pagan, and the leaders were corrupt. They did not know the LORD (5:4b).

The absurdity of idolatry is self-evident. They were at the place where inquiring of sticks was more reasonable to them than praying to the God whom they could not see but historically had made himself known powerfully and unmistakably among them (4:12a).

If we could be honest and find a note authenticity, I think we might find healing for our struggles. Too often we go around with an air of spirituality when we are empty. The LORD said, *I know Ephraim* (5:3a). He knows the reality. The reality was they loved their deeds and held to them so tightly that they could not return to God (5:4). They would have life and God on their own terms.

Pursing truth and love in our knowledge of God will aid us to be guided by the word, avoid sin, and walk in love and authenticity with God and one another.

ⁱ These two major divisions of the book are introduced with the phrase *the word of the LORD* (1:1; 4:1). These are the only two verses in the book that use that expression, indicating these are the two major sections of the book.

ⁱⁱ Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets vol 1, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah in The Daily Study Bible Series*, 30.

ⁱⁱⁱ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 18.

^{iv} Packer, 18.

^v Repetition of words ties 4:1-5:7 together as a section of text. For example; controversy, contend, contention (4:1,4=rib), break all bounds and multiply (4:2, 10 = paras), my people (4:6, 12), stumble (4:5; 5:5), shame (4:7, 18), priests (4:4,6,9; 5:1), etc. Hosea introduces spiritual infidelity in chapters 1-3 (cf. (cf. 1:2; 2:2-13; 3:1-3) and the knowledge of God (cf. 2:8,20).

^{vi} see 4:2, 10,11,12,13,14,15,18; 5:3,4).

^{vii} John L. MacKay, *Hosea: A Mentor Commentary*, 130.

^{viii} The same word as *multiply* (*paras*) in verse 10.

^{ix} The land, referred to 3 times in these opening verses (4:1x2,3), is the *promised land* which was a type Eden, a new creation of sorts. Verse 3 gives us a description of uncreation—creatures that belong to the earth, the sky, and the sea will be removed (‘alsap, gather up, taken away). The land, because of their sin, had become uninhabitable (cf. Lev 18:25-28; Gen 1:2).

^x This is not dissimilar to Amos’s altercation with Amaziah, the priest at Bethel (cf. Amos 7:10-17).

^{xi} Cragie, 35.

^{xii} Translating 5:2b, *dug a pit at Shittim* requires amending the text in a way that is not necessary. See a helpful footnote in John MacKay, *Hosea: A Mentor Commentary*, 160n41. The place names, one in the south and the other in the north, may indicate the widespread failure of the leaders in Israel.

^{xiii} *Muscar*, discipline, has the sense of correction, and, ultimately, as we saw in chapters 1-3, the LORD would gather a redeemed people under one Davidic King in the latter days (cf. 3:5).