

Lessons on [Not] Returning to God

Hosea 6:11a-7:16

Perhaps you know a person who is gifted at nicknaming people. Our president seems to have a knack for it. I'm not sure how the science of nicknaming works. Now, people have gotten very sensitive, it seems, but when I was a kid, people were nicknamed either in a way that described some physical defect or was the opposite of a physical reality. For example, a guy who walked with a limp was called *Limp*. Or an unusually big and tall guy was called *Tiny*.

In our text, Hosea used a series of metaphorical descriptions, we could almost call mockery, to peg Israel for their missed opportunity to return to God: preheated ovens (4), raw cakes (8), old fools (9), silly doves (11), and deceitful bows (16).

Why did Israel refuse to return to the LORD? Probably, for similar reasons, people will not return to the LORD today: holding onto anger, half-baked schemes, thinking too highly of self, flitting from one ideology to another, and always missing the mark. Such came to characterize them.

Rather than return to the LORD, the NK was always cooking up some half-baked, flighty scheme that missed the mark and over-estimated their ability to make a go of it on their own apart from God.

The primary issue of this section of text is the failure of the NK to return to the LORD (6:11b-7:1a,7b,10,13b,16). They had opportunities to return to the LORD (6:11b-7:1a, 13b).ⁱ God stands ready to receive the genuinely repentant sinner.

Hosea masterfully shows how the NK spurned their opportunity to return to the LORD. Rather than return, they plunged into an internal power struggle and sought external alliances in an effort to find stability and prosperity.ⁱⁱ

With Jeroboam II (793-752BC) as their king (1:1), the NK had 41 years of prosperity and national pride (cf. 2Kgs 14:25),ⁱⁱⁱ but they did not return to the LORD. After Jeroboam's death, the NK would have 6 kings in the span of 30 years: only 1 of the 6 would die a natural death, 4 would be assassinated, and the last would be carried off into captivity when the NK fell (722BC).

Hosea opened his prophecy saying, *in just a little while I will punish the house of*

Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel (1:4).^{iv}

Jeroboam II was next to last in the line of Jehu.^v When he died (752 BC), his son Zechariah reigned for 6 months before being assassinated by Shallum, ending the Jehu dynasty (2Kgs 15:10).^{vi}

In a month's time, Menahem assassinated Shallum (2Kgs 15:13-16). He started paying tribute to Assyria (2Kgs 15:19). Menahem reigned 10 years and was succeeded by son Pekahiah (2Kgs 15:23). Pekahiah reigned 2 years before being assassinated by Pekah son of Remaliah (2Kgs 15:25).

Pekah hated paying tribute to Assyria, so he formed an alliance with Syria, and tried to force the SK to join (cf. Isa 10, aka. The Syro-Ephramitic Crisis), so that together they might repel Assyrian aggression. This alliance did not materialize. In response, Assyria defeated Syria and carried regions of the NK into captivity.^{vii}

In a desperate attempt to keep Assyria from completely destroying the NK, Hoshea assassinated Pekah son of Remaliah and agreed to pay tribute to Assyria (2Kgs 15:30; 17:3). Later, he reversed courses, stopped paying tribute to Assyria, and appealed to Egypt for protection (7:11; cf. 2Kgs 17:4). Unimpressed, Assyria came and took Hoshea prisoner and toppled the NK (722BC), while Egypt looked on with glee (7:16; cf. 2Kgs 17:4-6). Thus ended the NK forever.

This is the background for Hosea 7: the internal and external politics they employed rather than returning to the LORD.

In this chapter, rather than pleading with Israel to return like in the previous section (cf. 6:1-3), the LORD speaks of them in the 3rd person, as if he is talking to us about them, showing us their failure to return to him. I think in this text, we can find some lessons on returning to God.

1. We must consider God (6:11-7:2)

Simply put, Israel did not return to God because they did not consider him (1a). Speaking of Israel in the 3rd person, the LORD says to us, *When I would restore the fortunes of my people (6:11b)*—reverse their hopeless situation—*When I would heal Israel (7:1a)*, their iniquity and evil deeds are in full view. The willingness of God to restore and heal met hearts set on rebellion. God was not the problem in

Israel.

God stands ready to restore and heal repentant sinners. This stands as a warning, dear friend. God will not forgive the unrepentant.

The LORD goes on to detail the iniquity and evil deeds that are in the way of repentance (cf. 5:4): *They deal falsely; the thief breaks in and the bandits raid outside* (7b; cf. 6:9).

They did not consider, literally, *they did not say in their hearts God remembers my evil* (2). They had no pain of conscience. They were acting as if they could sin and get away with it. In the deepest part of their beings, they had no thought that God took notice of their sin.

God *remembering* is not like our remembering where we recall something. God remembering is him holding them accountable for their sin.

Now their evil deeds surround them. Their evil surrounds them the way the men of Sodom surrounded Lot's house (cf. Gen 19:4; Judges 19:22; 20:5). Their deeds were closing in on them.

They were so characterized by their evil that all God could see was their evil. *They are before my face*. Like the sin of Sodom came up before God, their sin came up before God. Like the blood of Abel crying out from the ground, like the wickedness of Nineveh coming up before God, the evil of Ephriam had God's full attention. Psalm 90:8 reads: *You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence*.

We must take seriously our accountability to God. The Bible says we will give an account for every careless word (Mt. 12:36). When we take to heart our accountability, we will be better spouses, parents, and neighbors. Few people indulge in sinful behavior thinking, *I am going to answer to God for this*. Rather, God is simply no consideration at all.

It seems that verses 1 and 2 are the introduction for what follows: the internal and international underhanded dealings of the NK.

2. We must call on the LORD (7:3-7).

Verses 3-7 look at the internal instability of the NK. The passage is framed by

references to their *kings*. Verse 3 uses *king* in the singular and verse 7 in the plural. Hosea seems to give us a snapshot of an assassination to show us the corrupt hearts at the core of all the assassinations, leading to the ominous words, *All their kings have fallen* (7b).

When God is no consideration, evil is easily justified. The passage describes the motives at work in the in evil men in the final decades of the NK. Internally, the NK is a *pre-heated oven* ready to cook up intrigue and betrayal (4a).

The text seems to identify three groups of people: the kings (3,5,7), the princes/rulers (3,5,7), and *they/them* (3,4,6,7)--the useful idiots who gladden the king and the princes by their evil and treachery (3).

In verses 4-7, we have a description of their evil and treachery. How debased does a king have to be to rejoice over the wicked and treacherous deeds of others?^{viii} And are these the kinds of people you should surround yourself with?

Sure enough, *they* (whomever *they* were) are unfaithful men (4a). *They* are like a *heated oven* (4b). With the skill and patience of a baker, they cook up their plot like leaven working in dough (4c). Like a smoldering fire in brick oven, they nurse their anger, creating opportunity to act on it (5-6). When the time is right, they stoke the angry fire and devour their rulers (7).

They might defend their actions as in the political interest of the NK. One king would pay tribute. The next king would not. And they were willing to kill one another over it.

Hosea cuts right through the window dressing to say, *NO!* The problem in the NK was *not one of them called on the LORD* (7b). They did not consider the LORD and found themselves applauding evil. They did not call on the LORD but rather nursed their anger.

They did not need God; they had their anger. Their anger made them feel strong, but it was not strength; it was weakness, a liar, and death. Anger isolates and insulates. It is self-protection. No one can hurt me because in my anger, I have pushed everyone out of my life. Then I am angry because I have no friends. The angry man is a self-saboteur. *All their kings have fallen* (7b). This is the work of seething anger.

God's question to Jonah is a good one: *Do you do well to be angry?* You have no right to be angry, and you don't do right in your anger. *The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God* (Jas 1:20). God is angry with the wicked every day, so you don't have to be (Ps 7).

The cure is to consider God and call upon him.

3. We must embrace to the LORD as our only hope (8-13)

As long as we have one more self-saving trick up our sleeves, we will never return to the LORD. When internal intrigue did not work, rather than turn to the LORD, the last man standing in the NK turned to external alliances. To trust in our own scheme of salvation rather than turn to the LORD is to invite failure. In effect, they were denying God's ability to save them.

A. Rather than half-baked schemes (8)

The LORD complains, *Ephraim mixes himself with the peoples* (8). The word *mixes* (balal) is the same word used for the *confusion* of languages at Babel (Gen 11:7,9). The people of God were to be separate. Their distinctiveness was in their reliance on God as their covenant partner.

Like their kings surrounding themselves with conspirators, the NK was allying itself with nations who wanted nothing more than to conquer them. That is the definition of a *half-baked* scheme.

No one orders unturned pancakes. No waitress asks, *How do you want your pancakes?* An unturned cake defeats the purpose of being a pancake. In turning to alliances, the NK was defeating the purpose for which God separated them as a people.

The modern church is often a half-baked scheme. We are a kingdom of priests, not a cheerleading squad. Our job is simply to say what God wants said and leave the results to him.

B. Rather than act like a foolish old man (9-10)

Not only is the NK an inedible cake, defeating its purpose. They are like an *old man*, who imagines himself more capable than he really is (9). I keep thinking I'm going to make a comeback.

They foolishly made alliances to gain strength, but the opposite happened. Their alliances sapped their strength, and they *did not know it* (9x2). The LORD had plainly given them opportunity to repent (7:1,13b, cf. 6:5), but they would not return or seek him (10, cf. 2,7.13.16).^{ix}

C. Rather than flitting about like a silly dove (11-13)

Verse 11 perfectly describes Hoshea, the final king of the NK, first appealing to Assyria and then to Egypt (11). Like the erratic flight patterns of a *dove*, first in one direction and then in another, so, Israel flitted about between Assyria and Egypt, but did not call on the LORD.

For all their evasive flying patterns, whichever way the NK went, they ran into the LORD (12a). They invited the LORD's discipline by their misguided policies (12b). Three reasons are given for their discipline. 1) They *strayed* from the LORD (13a). This is not a wandering off the path, but a deliberate walking away from the LORD. 2) They *rebelled* against the LORD (13b). They intentionally violated the covenant by seeking foreign alliances. 3) They *spoke lies* against the LORD (13c). Their religion lied about God. Their political alliances lied about God. They attributed the blessings God gave them to the Baals (cf 2:8).

The LORD was the only one who could or would *redeem* them (13b). In the exodus, the idea and reality of redemption burst on the scene. The LORD single-handedly brought them out of Egypt. If they were simply honest, their only hope of redemption was to return to the LORD.

The LORD is our only hope.

4. We must beware of inadequate responses to God (14-16)

They cried out to the LORD but not with heartfelt repentance (14).

A. Repentance is turning from sin (14-15)

They did not cry out in repentance for their sin, but because they wanted grain and wine. Perhaps, this text was in the Paul's mind when he wrote: *For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death* (2Cor. 7:10).

Like the worshipers of Baal, they wailed and gashed themselves in an effort to

manipulate God (cf. 1Kgs 18:28). Their acts of self-mutilation were efforts to get God's attention. They did not consider that God is the one who remembered all their evil (cf 2). The reason they were in such straits was because they had God's full attention.

Even their prayers were rebellion against God (14b). In their crying out, they were turning not to but away from the LORD. Their religion was an ancient version of health and wealth. Their prayers were manipulative acts of self-pity.

Friends, God expects us to be faithful where we are. If you have much, if you have little, simply be faithful. We don't wear God down with our prayers; we don't manipulate him. He is our loving heavenly Father who knows what we need before we ask. We simply make our requests and leave them with him. His plan for you is better than your plan for you. Simply trust him.

Everything they had, God provided. He equipped them and prepared them for their time and place, yet they planned evil against the LORD (15).

B. Repentance is turning to the LORD (16).

They cried out but not from their hearts; they returned but not *upward* (16). Their returning was not to God. Like a *crooked bow*, they were not *shooting straight*. To return was what God required, but their return was like an arrow from a defective bow. In the end, they got to the place where they lacked the capacity to be anything but deceitful.

Their leaders fell because of their rage. Their words were full of anger toward God. They boasted in their evil schemes. They mocked the LORD. Their enemies would mock them. Egypt, the place from which God by his strong arm redeemed them, rejoiced at their fall.

ⁱ Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the OT*, 268.

ⁱⁱ In the old covenant, there was no separating politics and religion. To be faithless in one was to be faithless in the other (cf. 7:4). This is why Hosea applies the term *adultery* both to their religion and their politics (e.g. 7:4 and 1:2). To make a covenant with another nation would inevitably involve adopting their gods as your gods and intermarrying with unbelievers. Moses warned the Israelites: *When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it and clears away many nations before you You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them...for they would turn away your sons from following me to serve other gods. The anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly* (Deut 7:1-4).

ⁱⁱⁱ He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by this servant Jonah the son Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath-hepher (2Kgs 14:25).

^{iv} Ahab of the Omride dynasty had married Jezebel a Sidonian princess, which invited the wholesale worship of Baal into the land. Jehu had put an end to the House of Omri when he killed Ahab and Jezebel, which was good. But the problem with it was he did not rid the land of the Baal cult.

^v When Jehu as the arm of God's judgment in ending the House of Omri with the death Ahab and Jezebel assumed the throne in the NK, the LORD said his sons of the 4th generation would sit on the throne of Israel (cf 2Kgs 10:30). The 4 generations were Jehoahaz, Joash/Jehoash, Jeroboam, and Zechariah.

^{vi} 2 Kings 15 is the background for Hosea 6:11b-7:16. 2 Kings 15 is the assassination chapter of the Kings material.

^{vii} In the days of Pehah king of Israel, Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, and all the land of Naphtali (2kgs 15:29).

^{viii} This sounds a lot like Pekah's plot to kill Pekahiah. He took 50 men of the people of Gilead kill the kings in Samaria (2Kgs 15:25). The men of Gilead are notorious (cf. Hosea 6:8).

^{ix} We saw the phrase *pride of Israel* already in 5:5. The word translated *pride* (*gaon*) has a range of meaning: pride, arrogance, majesty, excellency, majesty, pomp. Like in English there is a good kind of pride and bad kind of pride. Some take this as the bad kind of pride, as their arrogance is testifying to them. Another way to read this is as a reference to the LORD. In that case the LORD is testifying plainly to them, but they will not return or seek him. I think the latter interpretation is the right one. One, arrogance doesn't try to persuade you to return; it tries to convince you don't need to return. Perhaps, in that sense, it is an indicator you need to repent. And, two, It keeps with the theme in this text of the NK's persistence in their refusal to return to the LORD (2,7,10,13,16). The rulers are gone; their strength is devoured; and they will not return to the LORD.