

**HOSEA 4:1-19**

*(Reading: Matthew 15:1-20)*

**The People Lost By Their Priests**

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

We are back in court again.

The imagery which came up in chapter 2 is back - but even stronger now.

For back then it was described in a general way as Hosea laid out the summary of the message he was being inspired to declare.

But now we get into the nitty-gritty.

Comparing it to a court case, chapter 2 was the preliminary hearing while now the trial proper begins.

The first three verses of chapter 4 lay down the charges.

Here the prosecution's case is very clearly put.

Because the verses 1 till 3 get right to the heart of the indictment.

In the words of the first aspect to the sermon this afternoon, this is about WHAT THE PEOPLE ARE DOING WRONG.

Already in verse 1 the most serious of all charges is raised.

There is no beating around the bush here.

The people of the northern kingdom, the ten tribes of the nation called 'Israel', are being directly addressed.

Every man, woman, young adult, boy, or girl, is being spoken to.

Listen to what they are accused of: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land."

The covenant God is clear that there is no relationship between them!

You think about it.

"Faithfulness" is simple honesty.

This is the dependability you have to have in any relationship with another human being.

Whether it's the most intimate personal connection, or a distant business deal, you have to have it.

Without it the whole fabric of our community is torn apart.

Added to this, the "love" spoken of here is the kindness and loyalty expected of partners in covenant.

The covenant here that was between God Himself and His people.

Of course there would be love for the Lord after all He had so mercifully done!

But there isn't - not a single shred of it!

So what do we see?

Surely you know what happens where there's no true love.

People don't trust each other any longer.

There's a lot of suspicion there.

Accusations are constantly thrown around.

In the words of Derek Kidner, "What should have been a home and family had turned into a den of lust and violence."

Certainly this was no witness for the nations around about Israel.

None of them would be saying what was said 800 years later of the New Testament church that you could see how much they love each other!

But there is a third aspect mentioned here also.

It's a requirement the people obviously didn't have because they lacked the first two.

Because there was no acknowledgment of God in the land.

And yet it's put in a way that we have to notice it.

For by saying "there is no acknowledgement of God in the land" is to expose the most complete ungodliness.

You see, God is **known** as He is with them and in them.

So what's lacking is the very heart of faith.

There is no walking and talking and praising God!

Congregation, there is no showing the love of God in every part of their lives, as Deuteronomy 6 describes.

It's that passage where Moses describes living out the covenant relationship.

There he applies the law, which he has just restated in Deuteronomy 5.

In the verses 4 till 9 he declares, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD your God, the LORD is one.

"Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

"These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.

"Impress them upon your children.

"Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the ground, when you lie down, and when you get up.

"Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads,

"Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."

In fact, what religious pretence there is now in Israel only exposes this all the more!

Because everyone can see they're just going through the motions.

As soon as they've done the rituals they're into what they want to do.

And that's what everyone else is doing!

Verse 2 describes this.

"There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed."

It's not a nice place to be.

Melbourne streets at 3AM in the morning are looking quite safe in comparison!

Because notice what's turned upside down!

The Ten Commandments!

Each of them is being broken in the worst possible way and without any stops at all.

And it's gone on for so long!

One example of this is what happens to Zechariah, the son of Jeroboam II.

2 Kings 15 says that within six months of his coming to power he's assassinated in a plot led by Shallum.

But Shallum himself only reigns one month.

Because Menahem then assassinated him.

And as well as that bloody act, Menahem also rips open all the pregnant women of Tiphah because they wouldn't let him in!

How bad is this?

Well, even the environment weeps because of this.

Verse 3 pictures how a terrible drought will come across the land because the people's blatant disobedience.

That this is a prophecy is clear from the present prosperity the people had then under Jeroboam II.

But it's an inevitable result as the judgment then was inevitably physical just as the blessing was a land flowing with milk and honey.

It's this which Leviticus 18 pointed to already some centuries before.

For in verse 28 there says, "if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you."

Congregation, the heart of this community was meant to be with the Lord.

That's why He had called them apart through the patriarchs - through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And that's why so many times He has delivered them out of trouble and hardship and battle, through Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David and others too.

But such mercies could not forever go one way.

There was a point of no return.

A point which showed that through man himself there could be no keeping of the covenant.

It would have to take God Himself to do that.

And that would come through David's line.

It's the end of this line, though.

Even creation itself testifies to that.

Yet despite the collective guilt of all involved, there is one group above all others the Lord holds accountable.

We've got a hint of who they are at the end of verse 1.

For there it referred to a lack of knowing the Lord.

And if we think about the ones who should know the Lord among them then we know who they are, don't we?

Ah, the priests.

Thus we come to our second aspect.

For now we see, **WHO LED THEM INTO THAT WRONG.**

Now, verse 4 is not an easy verse to understand.

What exactly are these charges people are bringing against each other?

And how are they like what you would charge a priest with?

Well, it's tied in with this failure to acknowledge God.

Because that also means they haven't been learning about God.

So they wouldn't know a legitimate charge if it stared them in the face.

They were totally ignorant!

Verse 5 shows the effect of that ignorance.

This stumbling day and night is similar to how Jesus described the clergy of His day.

In Matthew 15 verse 14 Jesus says that they are the blind leading the blind.

Congregation, the people don't know because they haven't been taught.

Those who have been at the forefront of leading them into pagan ways have been their very own priests!

And how much haven't we seen the same ever since throughout church history?

Revival so often starts at the bottom.

It begins when humble and often poor Christians are used to convert their ministers so that they can be used powerfully of God.

You need only think of Charles Spurgeon and Abraham Kuyper in this connection.

But when devival hits the church, when the rot sets in, it's inevitably from the top.

This is when liberal ideas become taught by professors at the theological colleges.

And it's when the ways of the world become the agenda of church synods and presbyteries and sessions.

Yet there is something else we need to note in connection with these priests.

Because they were not Levitical priests.

They were not those who had been consecrated according to the Law of the Lord.

They were those whom Jeroboam I had instituted because he didn't want any further influence from the temple in Jerusalem.

So having broken with the Lord so fundamentally that way, and also through the golden calves at Bethel and Dan, there was always a spirit against the Lord.

This is why it is said constantly about the kings of Israel, "He did evil in the sight of the LORD, walking in the ways of Jeroboam and in his sin, which he had caused Israel to commit." (1 Kings 15:34 et al.)

Now, while we often see the chief task of priests as sacrificers, verse 6 makes it clear that equally important was their role of teaching.

The priests in the settling of the land had been distributed throughout the land so that they could educate God's people in His Law.

While there were the key times of the church calendar, which took place in Jerusalem, there had to be the ongoing instruction of His people right throughout the year.

And though these priests weren't the Levitical priesthood, Hosea doesn't forget either that they were instituted by Jeroboam to worship and serve the covenant God.

He who had been made king by the Lord had, at least, in this way, acknowledged the covenant relationship with Him.

Still, not only did these priests fail to teach the Law to the people, they also failed to live out the Law amongst the people.

It seemed the more there were of them, the further away they went from the Lord.

You can imagine the scene.

Here was a protected and exclusive group.

They had the monopoly on this business.

And what privileges there were!

They got the prime cuts of the sheep and the cattle, because that was what the people had to sacrifice for their sin.

As Leviticus 6 verse 26 says, "The priest who offers it shall eat it."

But such a status leads here to abuses.

In fact, it leads on further to being cynical and shameless.

How much haven't we seen this throughout church history?

It was there in the Church of Rome at the time of the Reformation.

And how much isn't it shown by those insolent and completely unbelieving clergy in liberal churches today!

When verse 7 concludes by saying, "they have exchanged their Glory for something disgraceful," it says it all.

Then the charge of verse 8, "They feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness," is spot on.

I mean, it's more a business, isn't it?

Just like the Roman Catholics do a roaring trade out of people having to pay for the confession of their sins, through the lighting of candles, special services, and the like, so then the priests did also.

But not only do they grow rich from it, they also do it.

They're certainly not obviously opposing it!

So verse 9 forms an obvious conclusion to this point.

For while it might seem that "like people, like priests" is showing that everyone has been sucked in by this world, or that the people have sunk to the level of their priests, it's actually a warning that there'll be no exemptions.

Because they have gone against the Lord, He has turned against them.

This was the same as Isaiah prophesied.

In chapter 24, the verses 1 till 3 of his prophetic book we read, "See, the LORD is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants - it will be the same for priest as for people, for master as for servant, for mistress as for maid, for seller as for buyer, for borrower as for lender, for debtor as for creditor.

"The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered."

It's a sad day alright.

The most terrible day.

And now the prophet brings us into how it came to be that way.

For, in the third place, we see, WHY THEY COME TO BE SO WRONG.

And here let's keep in mind that Hosea still has the priests in view.

Because in the verses 10 till 14 worship is a strong theme, but for all the wrong reasons!

Reasons which had not been tackled by those who should've known the right way to worship.

And certainly they were those who ought to have been teaching the right way to worship.

You see, the prostitution noted in verse 10 was the cultic variety.

It was the prostitution of the so-called fertility cult which will only lead the people astray.

And to hype themselves into this worship, which to some degree they would know is definitely wrong, they got into the booze.

Throughout history those religions where people have lost themselves in immorality, have had to do that by alcohol or drugs of some sort.

And it's as they drink themselves senseless that they do stupid things.

Well, we might say, we know that from the parties some of the teenagers are having in our society!

But while for those young people it leads to more binge drinking, in Hosea's time it led to the people looking for revelations from a piece of wood.

One translation even puts verse 12 this way: "A stick tells them what they want to know (TEV)."

Of course it's not the stick that tells them which way to go.

It's the priests manipulating this 'alternative' worship to draw them away.

Remember, any deviation from God's Word is only going man's way.

All the sects and cults and other religions are simply what we selfishly want to do and say.

And so it is here.

The reference in verse 13 to sacrificing on the mountaintops and burning offerings on the hills, and worshipping under those huge trees, is simply the priests extending what Jeroboam I had already done by setting up alternative worship centres in Bethel and Gilgal.

They would even have said it was bringing religion to the people.

You know the language - 'making it more meaningful,' 'having a hands-on participation' - and all that other rubbish!

Because all along it's just paganising their faith.  
It's syncretism.

And it gets further and further away from God's Word!

Not only are they exchanging His Law for dumb and blind idols, they now sell out the blessing of a committed faith for an instant experience!

And that can only lead to more of the same.

For it's an addiction.

You can never get enough.

And when you find yourself without it - oh you don't want to go there!

**Give me some more!**

Hosea in verse 13 condemns this rampant adultery.

He brings it vividly home by saying it means their daughters and their son's wives are having sex with strangers!

That violates God's will of purity for them.

It goes against His provision for them in marriage.

But behind it all are the priests.

The leadership is clearly shot - it's absolutely corrupt!  
Something verse 14 addresses specifically.

For while it addresses specifically the fathers and husbands here, let's understand that this is rebuking all those in any leadership.

Indeed, this verse ends by returning to the theme of a people failing to be properly taught!

Congregation, this verse addressed the double standard that had permeated these people for so long.

It was what Jacob's fourth son, Judah, had shown, as we reading Genesis 38 verse 24.

He thought nothing of visiting a prostitute but then he demanded his daughter-in-law be brought out and burned to death for doing the same thing!

And now Hosea says, "And don't go thinking because it's a so-called religious act that you're not accountable either!"

He joins up both evils, and he puts the blame where it rightly belongs - with the men and with the priests.

Still, Hosea hasn't finished presenting the prosecution's case here.

In fact, he actually gets a conviction here!

In the words of the fourth aspect to this chapter, we see HOW THE PROPHET EMBARRASSES THOSE WRONG.

Now you're wondering!

Where does he do this here in the verses 15 till 19?

Well, you consider what Hosea seems to be doing here.

Because it appears he is warning the Judeans to keep right away from Israel.

But, in reality, it is a very sharp dig at the Israelites themselves!

They would have been fuming at this.

Because they would have seen this as Hosea not trying to keep the Judeans away but having a go at them.

They were the ones he's speaking to!

Amos did something similar to the Israelites.

He sarcastically invited his readers to go to those famous shrines to sin some more!

In Amos 4 verse 4 we read his words from the Lord: "Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more."

It really makes Israel look bad.

Look at what the big sister is doing!  
Come and see how bad the bigger kingdom is!

In verse 15 Hosea even twists the name of Bethel around.  
Now it's not Bethel, the 'house of God,' but Beth  
Aven, the 'house of evil.'

Oh, they wouldn't have liked that!  
Though they were far from living holy lives don't you  
dare touch their sacred shrines!

But Hosea is clear.  
Don't you go invoking the name of the true God when  
you're chasing after all these pagan deities.  
And if you're upset with me for twisting God's  
name with replacing the name 'Bethel' with 'Beth Aven,' and  
so breaking the third commandment, then you think about how  
you've already broken the first and second commandments!

To show how far gone this is, Hosea next compares Israel  
to a heifer.  
A heifer is a young cow which hasn't yet borne a calf.  
So she is hard to manage, she doesn't want to be  
yoked.

And Israel is the same.  
So the Lord can't help them.  
If they don't want to live humbly under God's law  
then they can't be lifted up by His blessing.  
Then they come under the same condemnation Jesus spoken  
of in Matthew 23.  
For there in verse 37 the Lord cries, "O Jerusalem,  
Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to  
you, how often I have longed to gather your children  
together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, **but  
you were not willing.**"

Congregation, Israel is that lost in herself!  
"Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone!" verse  
17 declares.

In fact, so caught up are these people in this  
idolatry they cannot get out.

Even if the drinks are gone, the addiction is still  
there.

Because this is the ultimate addiction.

This is right up there with Faust who sold his soul  
to the devil.

Israel cannot cut these links.

This chain has got her completely entrapped to the most shameful, disgraceful practices.

And just think, congregation, they had thought it was the way to be 'free'.

You know, like they talk today against biblical Christianity.

As though it is something that holds you back and stops you seeing and being something great!

They are the ones who are blind.

They are those being led by the blind, their own priests.

And until, by God's grace, their eyes are opened, they are heading for hell.

A hell of their making!

Until the very last line chapter 4 is all downhill.

Verse 19 still begins describing their destructive path as it pictures the whirlwind destroying all.

For that whirlwind is the spirit of prostitution which leads them astray.

They're being carried away by their false religion.

But the last line offers a glimpse of hope.

There's a sparkle of grace here.

Because it could be, as with the prodigal son, that they come to their senses.

They might wake up to themselves - but only because the Lord's Word and Spirit has stirred them!

You see, if there is to be any change of heart it won't come because of what's in their hearts.

It can only be from Israel's true love, the Lord Himself!

Amen.

PRAYER:

Let's pray...

O Lord God, again we have seen that it's all of You.

Nothing man could think or say or do can help in any way.

It's only Your grace that opens up the way.

And so it is, Lord, we come pleading for Your grace - the grace that comes by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

Please hear us and forgive us.

In Jesus' saving and ruling Name, we pray, Amen.