

HOSEA 5:1-15

(Reading: Hebrews 12:14-29)

The People Doomed To Destruction

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

One thing we need to remember with the Old Testament prophets is that they were always preaching to the people right there and then.

Those who were faithful to the Lord didn't hesitate to declare His will to His people.

Even if it meant they were despised, beaten, thrown down wells, and even killed, they were very much in the public square.

The book of Hosea is largely a collection of these sermons preached to the people.

And because Hosea lived through the reign of a number of Israelite kings, they were delivered in quite different political and economic times.

The way our text begins this afternoon is very suggestive of such a setting.

You can even imagine Hosea in the town square of Samaria crying out these very serious words.

"Hear this, you priests!

"Pay attention, you Israelites!

"Listen, O royal house!"

Well, he's got **our** attention hasn't he?

So you can imagine how he would have grabbed people's attention then.

Especially those right on top of society's pecking order!

Because that's who he addresses first.

The spiritual and the secular authorities are left in no doubt whom this is about.

And when the prominent public figures are challenged in public aren't the rest of the public keenly interested in what's being said?

But don't let the man in the street think he escapes any culpability either!

He's also addressed in verse 1.

As we've seen in chapter 4 verse 9, lack of knowledge is no excuse under the law.

So Hosea is quite open about it.

And no wonder!

This evil is quite blatant.

In the words of the first aspect to the text this afternoon, THIS IS SHOWING UP THE SIN ON THE OUTSIDE.

Congregation, here we consider the verses 1 till 7.

And how can we see there it is regarding such obvious sin?

Well, take the second half of verse 1.

There we hear how their place names themselves declare this sin.

For Mizpah and Tabor are both places with much history.

But which history, we wonder?

For Mizpah is a place name which is found in several different locations.

It could be associated with Jacob, Jephthah, Samuel, or Saul.

And Tabor brings up the memory of the great victory of Deborah and Barak.

But what have they become?

Mizpah is described as a snare.

And Tabor is a net spread out.

So to get caught up with what was happening there now was to become trapped.

Verse 2 details this further.

Because there it is clear these places have become centres of pagan worship.

Now, that might not seem that clear when you first read this verse.

But, tell me, how else could they be charged with being deep in slaughter?

And why would the Lord speak about the need to discipline them?

Oh, those Israelites think they are so clever in their own eyes!

Did they really think they could get away with it?

"I know all about Ephraim," the Lord says in verse 3.

"Israel is not hidden from me," He says next.

Because He knows them well.

They can't get away with it.

He knows they've sold out to this most disgusting perversion.

Congregation, this is the process described in the New Testament letter of James.

As the Lord's brother says there in the verses 14 and 15 of chapter 1, "each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.

"Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."

You see, they're totally captivated by this.

Verse 4 of our text only confirms this.

What they're wrapped up in is completely addictive.

The sin on the outside also shows up in their direction.

Because it's all one way!

And it's totally the wrong way!

Perhaps you have known or you know a drug addict.

What is the one consistent motivation in his life?

Isn't it his next fix?

He will lie and steal and do anything in order to feed that addiction.

It's not long and he's lost friends and family because they cannot dare trust him.

In fact, they have already lost so much!

That is what's happening here.

The phrase "spirit of prostitution" brings back the whole picture of what they were charged with in the previous chapter.

But in combination with saying that their deeds don't permit them to return to their God, there's a deep sadness here.

Because, congregation, they're lost.

As one commentator succinctly sums it: "Total apostasy takes away freedom (Wolff)."

And the freedom here, of course, is the true freedom.

This is the freedom that is not freed from but freed for.

This is the freedom of gospel.

Which is exactly what the last line of verse 4 confirms.

To say "they do not acknowledge the LORD" shows they're right out of it.

But are they willing to see that?

See what?

Verse 5 makes it clear who's got the problem here.

'It's that fanatical little zealot of a prophet!

'The sooner the Council gets round to banning such vexatious individuals, they better!

'What do you means we've got it wrong!

'We're more united than ever before!'

The sheer arrogance of the Israelites is astounding!

They are so full of themselves there's definitely no room for anyone else - especially the Lord!

That's what their sin shows.

Like the drunk who thinks that he can get into a car and drive anywhere he likes they go headlong into impending disaster, taking everyone else with them.

'Why, look, isn't that Judah driving up ahead?

'Mate, he's had a few dozen stubbies tonight!'

Brothers and sisters, young people, this is spiritual suicide.

No good can come out of this.

And hasn't that been the devastating result so many times in the church's history?

Those who call themselves God's people couldn't be further away from doing His will then!

In fact, God's Will in His Word has been totally dismissed by them then.

They have become completely caught up by the sights and the sounds of this world.

What is the saddest thing of all then, however, is that the Lord lets them go.

Verse 6 shows that while they still carry on the pretence of worshipping the Lord, He's not there.

They may well follow all the outward forms but God's not home!

David had said this already long before.

In Psalm 51 he spoke of what had to be at the heart of true worship.

There in verse 17 he declared, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you won't despise."

So, even when they try to appease the Lord at the most prominent religious celebrations, they can forget about it!

How can the ritual of the New Moon festival make up in any way for the bastard sons they've bred through paganism?

Another prophet addressed the same situation in the southern kingdom in this same period.

As we read in Isaiah 1 verses 13 and 14, the Lord said through him, "Stop bringing meaningless offerings!

"Your incense is detestable to me.

"New moons, Sabbaths and convocations - I cannot bear your evil assemblies."

Congregation, it's quite clear there's sin on the outside.

This makes our next aspect inevitable.

For THIS IS CLEARLY THE JUDGMENT FROM ALL SIDES.

This is about a national disaster.

Here is no empty threat.

Soon enough the northern kingdom will be obliterated and the southern kingdom itself will only just scrap through.

Verse 8 indicates this through the names of two towns which lie on the border between the two kingdoms.

Gibeah was in Benjamin, and so part of the southern kingdom, while Bethel was just inside the northern kingdom.

Though here Bethel is not actually called such.

Again we have the term used in chapter 4 - 'Beth Aven'.

For Hosea is not letting them forget that that place cannot be called 'the house of God' anymore.

It's definitely become 'the house of evil'.

Interestingly, this verse seems to suggest that this particular threat is from the south.

And while some commentators have thought it was Egypt, it is most likely Judah herself.

So this judgment is from the least expected side.

And it would most likely have happened because Israel in her arrogance made advances into Judah.

The northern kingdom got back her own medicine - and quite a bit of it too!

Now, it might seem a bit strange that Judah devastated so much of Israel.

But looking more closely at the character of each nation explains a lot.

As Derek Kidner says, "If Israel was a den of vice, Judah was a den of thieves."

Still, it is a judgment nonetheless.

And this is what stands out here.

For it doesn't matter who brings this punishment - what must stand out, though, is that it's the judgment from God!

Verse 9 continues describing this devastating scene.

Ephraim, once such a rich and productive land, literally blooming, will be made into a desert, a total desolation!

But Judah won't escape unscathed either.

To say that their leaders are like those who move boundary stones certainly can refer to a negative aspect of their character.

And yet the boundary line between the two wasn't in itself set down by God.

The Lord wouldn't have regarded that as such a terrible thing.

Yet He would be furious with them for removing the boundaries of right that He had determined.

It is this Isaiah also condemns Judah for in his first chapter, as there he declares, "Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!

"Seek justice, encourage the oppressed.

"Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow (vv16c-17)."

Though God may use Judah now to punish Israel, they will themselves be punished for their sin.

Verse 11 turns us again to Israel's continued crisis.

Because it won't finish until they seek their God.

So this verse is like the drunk who, after a terrible accident caused by his drinking, still gets behind the wheel of a car.

"You stupid idiot!" we cry out.

But there's nothing changing upstairs.

The grey matter doesn't matter for him.

Israel must repent and change.

But all she's doing is getting caught up more and more in this vortex of destruction.

Like those caught in a powerful whirlpool these people are getting sucked right in.

And just as much as they are the agents of their own doom, so the Lord steadily makes it so also.

This is the graphic picture verse 12 finishes this aspect with.

For what does a moth do?

Well, a good housewife will know.

And some of the rest of us have found out when we've pulled out that old jumper we used to love many years ago!

"Oh, no, the moths have been at it!"

They've been eating away at it because we didn't keep up the moth repellents, or forgot to use the insecticide in the first place.

And "rot" has the same effect.

By the time we notice it that piece of fruit has to go - and perhaps some of its companions as well!

No less than the march of armies, the silent process of decay is the Lord's way also.

He can use aggression or corruption, but the second of these two is the more deadly.

You see, being attacked from without can work to unite and even cleanse a nation.

But the rot from within is the spiritual cancer that is spotted far too late.

And so it is we come to the third aspect.

Here we note from the verses 13 till 15 that **THIS ALL SHOWS THEY ARE COMPLETELY OFFSIDE.**

Verse 13 picks up again on the theme of a physical disease.

The cancer is coming through.

And, you think, perhaps now it will finally get through?

Surely now they'll come to their senses?

So, what do we see?

"When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his sores, **then Ephraim turned to Assyria...**".

You what?

Yes, you heard it.

Instead of going to the very best medical specialist there was - in fact, the only doctor who could help - they go to a quack!

We know what happens when you go to a quack, don't we?

You definitely won't get better.

In fact, you're going to get worse - and quickly too!

As verse 13 concludes, "he's not able to cure you, nor able to heal your sores."

How much doesn't sin make you blind!

And the likely scenario this describes was very sinful.

For Assyria wasn't paid off to stop an invasion already begun.

Rather, this was Menahem's attempt to get outside backing for his totally illegitimate reign.

As 2 Kings 15 tells us, he was the usurper who had butchered his way to the throne.

He was the one having no qualms about ripping open the wombs of all the pregnant women in one town.

Within twenty years those Assyrians were back.

And then there were no deals!

But, especially, how much doesn't this make God so angry?

Time and again He rebukes and punishes.

And He still does it!

Like the lion does to its prey, He tears them to pieces.

They're being punished in the most severe way.

We can even say the Lord gives them what would have to be biggest smack a nation could get.

The exact punishment He told them through Moses they would get for disobeying Him.

Because there would come a far great invasion than Judah's.

An invasion which will sweep through both of them.

They'll be completely devastated!

As verse 14 says, there won't be anyone who can help them out of this mess.

They'll be all taken away.

And let them think about things when they're so far away.

The land of exile where they're enslaved and despised.

The place where, soon enough, they have completely faded away.

The way this is pictured at the beginning of verse 15 puts this in the saddest way.

For the Lord to talk about going back to his place is to be like the lion who goes back to his cave.

God isn't going out to chase after Israel now.

He leaves her to herself.

And so they won't experience His gracious, helpful presence.

Until they repent, that is.

When they admit their guilt and so they seek His face, then there will be grace.

But until then there's only His wrath.

So when did Israel earnestly seek the Lord?

What time do we see that they realised their utter misery and repented before the Lord?

Congregation, then we have to go to the time and place when God's Spirit really struck the people's hearts.

And that's the Day of Pentecost.

That's the occasion they truly did respond this way.

And that's the day which marked a whole new day for the Church.

Someone could say here that this is a bit unfair.

Because it took God's own Spirit to turn their hearts towards Him.

So what hope did these people of the northern kingdom have seven hundred years before?

Dear friend, they had the gospel preached to them.

They were warned against refusing God.

As Hebrews 12 verse 25 says, they knew they shouldn't refuse him who speaks in the name of the Lord.

But this is a warning for all of us today also.

As Hebrews 12 verse 25 goes on, "if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?"

Congregation, God's own Son has come.

He was born among us.

He suffered, died, and was buried for us.

And He rose victorious over sin and death and the devil.

By His righteousness we are forever right with God.

Through His Spirit we live pleasing the Lord.

Do you dare turn away now?

Amen.

PRAYER:

Let's pray...

O Most Gracious God, we plead upon Your mercy now.

Because of what You did once for all time in Your Son, Jesus Christ, keep us on Your way.

So stir us with Your Spirit that we will stay in the way of Your Word.

And then may others come to see also.

For we want many to glorify and honour You with us.
We pray for the world to wake up and see!
In Jesus' saving Name, alone, we pray, Amen.