

HOSEA 9:1-17

(Reading: Romans 11:11-32)

The People Punished By The Lord

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

The case has been made; the evidence is overwhelming; and the conviction has been declared.

What could possibly come next?

Well, the sentence being pronounced, of course!

Once a person has been found guilty the next thing the magistrate does is to make a judgment.

There must be a penalty!

So, how does a judge decide what kind of sentence?

Well, the punishment to be laid is always in line with what the law has laid down.

A government's legislation has set the clear guidelines for what must be meted out.

In chapter 9 of Hosea we see exactly this.

The evidence produced against Israel has been irrefutable.

It has clearly shown the guilt of Israel.

She has broken with her covenant God.

Time and again she has gone against the most gracious covenant agreement between the two of them.

In fact, in the most despicable ways she has ripped up that contract many, many time over!

Certainly no human authority would have let anyone get away with so much.

Chapter 8 ended testifying to that with what Assyria would soon do because Israel had done a dirty with them!

But God had been extremely merciful.

He had gone out of His way to try and draw them back to His way.

But even those loving acts only confirmed Israel's evil direction all along.

She just kept on going on her own merry way!

Now that day was over.

In fact, in the words of a first aspect to the text this afternoon, **THE PARTY IS WELL AND TRULY OVER!**

The way verse 1 begins it seems these people are very much in party-mode.

Israel has been rejoicing.

She's been celebrating like the nations around her.

But by so doing they have gone against why they were a particular nation in the first place.

Doing what everyone else around was doing is exactly what she shouldn't have been doing!

They were God's people.

They were those who were meant to be the ones in a covenant with Him – the only ones in a covenant with Him!

And don't think this was negating the Judeans in the southern kingdom.

They were part of the same people also – and they shouldn't think they're immune to any of this.

In fact, it would not be long and the Lord's judgment would be visited upon them also!

In this text, however, the focus is on the northern kingdom.

And it's likely that it's at a major religious festival Hosea is speaking these words here.

Indeed, the Harvest Festival is the most probable occasion.

A harvest which seems to have been a good one.

Verses 1 and 2 indicate this with reference to their threshing floors and winepresses.

Because they are referred to in the sense that while they were being blessed physically it was far from being a blessing spiritually.

In fact, they had been throwing away the Lord's blessings to them through the harvest upon the pagan gods.

At the very time they gave lip service to the God of the covenant they couldn't wait to get into the prostitutes of the fertility gods!

Thus they were reaping a harvest that would result in a spiritual cursing, rather than blessing.

As the prophet declares in verse 3, "They will not remain in the Lord's land; Ephraim will return to Egypt and eat unclean food in Assyria."

But don't think that they didn't want to hold on to the worship of their covenant God.

He was "their" God after all!

He was what made them unique as a nation.

The prophet here homes in on something they will miss when their sentence is carried out.

And he further confirms this with reference to the ceasing of sacrifices in verse 4 and of pilgrimages in verse 5.

In chapter 2 it was clear how much the religious veneer was important to Israel.

They kept up that façade.

But all that really remained of it were the shreds of superstition.

It was part of what being Israelite was about, just like today being Australian has an outward form too.

Yet there's very little to this Australian outward form either.

For to many in Australia it's simply about shouting for green and gold at sporting events.

It's about giving it a good old yell, "Ozzie! Ozzie! Ozzie! Oi! Oi! Oi!"

But that's pretty skin deep.

Ask someone what being Australian really means and you might not get much of an answer.

Okay, "football, meat pies, and Holden cars" is a nice jingle but there's no deep faith in it.

And so we have found with the Israelites.

They weren't worshipping the Lord from the heart.

For what they really wanted was the very thing the Lord had clearly forbidden in His Law.

So when they did worship in the old traditional way it was full of hypocrisy.

Just like many will turn up to Christmas and Easter worship service out of tradition, so they were doing.

There are even some very large modern churches who have Saturday night services so that the people can do what they like on Sunday!

Congregation, THE PARTY IS WELL AND TRULY OVER.

The Israelites would be so displaced as a result of God's punishment they would no longer have any semblance whatsoever of their old worship.

It's clear from verse 5 that those days will be over.

Because even if they miss the terrible loss of life the Assyrian war machine invariably brought, they wouldn't have a life to live any way!

Verse 6 highlights this as it speaks of their being buried in Memphis.

Because Memphis is not only a city in America where Elvis Presley died, it is also a place in Egypt where all those who died were buried.

It's a huge cemetery.

So like on Flanders Field in Belgium you can see row upon row of ANZAC soldiers who died, so there will be row upon row of Israelites buried in foreign fields.

They might not be buried in Egypt but they would be buried outside of the Promised Land.

And that's the point here.

For while we still remember those buried on foreign war fields, those Israelites buried elsewhere have been long forgotten.

The description of treasures of silver being overtaken by briars and thorns overrunning their tents tells of this.

Like so many nations and empires of the past they have been swallowed up.

Yet they could have remained in the land.

They could have humbly obeyed God's Word and continue to be blessed.

With God on their side they would not have been like any passing earthly power.

Here is where we come to our second aspect to the text this afternoon.

For now we are told that **THE REJECTION OF GOD HAS COME TO A HEAD.**

So how can we know Israel has reached the point of no return?

Which way can we tell that there is no way out for them anymore?

Because that's how verse 7 begins.

It clearly declares to the northern kingdom that there's only punishment for them now.

We find the answer in the latter part of verse 7.

Because so extensive is their sinning and so great their hostility against God they treat the true prophets as fools.

Anyone sent from God to them is regarded as a maniac.

Congregation, isn't that the classic way to dismiss someone?

Reduce them to some kind of ignorant, ranting fundamentalist, and you can disregard them.

And then you do whatever you can to stop them telling the message they claim to have from the Lord.

You make sure their very politically incorrect diatribe is kept off the streets.

Because you know those prophets believe they're on a divine mission.

You have seen how they see themselves as watchmen over the nation, the conscience of true faith.

And so Israel makes it as difficult for these divine messengers as she can.

They beat them up.

They lock them up.

And they'll even lie and deceive them to get them offside with God as well!

We see an example of that in 2nd Kings 9 after the prophet of the Lord had anointed Jehu as king over Israel.

After that prophet had left, Jehu's fellow officers asked him in verse 11, "Is everything all right?"

"Why did this madman come to you?"

And hasn't that been the reaction against those faithful servants of the Lord throughout the history of the church?

Jeremiah was named in a letter urging the authorities to "put any madman who acts like a prophet into the stocks and neck-irons."

The apostle Paul was told the same by Festus in Acts 26 verse 24.

And the most perfectly faithful servant of them all, our Lord Jesus Christ, was accused of being demon-possessed (John 7:20; 8:48).

Congregation, this raises a very good point.

When Jesus said in Matthew 5 verse 12 that this could happen to us we realise that not only are we also called to be His prophets here and now but the persecution against true believers is more likely the norm than non-persecution.

The time we have experienced in our nation and civilisation of an acceptance and even endorsement of the gospel is a rare time.

It's now ending – we're going to share in what most believers suffer.

So when you are rejected for your faith you are honoured.

When you are despised and disregarded they are medals pinned on your chest.

Because you are doing your duty.

You are being the watchman over your nation.

And even if that brings you hatred within the church itself, as verse 8 says, you need to keep looking up.

When you do that, when you look to the Lord's ways, it's the completely opposite way to where Israel was going then.

For verse 9 is very vivid about the path they've taken.

When it says they have sunk into a depth of corruption as deep as the day of Gibeah there is some frightful history being recalled!

You see, Judges 19 to 21 tells us this story.

Those chapters tell us of how Sodom and Gomorrah had nothing on how bad Israel could get.

In fact, so depraved was that town they openly promoted homosexual deviancy.

Derek Kidner is quite right to say that that city would have been in full agreement with renaming sodomy as the gay life.

But what we have to also note with the example of Gibeah is how the whole tribe of Benjamin was complicit in it.

There was no initiative from them then to seek justice in the matter of the concubine who was terribly violated and murdered.

It took the other tribes to unite together and punish them.

And that itself only happened after a huge battle with thousands of Benjamites killed defending such depravity!

So the way the prophet ends verse 9 is decisive.

When he declares, "God will remember their wickedness and punish them for their sins," **THE REJECTION OF GOD HAS COME TO A HEAD.**

There can be no more.

How different this last sentence is to the grace of the new covenant!

There it gets personal too but in totally the opposite way.

For Jeremiah prophesies the Lord pronouncing about that time, “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more (Jer.31:34).”

But that completely different situation would only come with repentance and faith.

There would be none of that with the Israelites then.

In fact, in the words of the third aspect to this text, **THE GLORY HAS TURNED ALL GORY.**

And what a glory Israel had had!

Verse 10 paints the picture of what the Lord did when He took His people out of Egypt.

There was so much potential then!

I mean, you think about finding grapes in the desert and seeing the early fruit on the fig tree.

They're marvellous things – they show us joyful and unexpected wonders.

There was so much to look forward to!

God's presence was among them.

And notice how this is written from the Lord's angle.

The covenant God looked to the most loving relationship.

But oh so soon and this delightful sweetness sours.

Already early on in their wilderness travels to the Promised Land they rejected the Lord.

Baal Peor is the place described in Numbers 25 where Israel first committed the disgusting act of worshipping Baal.

So right from the beginning Israel has bitten the hand that fed her.

All along she had shown unfaithfulness to the most loving Bridegroom.

She who knew it was naughty – but oh so nice!

And how much different is that to our day and age?

Our society seeks to plunge the church into the same sexual dissipation as Moab did to Israel in the wilderness.

The desperately sad thing is that the church is falling for it.

We see this in what we watch on the TV or movie screen, the language spoken, the divorces, the financial corruption, and the adulterous pastors.

While we may not prostrate ourselves physically before Baal's idol we are certainly spiritually bowing the knee to the god of sex.

They say, ‘You are what you eat’, and how much isn't this truer of what we feed our minds?

Don't think an hour or two of church on Sunday can counter the many more hours we are found worshipping before that other altar during the week – and today too!

Israel became as vile as the thing they loved.

And we've seen that in church history also whenever God's people went away from that single-hearted devotion to the Lord.

The punishment the Lord next outlines makes this clear.

For while with the Lord His promise of descendants as numerous as the sand on the seashore is the most glorious thing the opposite will bring only utter barrenness.

The verses 11 till 13 declare the covenant curse upon them.

And how ironic this is when they have been so busy following the fertility gods.

In the same way how double-edged it is that this world so full of sex is having such high infertility rates.

One of the reasons for it has been the overabundance of sexual partners spreading diseases causing this very barrenness!

So verse 11 pronounces infertility - itself regarded as a curse from the Lord.

Verse 12 tells of children torn from their families - probably through the curse of exile.

And verse 13 speaks of down-right murder – as shown in the sacrifice of children to the god of Moloch.

The reference to Tyre in verse 13 is most likely a reference to both what her name means and what she had become.

Because Tyre means a rock – something which stands out.

One commentator refers to her as an island in the water.

Well, that's what the northern kingdom could have been.

She could have really stood in her Lord and for her Lord.

But instead she's going to be totally flattened!

This all hits the prophet too.

In verse 14 he cries out his anguish.

There he prays, "Give them, O LORD – what will you give them?"

"Give them wombs that miscarry and breasts that are dry."

Hosea feels for his God here.

This is the holy indignation of the imprecatory psalms.

And while some may see Hosea's compassion for his people shown in praying for the softer punishment of barrenness rather than murder, that's not the point here.

The prophet cannot plead for mercy at this point.

This is the sentence being proclaimed.

Indeed, this is confirmed in the fourth aspect of the text this afternoon.

For the last three verses of Hosea 9 tell us **THE FUTURE IS WITHOUT ANY HOPE.**

Looking at these last verses more closely we note that the verses 15 and 16 are words from God Himself.

Here the punishment is even more clearly spelt out.

To realise this we need only to note the use of the first person singular pronoun.

Five times in these two verses the word “I” is tied in with a particular application of God’s judgment.

“I hated them there...”, “I will drive them out...”, “I will no longer love them...”, and “I will slay their cherished offspring.”

Each one of these is in response to what Israel has done.

Actions which clearly put them beyond redemption.

Verse 15 begins by speaking about their wickedness in Gilgal.

For while Gilgal has been the scene of some of the stirring acts in Israel’s history - whether Joshua’s first foothold in the promised land, Saul’s first kingly glory, or David’s welcome back from exile – here it’s about the evil done there.

And what evil could this be?

Well, we recall here that Gilgal and Bethel were the places the golden calves were located as alternative worship centres to Jerusalem’s temple.

That was the wickedness begun under Jeroboam I.

It further seemed that the false worship in Gilgal, there on the north-eastern edge of the Kingdom, went further than Bethel, which was near the border with Judah.

Amos 4 verse 4 makes reference to this with the prophet declaring, “Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more.”

The corruption of true worship was bad enough but the extent here is such that the Lord hates what they have done.

The word “hate” is a confirmation of God’s rejecting them.

Gilgal marks the height of the strained relationship with the Lord.

It’s where the depth of their depravity shows up the real heart of the people.

We can compare this with when a denomination today slips on the slope of liberalism.

It is often just one or two churches who keep pushing the envelope of change.

They are the radicals, they defy the established church order and the accepted forms of worship.

But they also reflect a spirit of rebellion amongst many more.

They are not adequately stopped in what they’re doing.

Oh you’ll hear all the pious platitudes from others.

There’ll be letters of concern.

But what official church discipline there is will be saved for the conservatives who expose what is happening.

They will be clobbered with not having followed correct procedure.

They will be told that you cannot criticise for that would impute impure motives on the brethren.

So don't think Gilgal was alone as she went hard against the Lord.
She has her supporters everywhere.

This is why they will be driven out of the Lord's house.
In some translations the word "land" is used instead of "house".
And this helps us see what is happening here.
For doesn't verse 16 clearly state, "Ephraim is blighted"?
So she is diseased and diseased to the extent that she will die.
And until then she won't be able to produce any fruit either.
Her roots are already withered – completely dried up!

While the name "Ephraim" refers to being fruitful it's the last thing the northern kingdom is showing now.

And if they do happen to have any children at all they won't be living long!

This is affirmed by what comes again from the prophet personally in verse 17.
The one speaking changes but the message is the same.
The Lord's messenger is speaking here His Word in this way.
He is the one man among all the men there who can say the Lord is "**my** God".

And what Hosea ends with prophesying here is perhaps the harshest punishment of all.
For to be wanderers among the nations means you have no home of your own.
Then you have no real identity.

Congregation, doesn't that remind us of someone else?
Do you remember the punishment Cain received for murdering his brother Abel?

In Genesis 4 verse 12 the Lord pronounces this sentence upon him, "When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you.
"You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

Israel too is homeless and guilty like Cain.
They will be scattered.

But it's exactly through this that we have become part of the spiritual Israel.
God's grace powers through exactly because in their fall from grace we've come to be touched by grace.

Romans 11 is clear that their rejection of God is the way we are reconciled to Him.

So while THE FUTURE IS WITHOUT ANY HOPE for them then it has opened up the hope for the whole world today.

Although they are scattered among the nations, and these ten tribes are no longer to be even found among the nations, yet we've been drawn in from all the nations to become the people with the most glorious place.

Dear friends, let's ever praise and thank the Lord for this most precious gift – the gift of grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

PRAYER:

Let's pray...

O Most Loving Heavenly Father...

How much don't we thank and praise You for all You've done through Your one and only Son!

We who were no more deserving that Israel of old have yet been chosen and equipped to be Your very own.

It's to us – we of all people – that Your grace has come.

May we always be obedient to Your Word and so show our deepest thanks always.

Through Christ our Lord we pray, Amen.