

Hosea 14

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it was a heartbreaking marriage. It all started well enough. You can imagine the beautiful family pictures as the first child was born. In a grotty part of town, where she lived as nothing more than a prostitute. You can imagine the gossip, you can imagine the talk, can't you?

Imagine the searing looks at this cold husband, rejected by his wife. Or you can also imagine the suspicions that were cast about him. Well, he seemed like a nice bloke, but what was he doing behind closed doors? There's no smoke without fire, you know.

What had he done to make her leave? And yet, to confound all expectation, in spite of all the gossip and the rumour, in spite of the heartache, that husband took the long journey across town, from what had been the family home, to the red light area where his wife now lived, under the control of the pimp.

He pleaded with her, he met with her, he paid the money to win her back. That was a true story. It's the story of Hosea's marriage that we saw in the first few chapters of this book, back at the end of last year.

But not only is it a story of Hosea's marriage, it was a picture. It was a picture of God's relationship with Israel. Israel, these unfaithful people, this nation he had married, as it were, rescued them out of Egypt, entering into a marriage relationship with them at Sinai, as he led them out through the desert to the promised land.

[1 : 5 3] And yet she, Israel, like Hosea's wife, had gone after other husbands, put her trust, put her hope in other men. It would be perfectly within God's rights, as it would have been within Hosea's rights.

To say, okay, have it your way. Run away. If you treat me like that, live with the consequences. And yet God didn't do that. Hosea didn't do that.

God did warn that terrible judgment should come. So if you look at the previous verse, Hosea chapter 13, verse 16, there is this terrible warning that judgment will come to those who have rejected God's love.

Samaria shall bear her guilt, because she rebelled against her God. They shall fall by the sword. The little ones will be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open.

It's a horrible picture, isn't it? Of the judgment, the right judgment of God, against the people who have rejected him. A judgment that was executed in 722 BC, when the Assyrian army strode into town, destroyed Samaria.

[2 : 5 7] And in keeping with the practices of the day, dashed the little ones to pieces, and ripped open the pregnant women. It's a terrifying sight, terrifying description. Yet even more terrifying, is the truth that stands even behind this story.

The way Israel treated God, the way Gomer treated her husband Hosea, is actually the way every human being who has ever lived, naturally treats God. He's a loving creator. He's made us, he's given everything we need, for life and breath and everything.

And yet we naturally turn away from him. And one of the messages of Hosea, is that for those who persistently run away from God as Israel did, terrifying judgment will come.

Terrifying judgment will come. And so we all need to heed this story. We all need to heed this story. Because the good news is it can end with judgment.

The good news is there's this chapter 14 I've just read. Which is a reminder to us that we can turn away from that judgment. Just as Hosea had gone to Gomer, and pleaded with her back in chapter 3, to come back and live with him as his wife.

[4 : 0 4] So God pleads to Israel, and through Hosea, pleads to us all, turn back, return home, come back to me, stop running away, stop ruining your own life, stop running headlong into

judgment, come back to me, I love you.

So through Hosea, God is inviting us today, commanding us, to turn back, to turn back to our true home, to the God who loves us. Look at chapter 14 verse 1, will you? Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.

You've stumbled, you've fallen, you're heading to judgment because of your iniquity, the badness in you. But I want us to notice something very important here. See what Hosea says?

He doesn't just say, turn around, live in a different way. He doesn't say, come back to your old religious practices. Rather, he says, return to a person, to the Lord your God, to a person.

And literally, in the original language, it's not just turn back in the direction of, but come back right to, into relationship with, right up until the Lord your God. Hosea isn't calling us to change our lifestyle, to change our philosophy.

[5 : 18] He's telling us to embrace a new religious practice. He's telling us to come back to a person, to return to the living God. Now I wonder, have you ever known God personally?

Have you ever known God personally? Not just as an idea, not just as an abstract, vague deity out there, who you might sing hymns to in church.

But as a personal God, who knows you, and loves you. That's what Hosea is urging us to do, to come personally, to God. Don't just read about him, don't just hear about him, but speak to him, know him, personally.

So there are three questions I think that raises for us, that Hosea answers here. How can we return to the Lord? How can we do it? Secondly, what will happen if we do?

And thirdly, so what? Does this really matter anyway? Is it that important? Let's look at those quickly. First of all, how can we turn back to God? What does it take to come back from him?

[6 : 20] To come back to him? What do you think you need to do? If you or I have drifted away from God, or if we've never personally come to Jesus Christ, for forgiveness, how can we come back to him?

I think our natural instinct, when we've done something wrong to someone, is to try and make amends, isn't it? I have a friend I often meet with for a coffee, so we can read a bit of the Bible together, and he quite frequently in the early days was late, and so he was going to go, oh Stuart, it must be my turn to buy the coffee.

Why do you want to buy the coffee? Because he felt guilty. He wanted to do something to make atonement. And often that's how we are with God, isn't it? We think, if I've messed up in this area, then maybe I need to go to church for a while, maybe I need to make sure I actually read the Bible this week, and that will make it up.

But that's not what Hosea says, is it? That's not what God says. How can we turn back to him? Well there is an art in returning. A-R-T, to help you remember, an art.

It starts with asking, look at verse 2, take with you words, and return to the Lord. Don't come back with things you've done, and say, look, please accept me, I've done this, that, and the next, I've got this good pile of good deeds here.

[7 : 28] No, Hosea says. Ask. Ask. Take with you words, and return to the Lord. Now you might say, how can I pray? I don't know how to pray. I don't know if you've ever seen the film Gravity, it's a great movie, and in it, Sandra Bullock plays an astronaut, Dr. Ryan Stone, and it's a disaster movie, so she's about to die, and the George Clooney character comes to her and says, Lord, why don't you pray?

He says, no one ever taught me how. No one ever taught me how. Well Hosea tells us how. Look at verse 2. Say to him, take away all iniquity, except what is good.

In other words, ask for forgiveness. Take away my iniquity. Take away the badness that keeps oozing out of me. That's what that word iniquity means.

It means something that's crooked, something that's broken, something that doesn't work. We all have that inside us, don't we? We're all like those bowling balls, you know, lawn bowls. It looks very simple when you see it at the Commonwealth Games on television, it's the only time I ever watch it. And people come up and roll a ball down the green. It gets towards the jack. The thing about those balls is they've got this bias in them. If you try and roll it in a straight line, it curves off. Well that's like us.

[8 : 44] We try and go in a straight line, we curve off. That's our iniquity, that's our crookedness. We cannot live properly. And so we start, we return to God by asking him for forgiveness, to take

away our iniquity.

We do that with sincerity as well. The next line says, we will pay with balls the vows of our lips. That makes it a bit confusing to us. Actually, scholars argue over exactly what that means.

It could mean either what our translations have, we will pay with balls the vows of our lips, we'll promise to do something and we'll fulfil it. Or it could mean, the other way around, we're not going to bother you with sacrifices, rather we're going to do what we promised to do.

But either way, it means asking God with sincerity, with integrity, please accept us, please forgive us, and I'm going to try to go your way. I'll try to truly honour you with my lips, with my mouth, with my heart.

So the point is the same, it's not merely going through the motions, it's asking with sincerity. So that's the A, ask. But secondly, if you turn to something, you can actually turn away from something else.

[9 : 52] If I ask you all now to turn to the table with the books on, I'm glad you're not doing that, you do keep looking at me, but if you did that, you'd be turning away from the windows, wouldn't you? So it is as we turn to God, so we're turning away from something else.

So the A is ask, the R is renouncing, renouncing false hopes and false securities. Look at verse 3. The people are to say, Assyria will not save us, we will not ride on horses, we will say no more, our God, to the work of our hands.

Assyria was the superpower of the day, Israel hoped Assyria would save them. Horses were a sign of self-sufficiency, if you like. If you had an army with lots of horses, then you could feel pretty confident you'd win, because the horse was like a tank of the day.

And of course, they made their own gods, their own idols, they hoped to provide security. So all these three things, Assyria, horses, man-made gods, they're all false hopes, things people put their comforts in.

Now, I don't expect any of us to actually have a little God that we've made in our toolsheds back home. I don't expect any of us are looking to Assyria to save us, or to the UN, or to anyone else.

[11 : 02] However, let me ask you this. How would you finish this sentence? I will feel happy when... dot, dot, dot. I will feel happy when...

dot, dot, dot. When I meet God. When I meet God. Good answer. We can talk more about that. Many of us, I'll be happy when the kids are finally left school, they're finally left university, they don't have to pay for that anymore.

I'll be happy when I can get to a holiday and the stress at work is behind me for a few weeks. Well, I won't worry about my future when I've paid off my mortgage. When I shall save enough in a pension fund.

When the kids have good enough grades to get a decent job. See, how we finish that sentence shows us what our Assyria, what our horses, what our false gods are.

All these things can be false securities. If we want to return to the Lord, firstly, ask for forgiveness, but secondly, we renounce those false securities. We say, God, I no longer get a trust in my investments, not just because the stock market's a mess.

[12 : 13] I no longer get a trust in my own ability to progress in my career. I get a trust that you are the one who holds my hand. So we ask, we renounce false securities, and thirdly, A-R-T, the ask of returning, we trust.

Look at the rest of that verse, will you? The very last line of verse 3, In you, the orphan finds mercy. We've seen terrible stories in our news, haven't we, of orphans, orphans on the way to Europe, fleeing from Syria or wherever.

So often they end up at the prey of merciless man, taken into the sex trade in Italy and other countries. It's terrible, isn't it? But here we have a God in whom the orphan finds mercy.

Someone who is safe, someone who will care, someone who will love. And that is what you and I need, isn't it? We have nothing to offer. We need a God who is going to be merciful to us, and he is. As we read on in the story of the Bible, we find God can accept us as his own children because his own son died in our place. Our iniquity, our rebellion, our sin, our false hopes have earned us God's righteous anger.

[13 : 29] Yet God has sent his own son who has turned that anger away, taken it upon himself. So now you and I can be treated as God's own children. So here's the art of returning to God.

We don't try and do good things to be accepted. No, we ask for his forgiveness. We renounce our false hopes and insecurities and we trust in his unfailing love.

So that's how we can return to God. But what will happen when we do come home? What will happen when we do come home? Well, that's what Hosea describes this poetry in verses 4 to 8.

Verse 4, the Lord promises, I will heal their apostasy. Now that word apostasy in the original language means kind of waywardness. It actually has the root word turning in it.

It's kind of turning about. this fact that we often turn astray. I will heal their apostasy. I will heal that inbuilt bias in them that causes them to turn away from me.

[14 : 31] Here's the first thing that happens. The Lord promises deep healing. He will not merely accept us, he will change us. He will change us from the inside out. He will give us new hearts. And please notice, we don't change ourselves.

it's not our long walk home that changes us as we turn back to God. It's not that that changes us, it's God's acceptance, God's welcome. Mumford and Sons in one of their songs put it beautifully, somehow.

In the song Roll Away Your Stone, they say it's not the long walk home that will change this heart, but the welcome I receive at the restart. It's not the long walk home, it's not turning back to God that changes you.

It's the welcome we receive at the restart. I will heal their apostasy, deep healing. Secondly, real love. I will love them freely for my anger has turned from them.

Those things we have done in life that should cause God's anger, that naturally cause God's righteous anger with us, our lying, our selfishness, all those things, they've been turned away because Jesus has taken them for us, and so God will love us freely.

[15 : 39] Now the healing and the love becomes refreshment. Look at verse 5. I will be like the dew to Israel, he shall blossom like the lily. Now we don't really need dew in this country, do we? Especially the rain we've had this winter.

But some of you have grown up in dry, arid countries, or at least have visited such places, you know what it's like. It's hot and nothing can grow. Yet with a bit of rain and a bit of dew, plants can suddenly flourish, life can come, and so the Lord will bring refreshment.

I suspect some of us here have been Christians for a long, long time. Maybe it feels like our walk with the Lord is stale and dry, but we open the scriptures but we just read through it in a perfunctory way.

We try to pray but it's hard. We go to church and we can take part but there doesn't feel like there's much joy there. The Lord promises refreshment for those who turn back, those who come to him with words.

He renounce when we renounce our false securities. He brings deep healing, he brings real love, he brings true refreshment. And he brings stability.

[16 : 45] Look at the rest of that verse. He, that is Israel, shall take root like the trees of Lebanon. His shoots shall spread out. These huge trees that Lebanon was famous for, that don't get blown over by the wind like the winds we have now.

Stability. Stability even during drought, during the hard seasons of life. As we turn back to the Lord, he makes us stable. Not only stable but beauty. His shoots shall spread out, his beauty shall be like the olive, his fragrance like Lebanon.

There's something attractive about someone who's been given new life by the Lord. I wonder if you think of those people who, those of us who are Christians, perhaps in our own lives, we know people who have really helped us.

People who we sense are just godly and Christ-like. There are two particular men who come to my mind, who are just very gentle, very humble, have suffered a lot in life, very caring, very giving, but strong men.

There's something deeply attractive about them. I would love to be like that. When the Lord says, that's what I want to do with my people. You come home to me, you'll be deeply loved, you'll be truly healed, and I change your apostasy.

[17 : 54] You'll be given stability, refreshment, and there'll be a beauty about your life. In this case, you get this image of fruitfulness. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow, they shall flourish like the grain, they shall blossom like the vine, their fame shall be that the wine of Lebanon.

This is what we can expect as we return to the Lord. A fruitfulness, a joyfulness, a vitality in our lives. What else can bring that?

Well, nothing, can it? We can go on all the detox diets we want, we can go to the gym as often we want, those things can be good for physical fitness, don't get me wrong, but ultimately true life, true fruitfulness, comes from the living God as we turn back to him.

And you see that's the answer if you look at verse 8. Oh Ephraim, that's another name for Israel, what have I to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you. I am like an evergreen cypress, from me comes your fruit.

The Lord alone is a source of true fruitfulness, true life. Our money cannot do it, our careers will not do it, nothing else can guarantee our security. Here is where we can return to.

[19 : 05] So you see how to return to the Lord, there was an art, ask, renounce, trust. What will happen when we do? Vitality and life and healing. So clearly, does this really matter anyway?

Our young friend lives a couple of doors down, who hates her religious education classes, she says, no point, it's all rubbish, what's the point of it? My friends often tell me, I'm not religious, it's alright for you to do it, but I'm not religious.

Maybe you feel like that as well. I urge you to look at verse 9. Whoever is wise, let him understand these things. Whoever is discerning, let him know them.

What is wisdom? Wisdom is living in a manner that is appropriate for the actual conditions. Wisdom is living in a manner that is appropriate to the actual conditions.

It is not wise to go out on a bike at night dressed in dark clothes with no lights on. You'll get run over. That's why I look like a Christmas tree when I go out. It would not be wise to drive down the motorway at 90 miles an hour in heavy rain or freezing ice.

[20 : 09] You will get hurt. It is not wise to go and park by the river in Twickenham where there are signs saying, road liable to flooding. And yet when I lived there, almost without fail, I saw a reasonably smart car parked on those lines.

Some of you thought it didn't matter, but they were above the rules. See, wisdom is living in a way that is appropriate to the actual conditions. What are the actual conditions we live in?

We live in God's world. We live in a world created and sustained by God. And so look at the conditions here at the end of the verse. We have to decide how to respond to this. The ways of the Lord are right and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them.

See, God has revealed his ways. He's spoken to us. He speaks to us through the scriptures. He's speaking to us through this book of Hosea. He speaks to us ultimately through the Lord Jesus Christ. And we've got to choose.

What do we do with that? Do we walk in his ways? Do we return to him with words and with sincerity? Or do we go our own way? That's not for me.

[21 : 12] I'm just going to keep going my own way. Like the guy who parks his BMW by the river in Twickenham thinking the sign doesn't really matter to him. Oh, it does. See, Israel faced destruction because of their iniquity.

That's what verse 1 warned, wasn't it? You have stumbled because of your iniquity. Each one of us stumbles because of our inbuilt inability to live God's ways. Each one of us needs God's rescue.

So the question for us is are we going to be wise and return to the Lord? Or will we be, will we not? Will we stumble in our own ways?

We can do that either by living like God doesn't exist or by living as if God needed us. I have another friend who often says to me, gives me the idea that he thinks God needs him.

That she should go to church because that will do God a favour. If you think like that then that is not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible means nothing from you. However, he has everything to give you if you will acknowledge, if we will acknowledge we need him.

[22 : 17] That is the wise response. To return to the Lord and say, take away all iniquity, accept what is good, for we may not stumble, but have life.

Many praise you.