

# Hosea 14

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[ 0 : 00 ] He's a newspaper columnist. He's written some very, very interesting things this week. And the Times is a journalist who is widely known for his anti-Christian views.

Describing himself as a born-again atheist. He's brought up in an Anglican church. And as an adult, he says, he became a born-again atheist. He's a close friend of Dawkins.

He was a friend of Christopher Hitchens. And during that time, he wrote a number of books. Just to give you a flavour of where he was coming from, he wrote a book called God's Funeral. He wrote a book against religion called The Church in Crisis.

And he wrote many, many hostile books. He had a particular hatred for C.S. Lewis for some reason. And he wrote lots and lots of articles against C.S. Lewis' writings.

But in 2009, God brought him back. He would say he became a Christian. He writes about it in the New Statesman. This is what he said. He said, my departure from the faith was like a conversion on the road to Damascus.

[ 1 : 07 ] My return was slow, hesitant, doubting. And so it will always be. But I know I shall never make the same mistake. He attributes, and he's coming back to the Lord, to something that he read in the table talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the poet.

Coleridge quotes from Genesis chapter 1. And he advises people to read Genesis 1 without prejudice. The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostril the breath of life.

And Coleridge says, and man became a living soul. Materialism will never explain that. Materialism will never explain those words that man became a living soul.

And so Ian Wilson came back to the Lord, he says. My return was slow, hesitant, and doubting. But I know that I will never make that same mistake again.

I will never make that same mistake again. Never again. And that's what Israel promises God, doesn't it? In the last chapter of Isaiah.

[ 2 : 12 ] Do you see those words in verse 3? And we will say no more, our God, to the work of our hands.

In you, the orphan finds mercy. Three things I want you to see as we finish this book. The first is a plea straight from the heart of God, which is addressed to us.

And then secondly, there are promises that God makes here to give incentives for us to come back to him. And then there's a PS, a postscript, right at the very end of the book.

So plea, promises, postscript. First of all, there's a plea from the heart of God. Return, O Israel.

Return to the Lord your God, verse 1. Return. Your sins have been your downfall. You've stumbled because of your iniquity. Return.

[ 3 : 15 ] It's a bit like you're driving down the motorway, and there's writing in a very large print, go back. You're going the wrong way. Now you can ignore that sign if you want to, but if you do ignore that sign on the motorway, you're going to end up in a lot of trouble.

Because driving up the motorway in the wrong direction, it's very difficult to turn around. You've got to pray, haven't you? There's some sort of slip road. Not so far off that you can get off the road. And the danger is that if we ignore this plea tonight, as God's people, the same thing could happen to us.

Return, he's saying. He's saying you are going the wrong way. Go back. Return, O Israel. Your sins have been your downfall. It's a plea for repentance. Repentance. That's what repentance means.

Turning from our sin to Jesus. I saw a book advertised recently, which was called this, How to Apologize and Admit Nothing. It's the book, isn't it?

Every politician and every sporting personality who's been caught out needs. And so often you've heard those kind of half-baked apologies. I'm sorry if my words offended you.

[ 4 : 28 ] That isn't an apology. It's actually your fault that you're offended. I'm sorry if what I said offended you. But that's your problem.

That's no apology. Repentance is more than being sorry. It is more than even saying sorry. It is a turning around. You can feel sorry, can't you?

You might feel sorry tonight. You might feel genuine sorrow. But let me tell you this, being sorry isn't enough. Because we saw in chapter 6 that their sorrow, their sorriness, their repentance was just half-baked and it was superficial.

It was short-lived. And God says to them in chapter 6, Remember, your love, well it's actually like the morning mist. Words are cheap.

And God is calling on his people to return. But how will we return to return to God? Look what it says in these opening verses. Look what it says in verse 1. Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.

[ 5 : 27 ] Take with you words and return to the Lord. When Billy Graham, the kind of great 20th century evangelist, was on the scene, he would fill football stadiums all around the world.

And at the end of his preaching, he'd call people down to the front to respond to the gospel. He would pray with them the sinner's prayer. God is saying to you, come with me.

Take words. Pray the prayer. Come back to me. I'll even tell you what to say. I'll even give you the script if you're at loss. Look at verse 2.

Take with you words and return to the Lord and say to him, take away all iniquity, except what is good. The NIV, if you've got that translation, says, receive us graciously.

Perhaps, like the prodigal son, remember him in Luke 15? You've been in the far country and you've lived as if God was dead, practically. And just like A.N. Wilson, you've wandered far away from God.

[ 6 : 41 ] And I expect every Sunday, when I stand here and preach, there are people here who might be in church, but they're in the far country. And they mouth the hymns, but their life is far off from God.

And they're living as if God did not exist. And maybe you're a bit like that this evening. And I want to remind you, that famous parable of the prodigal son, there are two sons and they were both lost.

And so one, I kicked over the traces, didn't he? One went into the far country, he wasted his life, he disgraced his family, but there was another son who stayed at home. He was a church kid, he never did anything wrong, he never put a foot wrong, he did his duty.

The one son came back and he remember what he said, he said, I owe you. I owe you, let me make it up to you. I don't deserve to be called your son.

Let me sleep in the barn, let me be treated like one of your hired servants. Let me prove myself to you. Again, I've blown it. I owe you, father, I owe you. But do you remember what the other son says?

[ 7 : 46 ] The other says this to the father, he says, you owe me. I've always tried to be a good boy, I've always come to church, I've always said my prayers, I've always done my duty by you, you owe me.

And here's the truth, they were both lost. And if you read in Luke 15, you'll find that the father comes to both his sons and he pleads with them both. He comes to the runaway prodigal and the church kid and he pleads with them both, the feral son and the good son, he pleads with them both to come back.

And so I am pleading with you tonight, whether you've been in the far country or whether you've been in church all your life, to return to the Lord and take words, he says, and return to him. We will never again say that our gods to what our hands have made.

And that goes to the very heart of who we are as human beings. Martin Luther said in his day, Tim Keller has said it in our day, beneath every sin there is an idol.

Just think about that for a moment. You need to think hard for a minute with me. It's not just the things that we do or don't do. There's something that makes us do them. In Wales there was a prayer meeting every week growing up and what that led to sometimes, people pray the same prayer every week.

[ 9 : 17 ] One old man, Lord my life is such a mess. I've made such a mess of things. Clear away the cobwebs. Clear away the cobwebs. One of the things came the next week and the one after and it was always clear away the cobwebs.

Clear away the cobwebs. Eventually someone got up and prayed, Lord and while you're at it, kill the spider. And the problem is there's a spider.

So think with me about this. It's not just the wrong things that you do and that you get things wrong, but the problem is there's something that makes you do that. And the Bible tells you and I that it's idolatry.

And so behind every sin is an idol. So let's take lying. Why do we lie? Why do you lie? Think about that.

Why do you lie? The reason you lie is this. It's because you care more about what other people think than what God thinks. And that's why. So we look for acceptance, don't we?

[ 10 : 21 ] In the eyes of other people. So we lie to them rather than the eyes of God. And we're economical with the truth and we're always talking ourselves up.

Why do people steal? Well, there's all sorts of reasons, but the one big reason is they want security in life. We all do, don't we? And we look for security in the things that we have, in the possessions we accumulate, around us instead of God.

And that's what's happening in Israel, you see. They were looking to Assyria to give them security. That is like trusting in our politicians. Rather than trusting in the covenant-keeping God of Israel, the God who is a father to the fatherless to give them security.

They put their trust in war horses. I don't know if you put your trust in horses. There are people around the corner from my house who stand outside the bookies.

They put their trust in horses. They look to these things. They look everywhere but to God for their sense of significance. My friends, look everywhere for their sense of who they are, for their sense of safeness.

[ 11 : 37 ] And so you might be thinking, well, this isn't relevant to me. Let me just ask you a few questions and you can answer them in your head. Don't shout out. How would you complete these sentences?

I would be happy if... If what? Because if it is not God, then that is your idol.

My future would be secure if only... If only what? What's your answer to those questions?

Well, if only I could get a job. If only I could get a boyfriend or a girlfriend. If only I could get married. If only I could pass my exams. If only I could get that promotion at work. If only I looked slightly differently.

If only I could save enough money to retire comfortably. If only I lived in another place. If that's your answer, let me tell you this. Your gods won't save you. Turn from them.

[ 12 : 37 ] And seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And all these other things will be added to you, Jesus says. And so here is God and he is pleading with you to return to him, to come back to him.

To never again go to the things that we have made and say these are our gods. To stop trusting in everyone and everything else rather than him.

And he pleads with you tonight to turn back to him. But God is so kind, isn't he? Because the second point is that in order to help you do that, he promises. He makes you promises.

And three times in these verses he says, I will look at verse four. Verse four, he says, I will heal their apostasy. I will love them freely for my anger has turned from them.

I will be like the dew to Israel. Do you hear that? My anger has turned away from them. You see, this is where Jesus comes into the picture, isn't it?

[ 13 : 43 ] Because John tells us in the New Testament that in Jesus and through Jesus and here is the big New Testament word there is propitiation.

What does that mean? The New Testament tells us that he is the propitiation for our sins and not only for us but for the whole world. For people all over the place, wherever you're from.

In other words, the word propitiation means that Jesus is the one who turns the anger of God aside. There is no illustration that works on this.

Every single one falls short than this one does here. But think of a lightning rod on top of a building and there's a big lightning storm. And the lightning strikes the lightning rod and it conducts the lightning safely down to the earth.

And there is a sense, that's not the whole sense by any means, which that is what the Bible is telling us about Jesus. He is the propitiation. He is that lightning rod that short circuits the anger of God against your sin and mine.

[14:52] It's what happened on the cross. So, why that illustration falls down is Jesus did not just divert God's anger, he exhausted it. He didn't deflect it, he bore it on the cross, the full unmitigated wrath of God against his people.

Jesus took the full hit. without reservation. He drank the cup of God's wrath to the dregs so that tonight you could drink the cup of blessing.

And John says, this is love, not that we love him. That's a really weak, pathetic thing, your love for him, like mine. It's not that we loved him but that he loved us.

That's what this table tells you tonight. And he sent his son to do that for us, to be the propitiation for our sins. So he cries out on the cross, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

He goes into God forsakenness for us. Which tells you and I that the suffering of Jesus is not primarily, it's not in the nails, it's not in the torture, it's not in what he suffered.

[16:03] Physically, but it's under the wrath of a holy God. He went into God forsakenness of what our sins deserve so that we would never have to experience that. And it is retrospective.

Paul has told us, isn't he, in Romans chapter 3, verse 25, that God presented Jesus as the propitiation by his blood to be received by faith tonight.

And this was to show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

It works back into Hosea's day. It stretches back to Israel. God says, I will turn from the fierceness of my anger.

How can he possibly do that? How can a holy God pretend that sin doesn't matter? He doesn't. Can God sweep your sin and my sin under the carpet? How can he remain just and at the same time let Israel off the hook?

[17:10] How can he be the justifier of the ungodly? How can he do that? The answer is only because of Jesus. And only because of what happened on the cross. and all who trust in Jesus.

That's why you need to trust him. That's why you need to come to him tonight. That there is no condemnation now for those who trust in him. But for those who are not in Christ tonight, for those who have not come to him and taken him to be their Lord and Saviour, do you know what it says? It says, the wrath of God remains on them. all the grief and the frustration and the anger remains on those outside of Christ.

There's no shelter for them from the wrath of God. And that's why this is urgent. And so tonight, ask yourself, why will you perish?

God doesn't desire that any should perish. That's why he sent his son into the world. And so he pleads with you tonight at this table. He pleads with you, come back to me. Return to me.

[18:24] And he gives every incentive. Do you see what he promises here in verse 5? He says, I will be like the dew to Israel. Is that your life? You're dry, spiritually you're dry. Life feels like hard and barren and fruitless.

And God says, there's a reason why it's like that. Come back to me. I'll be like the dew of Israel. Softening the soil so you can plant your crops. Allowing you to flourish and grow and be fruitful. Return to me, he says, and I will refresh you and reinvigorate you. Verse 5, I will be like the dew to Israel. He shall blossom like the lily. He shall take root like the trees of Lebanon. His shoot shall spread out.

His beauty shall be like the olive and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow. They shall flourish like the grain. They shall blossom like the vine. Their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

What you have there is the promise of human flourishing. And human beings can only flourish in Jesus.

[19:25] Instead of the covenant curse which we deserve, God is promising covenant blessings. Return to me, he says, and I'll love you freely. I'll be like the dew to Israel in that dry and dusty place in the Middle East.

I'll be like dew. And he promises that to you tonight. If you are in the far country, if you are in the desert place, come back. Not only will you be blessed, do you notice you will become a blessing to

other people.

Not only will you flourish when you return to the Lord, but you will cause others to flourish. Look at verse 7 again. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow.

They shall flourish like the grain. They shall blossom like the vine. Their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon. Let me share with you the testimony of a man called Mes McConnell.

I don't know if you know him. He's quite a character. He's the church planter that Donald worked with in Edinburgh. He's probably the only man more eccentric than Donald. And he works at Nidre Community Church.

[ 20 : 34 ] He heads up a thing called 20 Schemes. I wouldn't agree with everything he says. But it's a church planting movement amongst Scotland's poorest communities. They do remarkable work. And Mes McConnell has written of his testimony.

He grew up in the most appalling, horrendous circumstances, suffering every kind of abuse unimaginable to a young child. And then he became a Christian in his young adult years in Swindon.

This is his testimony. Let me share it with you. Mes says this, Jesus Christ has not only freed me from my sin, he's not only reconciled me to God, but he's changed my future and the future of my offspring for generations to come.

He has broken the chains that bound me from birth. The cycle of pain and misery will stop with me. My children will never know what it is to be beaten at home.

They will never know what it is to be abused physically and mentally and sexually by those who are meant to care for them. God willing, they will never know what it's like to grow hungry.

[ 21 : 38 ] They will never know these things because of the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ in my life. Jesus Christ has broken the cycle. I can't protect them from the world around them and I can't protect them from their own sinful inclinations, but I can offer them an environment where the gospel is real and relevant in their lives.

I can offer them hopes, opportunities, and dreams. I can offer them things they'd never before imagine if God had not reached down from heaven and given me life.

I preached once in a place and I was speaking with someone over lunch. I said, how many generations of Christians are there in your family? He's one of these kind of ancestry boffins. He said, they go back to about the 14th century. It's a family that had come from Holland. They could trace generation after generation after generation of children who had been brought to be baptized.

God shows mercy to a thousand generations. Generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. He is a covenant keeping God and when we turn back to him and when we turn to him, he breaks the cycle.

[ 22 : 56 ] He breaks the cycle of dysfunctional families and we flourish. He changes the course of future generations. That's what's promised here. It's the covenant with Abraham. In your seed, God promised to Abraham, in your seed, all the nations of the earth would be blessed and that's what God is promising through Isaiah.

Come back to me and the nations will come and they will rest in your shade and they will blossom. Don't you want that for yourself? Think of someone in your life, think of someone in your family circle or in your church life who's been influential on you.

How fondly you remember them. Don't you want to be one of those people yourself? Maybe it's a grandparent. Maybe it's a peer. Maybe it's a Sunday school teacher. Maybe it's an elder.

Maybe it's someone who's had a big impact on your life and when you think of that person it's such a fragrant, warm memory. Don't you want to be like that? Come back to God and you will flourish.

And not only that, you will cause others to flourish. Don't you want that for your church? Don't you want that for our community?

[ 24 : 11 ] We really do want, don't we? We want Ealing, Hanwell, Greenford to flourish. But that only happens when human beings return to Jesus through the preaching of the gospel.

Oh, Ephraim, verse 8. God says, 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. Jesus said, if you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. But apart from me, you can do nothing.

You may very well get a good CV, a good degree, a great job. You might have lots of human accolades. You might be super bright, worldly accolades, but Jesus, apart from me, you'll ultimately accomplish nothing.

Come back, come back, come back, and return to me. Then finally, there's the postscript. Look at verse 9. We've heard God's plea. We've listened to his promise. And here's the postscript, the PS, to the whole book of Hosea.

[ 25 : 13 ] Verse 9, whoever is wise, let him understand these things. Whoever is discerning, let him know them. Hosea is written as a cautionary warning to warn us not to make the same mistakes that Israel did.

Because the ways of the Lord, verse 9, are right, and the upright walk in them. Story on the internet, you've heard it.

I don't think it's true, but it's a good story and a good illustration. Supposedly, it's an actual conversation between a US naval ship and a Canadian coast guard off the coast of Newfoundland.

The American naval ship, please divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision. Canadians, no, we recommend that you divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision.

Americans, this is the captain of a US Navy ship. I say again, divert your course. Canadians, no, I say again, you divert your course. Americans, this is the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln, the second largest ship in the United States Atlantic Fleet.

[ 26 : 29 ] We are accompanied by three destroyers, three cruisers, and numerous support vessels. I demand that you change your course 15 degrees north, that's 15 degrees north, or countermeasures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship.

Canadians, this is a lighthouse. Your call. Thank you. That's how the book of Hosea ends. God is not, God is not the immovable first mover of the Greek philosophy.

He is a loving heavenly father, and you and I are on a collision course with him in our sin, and it will not end well for you unless you repent, unless you return.

It's your call. I'll close this. I was brought up in a church. It was a church that taught the Bible.

There's some things that weren't so great about it, but it taught me the gospel. I reached my kind of teenage years. I decided I didn't want to believe.

[ 27 : 41 ] It wasn't that I didn't believe, but I didn't want to believe. I went on camp, not for very good reasons. And a man's book called Alan Rees, who is, I've often thought about getting him to preach, and then I listen to him again and think, I can't.

But he gave his testimony. He'd been a rugby player for Aberavon, which in the 1970s he played against all the greats. He'd been wonderfully converted. He's very rough and ready, and he spoke about how God had changed his life.

He said, there's a living God who can be known and wants to be known, and he wants to be in a relationship with you. He quoted a hymn, and I knew at that point I needed to get right with God, and I began to pray and plead with God to say to him, I want to know you like Alan Rees knows you.

Give me that relationship with you. I want to know you, and God answered that prayer. There were lots of struggles from that point on, but he answered that prayer. God was a prayer. And I became aware that God had come into my life through Jesus.

The love of God was gradually shed abroad in my heart, an awareness of, that my sins were forgiven, and things were right between God and me. There were lots of problems, lots of struggles.

[ 28 : 50 ] But I had this cry, Abba, Father, that God was not a non-entity, and God was not a distant deity, but he was my loving Father, and that is how he's revealed to us in the book of Hosea.

And I came to him. I came back to him. And I'm pleading with you to do the same. God says to you tonight, come back to me, and take back with you words.

Are you at a loss for words? Don't know what to say? Let me give you three words as I finish. Three words as we come to the table.

Sorry, please, thank you. That's all you need. Sorry, please, thank you.

Let's pray.