

Hosea 6

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Date: 06 February 2022

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[0 : 0 0] Turn to Hosea, chapter 6. We're going to skip around to the preceding chapters.! It's on page 754 if you've got one of the church Bibles.

Page 754. It's tricky to find, isn't it? So I want to ask you and talk to you tonight about your relationship with God. How do you picture that? How do you picture God? There have been lots of different ways that people have thought about God. So for example, Sylvia Platt, the poet, says, I talk to God, but the sky is empty. Albert Einstein said, I believe in God. I believe in a God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists. Not in a God who concerns himself with the fates and actions of human beings. So the God that Albert Einstein believed in was not the God of the Bible. Certainly not the God of Hosea's prophecy. Picasso, the painter, said God is really only another artist.

[1 : 1 1] Voltaire said God is a comedian playing to an audience too afraid to laugh. And the comedian Jimmy Carr has been in the news this week said, When I was a kid, I had an imaginary friend.

And I used to think he went everywhere with me and I could talk to him and he would hear me. And then I grew up and stopped going to church. We need to pray for Jimmy Carr, don't we? People think of God in lots of different ways. None of those pictures are biblical. So how do we think of God?

How do you relate to God? What's the biblical picture? The biblical picture is he's our creator, he made us, and we are his creatures. And that puts us in our place. He is our king and we are his subjects. But the interesting thing, the amazing thing is that when the Bible speaks of our relationship with God, it talks about a marriage.

[2 : 0 9] And that's the great theme of this prophecy of Hosea. You find it throughout the Bible. But it's a marriage that appears to be on the rocks. It's heading for the divorce courts.

We'll see that in verse 1 of chapter 4. That God is bringing a charge against his runaway bride, Israel.

And the question is, for Israel and for us, how much do we want this marriage to work? That's always a good question, isn't it? Whenever I kind of do marriage counseling and people come to see me, that's the question.

How much do you want it to work? If the answer is yes, we want it to work, well, there is some hope. If the answer is no, we don't want it to work, then it becomes very, very difficult.

And so God is asking his people through the prophet Hosea, and he's asking us as God's people, how much do we want this relationship to work? Or to put it in New Testament terms, do you love me?

[3 : 1 7] That's what Peter was asked, wasn't it? Jesus asked him three times, Peter, do you love me? You said you did. You even boasted that if everyone else left me, you wouldn't have left me, but in the end you did.

Peter, do you love me? Do you really love me? Do you love me more than these? Or is your love, like Hosea says, like we read, like the morning mist? You know, like the early dew that disappears? And so to understand this, we need to look around to the surrounding chapters. Let's go to chapter 4. We look to the first three chapters, we'll speed up a little bit, but look at chapter 4 and verse 1. Here's the charge that God brings against his people. He says this, Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel. For the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. And do you notice the charge in verse 1? It's threefold. So first of all, there's no faithfulness. And number two, there's no steadfast love.

[4 : 16] And number three, there's no knowledge of God in the land. No faithfulness, no love, no knowledge of God in the land. And God is speaking almost as a distraught husband, trying to save his marriage.

And he says to Israel, he says, you don't love me, you've been unfaithful to me, and you don't even acknowledge me. So let's look at the evidence for that.

Israel has been unfaithful. That's the first charge. When you read through chapter 4 and 5, we haven't got time to do that tonight, but you'll find that nine times in those chapters, Hosea identifies a spirit of prostitution.

Chapter 4, verse 10. They shall eat, but not be satisfied. They shall play the whore, but not multiply. Because they've forsaken the Lord to cherish whoredom, wine, and new wine.

What it's talking about there is probably kind of cult prostitution. If you wanted a good harvest, you wanted fertile crops, you go and sleep with the prostitution at the shrine.

[5 : 27] But it goes beyond that. Look at verses 11 and 12. They shall eat, but not be satisfied. They shall play the whore, but not multiply. Because they've forsaken the Lord to cherish whoredom. Wine, and new wine, which take away the understanding.

My people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking stick gives them oracles. For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they've left their gods to play the whore.

They ask a lump of wood for advice. How stupid is that? They worship sacred trees. Israel is talking to a lump of wood.

Probably the most famous thing that G.K. Chesterton never said was, when people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing. They believe in everything.

There's some doubt whether he actually said it or not. No one can find it. But it is true, isn't it? That when people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing. They believe in everything.

[6 : 29] Have you noticed that? Have you noticed how superstitious people are? People who don't believe in God. It's such a liberating thing when you become a Christian.

You don't have to worry about walking on ladders anymore. You don't have to worry about a magpie in the garden. You don't have to worry that the phones are quiet. You don't have to worry about jinxing things anymore.

You're set free from all that nonsense. But have you noticed that when people give up on God, they believe anything, don't they? That's how it was in Israel. And it wasn't just Israel's problem.

It's a problem for all of us. If you skip forward to chapter 6 and verse 7, it says that like Adam, they transgressed, they rebelled the covenant. So it's not just the descendants of Israel, but the descendants of Adam, all of humanity.

This is a common human trait. God placed Adam and Eve in the garden, and he walked with them in the cool of the day. And they had fellowship with God. And later he placed Israel in the land, and he promises them protection and security and blessing.

[7 : 38] And all that they have to do is trust him. All they've got to do is obey his word, but instead, like the morning mist, their relationship with him evaporates. Almost overnight, it seems.

And that's how it was for Adam. In the garden, it didn't last. It hardly survived the first Sunday. I think it's probably that first day in the Garden of Eden that Adam falls.

He's driven out the garden. In chapter 7 and verse 11, it describes how Israel goes after the other nations. Chapter 7 and verse 11.

Ephraim is like a dove. Therefore, it's a silly dove, and without sense, calling to Egypt and going to Assyria. That Israel don't trust in God to protect them.

They try to form alliances with other nations. They panic. They're concerned. They're fluttering here and there and everywhere, never settling, never committing, veering off in every direction. Isn't that what we're like?

[8 : 41] We're flighty, aren't we? So when I'm with God's people, I'm on track. When I'm singing the hymns and I like the tune. When I'm having fellowship with the Lord's people on the Lord's Day, I feel like I'm on track, but come Monday morning, I look for my joy and my satisfaction in someone or something else.

And I look for my security elsewhere. And so I can sing the hymns and I can say the words, but just like Israel, I'm unfaithful. That's the first charge. Unfaithfulness.

The second charge is you don't love me. The honeymoon is over. Their love has grown cold. John MacArthur says love turned cold is the forerunner of spiritual apathy, which then leads to a love for

the world, a compromise with evil, corruption, death, and finally judgment.

And that's what was happening in Israel. It's what happened to the church in Israel. It's what happened to that great church in Ephesus. So do you remember in Revelation chapter 2, Jesus writes to the churches and he says to the church in Ephesus, I've got something against you, even though you think you've got everything going for you.

You're orthodox. Yes, you're sound. You are heresy hunters. You could sniff kind of something wrong in church life a mile off.

[10:11] You believe the right things. You are evangelistically active. You've got loads of meetings. You run loads of programs. And nevertheless, Jesus says, I've got something against you.

He says, you've left your first love. And you don't love me as you did when you first came to me. Can you imagine that? Imagine your wife coming home to you or your husband coming home to you one night and saying, I don't think I love you anymore.

But we're going to stay together. We'll share the same bed. We'll go through all the same things we've always done. I'll live with you.

We can go on holidays together. Nothing will change. Everything will change, won't it? Everything will change. What kind of marriage would that be? It would be hollow, wouldn't it?

It would be the shell of a marriage. And yet that's what happened in Israel. And that's what was happening in Ephesus. And that's what's happening now in the lives, maybe of some of you sitting right here now.

[11:21] It's what happens in the life of many, many professing Christians. Their love has grown cold. They go through the motions. They keep up appearances. Lord, I don't love you the way that I loved you when I first came to you.

And I'll still come to church. I'll still sing the hymns. I'll serve on the rotas. I'll pay my dues. But that is just religion, isn't it? And God doesn't want your religion. He couldn't care less about your religion. He wants your heart. And the word in the Bible for that is chesed. It's covenant love. It's steadfast love.

It's a really important word in the Old Testament that God has bound himself, tied himself to his people in covenant. It's two things when I marry people that I'll never allow them to get away with. Well, in fact, there's probably about six or seven things, but there's two things in this sermon. If you want to get married and you want me to do your wedding, I'll never let you write your own vows. All right? One, because they're far too long and far too sentimental.

[12:36] And the other thing that I'll never let a couple do is people say to you, why do we have to sign the register in the service? Can't it be done before or after?

Surely this signing of the paper, it's just a bit clunky, isn't it? And a little bit awkward in the middle of the service. It's a bit of an anti-climax. But actually, it is the climax. And because as you put the pen to paper in indelible ink, that is a contract.

That is a covenant. An indelible ink. It's a contract that you are entering into with that other person for the whole of your life until death has to part.

The romance will fade. But that remains. And that is the kind of relationship that God enters into with his church, with his people. And the word for that is steadfast love.

We read it right at the start of the service. 1, 3, 6. The chorus goes, doesn't it? His love endures forever. His love endures forever. I think it says it 25 times in that psalm.

[13:48] His love endures forever. His covenant steadfast love. It's not like our love, which is like the morning mist. Which is like the dew, that as soon as the sun comes up, it disappears. But his love is steadfast.

His love endures forever. A friend of mine was speaking at a Christian union in the university earlier this year. And CU's still do this.

They say, has anybody got any notices? Has anybody got any notices? Which is a total disaster, isn't it? Because the same person gets up every week and gives the notices they want and everybody else just sits there.

Have you got any notices? There's a young guy who was in the CU who got up and he said, I'd like to say something. And he says, I've been reading about Mary and Joseph. I've been reading about how Mary and Joseph lost Jesus in the temple.

And I really feel I want to say something to the Christian union. Until recently, we've been losing Jesus. It's a very brave thing to say, isn't it? If I was the president of the CU, I probably wished he'd not said that in the main meeting.

[14:55] I wish he'd said it at the prayer meeting. But the CU needed to hear it. And he said, it's very brave of the boy to say, isn't it? There are many, many things that we can do without. We can do without a building.

And we can do without lots of things. We can do without loads of the stuff we do. That's not something we shouldn't do then. We can do without loads of the meetings, but we cannot do without Jesus.

Remember, there in those early chapters of Revelation, that picture, not only of the Ephesian church which had lost its first love, but there's a Laodicean church which was a really wealthy church.

The Laodicean church was way ahead of budget. It had lots of programs. It had a great reputation. It said, we are rich. We are increased with goods.

We've got need of nothing. It was the church in the center of the city. It was the church that people went to when they visited the city, the Laodicean church. Loads of money, great numbers. And Jesus says, let me in.

[16:05] Let me in. He says, behold, I stand at the door and if anybody hears my voice and invites me in, I will come into your church.

I'll come into your prayer meeting. I'll come into your singing by my spirit. Don't you realize I'm not there, he says to the ladies in church. You're going through the motions. You're playing church.

And we can do without anything. But we cannot do without him. Thomas Vincent, the old Puritan, said this. He said, the life of Christianity consists very much in our love to Christ.

Without love to Christ, we are as much without spiritual life as a carcass when the soul is fled from it. Faith without love to Christ is a dead faith.

And a Christian without love to Christ is a dead Christian. And so without love to Christ, we might have the name of Christian, but we're holy without the nature.

[17:16] We may have the form of godliness, but we're without any of the power. You don't love me, God says. You've been unfaithful to me.

And then the third thing is there's no acknowledgement of me. You don't even acknowledge me. There's no acknowledgement of God in the land. speaking at the guild hall in London, Alexander Solzhenitsyn said kind of mid-90s after power strike, after communism fell, spoke in London, and he says this, over 50 years ago, I remember hearing as a child a number of older people offering the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia.

men have forgotten God. That is why all this has happened. Since then, I've spent now and 50 years working on the history of our revolution.

In the process, I've read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, I've already contributed eight volumes of my own towards the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval, but if I were to be asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to say men have forgotten God.

That is why all this has happened. What is more, he says, the result of this Russian revolution can only be understood now at the end of the century against the backdrop of what has since occurred in the west of the world.

[18:52] What emerges here is a process of universal significance, and if I were called upon to identify briefly the principle trait of the entire 20th century, I would be unable to find anything as precise and pithy than to repeat once again, men have forgotten God.

So what happens when a nation forgets God? It happened in Russia, it happened in Nazi Germany, it is happening today in 21st century UK.

When God is not acknowledged, or people just pay lip service to him, when there is no acknowledgement of God in the land, we'll look back to chapter 4, and what is there? Chapter 4, verse 2.

They're swearing, lying, murder, stealing, committing adultery, they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed, therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken in a way,

welcome to the UK.

Verse 3, that is the ecological crisis, but the problem is us, we've forgotten God. There is a cosmic sickness in the human heart, that continues to kind of be incubated in the human heart, which attacks and affects the whole of creation, and because of that the whole land, the whole earth weeps, and it's grief stricken, the prophet says, and the animals of the field, and the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, they are lifeless.

[20 : 33] Why? Because of human greed, because of vested interest, because of propaganda, the very environment suffers, but why? Why all of this?

Because there's no acknowledgement of God, and everyone is out to do their own thing, to feather their own nest. The late Christopher Hitchens, he's a brilliant writer, he wrote a book entitled God is Not Great, and he argues in that book, you probably know it, that the world would be a much better place without God.

God is the problem, he said, but history proves otherwise. It's an experiment, isn't it, that's been conducted all over the world in different guises. When God is taken out, the void doesn't remain, something else fills its place.

So mark this, the Apostle Paul says, there will be terrible times in the last days, people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

Having a form of godliness, but denying its power, again, welcome to the UK. That's our society. So what's to be done?

[21 : 55] I've got it. Come with me to chapter 6. Chapter 6, verse 1. Beautiful, powerful words. But you need to think and you need to ask yourself just now as I speak, where do these words come from and who is speaking these words?

Come, let us return to the Lord. Is this Israel? Is this Israel's response to God's charge against them? Is this Hosea the prophet pleading with the people? Showing them the way back.

How are we to understand chapter 6, verse 1 and 2? Think about it as we read them. They are so right, they are so right, aren't they, these words. They are so perfect, so beautiful, so powerful.

Come, let us return to the Lord for He's torn us that He may heal us.

He struck us down that He will bind us up. And after two days He will revive us. On the third day He will rise us up that we may live before Him.

Let us know. Let us press on to know the Lord. His going out is as sure as the dawn. He will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.

[23 : 05] Is that Israel coming back to the Lord? It sounds like it. It's just the next verse is just such an anticlimax. verse 4, what shall I do with you, Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?

Your love is like the morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away. So are these just words? They've been well taught, they've got the right words.

Are these just pious sentiments? Is this superficial? Catherine the Great, when she was being confronted by her sin, by a priest, were told that she just shrugged it off.

She said, God will forgive, that's his job. That's what he does. Is that what Israel is saying here?

Let's go back to the Lord, he'll have mercy on us, he always does. Might take a few days, but he will sort things out.

Is that what's happening here? Are they just drawing near with their lips, but their hearts are far from him? Is it all a sham? Or is it the voice of God pleading with the people?

[24 : 11] I think it is. I think it's very difficult to read these verses without hearing the gospel in them. Just look at these words again. Surely it's a gospel invitation.

Is it come, let us return to the Lord. He's torn us that he may heal us. He struck us down that he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us. On the third day he will rise us up that we may live before him.

Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord. His going out is sure as the dawn. He will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth. How can God be both the healer and the terror?

How can he strike us down and at the same time bind us up? And the only answer that I can find, the only answer I can think of is that through the cross of Jesus Christ. He was bruised for our transgressions.

By his stripes we are healed. He was struck down that we might be raised up. He died the death that we deserve. He died not falling asleep in his old age but that death which had the punishment for sin mixed in with it.

[25 : 20] That death which had the anger of God mixed into it and it caused him to cry, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And that is the death that you and I deserve because of our unfaithfulness.

Jesus died that death for us and on the third day God raised him from the dead that we might live with him forever. story about an old man in a nursing home and he used to cry out at night. He'd wake up all the patients and the nurses were concerned about him. He was a very troubled soul and he used to shout out in the middle of the night, I've died, I've died, I've died. The nurses would rush in to try to reassure him.

No, they said, you're still with us. You're still very much with us, Mr. Whatever Your Name Is. You haven't died, it's okay. And no, he said, I've died, I've died. No, no, no.

You're still with us. Look around you, you're still alive. You're still in this world, they tried to reassure him. I've died, he says, I've died, I've died in Christ, I've died in Christ. You see, it was his testimony.

[26 : 28] He wasn't confused, he was crystal clear. At three o'clock, on a Friday afternoon, outside the city wall of Jerusalem, I died, Christ died, and I died with him.

And on the third day, God raised him from the dead, and I was raised with him to newness of life. To a new world, and to a new beginning, and to a fresh start, that is the gospel.

That is the old, old story of Jesus and his love. Tell me the story often, for I forget too soon. The early dew of morning has passed away at noon.

You have to keep coming back to the old, old story of Jesus and his love. Isn't that what we hear this morning, really? And I've seen in Romans, we forget too soon, we leak. And so Hosea wants you to know tonight that there's a way to come back.

That if your love has gone cold, and if you've worshipped at the shrine of other gods, and you've looked for your security and your sense of purpose, from elsewhere, maybe in your career, in your family, in your whatever, if you come here on a Sunday and you sing the hymns heartily, but Monday to Saturday, you never acknowledge him, and his name never really appears on your lips in prayer.

[27 : 47] And nobody would really know that you were one of his followers. If that is you, then I want to say to you, there is a way back, thanks to Jesus. Let me finish with this.

Michael Griffiths was a missionary in Japan. He's just died, actually. He worked with OMF. And I think he's just died. And he tells the story of a young Japanese man who'd greatly shamed his family.

And in that kind of shame culture, it was a big deal. He was really concerned. The young man wanted to be reconciled to his family, but he didn't know if he could ever come back home again. So he wrote to his parents, and he said he was sorry for what he'd done.

And he really wanted to come home, but he wasn't sure that he'd be welcome. So he asked them, if you would have me home, put a little hand towel in the window of your house.

So that when he came along on the train, he would look out to the window to the family home, and he'd see in that window if there was a hand towel in the window of his house, and he'd be able to get off at the next station, and he would come home.

[28 : 52] And if there was no hand towel, well, he'd just stay on the train and get on with the rest of his life. Well, of course, as he came along in the train, he's anxious to see, isn't he, what was awaiting him.

And as the train rounded the bend and came into the town, he looked. He looked out anxiously to see if the towel was there or not. And what he discovered is that there were towels hanging in every window, on every tree, on every washing line, from every pole.

And there was absolutely no doubt as to his welcome. He was welcome home. And so that is what God is saying to you this evening. That's what God says to his wayward, rebellious people, Israel, and his wayward, rebellious church.

Come. Let us return to the Lord. God. Because surely, as the sun rises, he will appear.

And he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that would be earth. Amen. Amen.