

Irreconcilable Differences

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- [0 : 0 0] If you could stumble across Scotland on social media, she would be the girl you remember from your student days at church, the one who went to all the Bible studies, the one who led the praise team, the one who led camps in the summer.
- She married young, and she dreamed of going overseas to share the gospel with those who had never heard it. But now you'd have to read her post again before it could sink in.
- She has lost her faith more completely and rapidly than ye would believe. She's been separated from her husband for years, and she is seeking a divorce.
- A hundred years ago, about half of Scotland's population was connected to a church in Aberdeen. In 1995, churches served the city. Sinclair Ferguson, who moved here in 1965 as a student, called it a city of spires.
- Churches were absolutely everywhere, he said. And the Church of Scotland had it all. Good theological heritage, good attendance, good buildings.
- [1 : 1 5] It also had the strong support of government. But the cracks were starting to show. Before long, Scottish Christianity had collapsed. In 60 years, the Church of Scotland lost a million members.
- Meanwhile, the proportion of Scots who claim no religion has risen to 60%. Aberdeen is now the most secular city in the most secular nation in the UK.
- Her church buildings have become restaurants, apartments, and bars. A few years ago, a photographer documenting the decline called it, Jesus has left the building.
- Jesus has left the building. Some of you will know those were not my own words. But we're taken with a few tweaks from an article that came out a week or two ago online that we linked, actually, in the email this week.
- It's well worth a read. Because it paints the picture, doesn't it, of a nation, a city, a church, that has lost her first love.
- [2 : 2 5] And that is just what we're seeing, isn't it, in the book of Hosea these last few weeks. A really bold and vivid picture of a broken marriage between God and his people.
- But when we look up, we see it, don't we, on our doorstep also. I hope we're seeing Hosea is speaking into our world, into our churches.
- God's people have become promiscuous lovers, he says. But God is still faithful, still devoted to his bride. And as we turn to the rest of this book, we do need to keep that picture of the marriage in view.
- You know what happens, don't you, when you stare at something in the bright light for long enough. When you close your eyes, you look away, you can still see the shadow, the outline of what it was that you were looking at, even when you're looking somewhere else.
- Well, chapters one to three in this book are designed to do that for us, to burn the picture of this marriage into the back of our eyes. So that even as we go on through the book, we'll still read these words through the shadow, through the outline of the marriage, even when it's not on the surface of the text.

[3 : 44] The first three chapters, if you like, give us the broad brushstrokes, but now Hosea gets out his tiny wee paintbrush to fill in the details. And like that shadowy outline, it fades from our eyes over time.

The risk for us is that the picture that we have seen in chapters one to three fades from our eyes as we go on through this book. And so we're going to go quite quickly through these chapters.

There's a lot of detail. We can't lose the big picture. But the details are surely no less important for us. And they will reflect to us, I hope we'll see, our own tendencies, our own hearts, and our own flirtations with idolatry and sin.

And all the more importantly, we'll fill in the detail for us of God's own heart and his love for his church. So today, Hosea brings us back to family court to hear God's case against his people.

How does a nation, a city, a church that started so strongly fall away from her first love so dramatically? Well, let's hear firstly then God's charge.

[5 : 04] Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land. So we're in the courtroom. The prosecution has the floor, and it's God bringing the charges.

Now, the prophets love this. They write like this all the time. It's called a covenant lawsuit. So God's people have broken his covenant, and God is pressing charges, they say.

And what's special about Hosea is that it's the family courtroom. This domestic breakdown has reached legal action.

And in God's lawsuit, verses one to three kind of act as his opening statement, his charge list. And like a skilled lawyer, Hosea grabs the jury's attention.

Listen up. He says, hear God's word. And this charge has three parts he's going to unpack throughout his case. First, the marriage has broken down.

[6 : 07] As a result, the family has broken down. And consequently, the family home has broken down. But the problems began, he says, verse one, with a breakdown in the marriage.

There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. Surely three things that underpin any marriage. But this has become a faithless marriage, says God.

The trust between him and Israel has broken down through open infidelity. Israel used to care what God thought.

Now she brings her lovers home openly. It's also a loveless marriage. The wholehearted devotion that led her to promise, all that I am, I give to you.

And all that I have, I share with you. That devotion has shrunk to a half-hearted commitment at best. At worst, an empty duty, empty word.

[7 : 08] She doesn't feel for him what she once did. It's also a marriage without intimacy. There's no acknowledgement or knowledge of God in the land.

Now that's not purely intellectual knowledge. He's not saying, my problem is that there's no theology courses, no seminaries. We will see that that is part of it.

He's saying, these people just don't know me. They don't understand me. They don't know how my heart works. What I think, what I want, what I like, what I hate.

There's no understanding between us. It wouldn't matter how much I read about King Charles, how many of the articles that I went through and raked through for detail, how many of the video clips I watched, how many books I read.

I could do a degree in Charlesology. Know everything there is to know about our king, and yet bump into him and be a stranger.

[8 : 15] I could know everything there is to know about him, and I wouldn't know him. And that's the kind of knowledge God is saying is lacking in this relationship, intimate, personal knowledge.

Israel had read all the books about him, and yet when he came into the room, she just didn't know what to say. So do you see the breakdown in the relationship with God?

It begins in the heart with a loss of love. Sometimes we speak about sin as if it was simply a case of not doing some things and doing other things and just staying on God's good side.

But knowing God begins in the heart and in the mind. If we don't personally know him, how can we love him? And if we don't love him, how can we stay faithful to him?

Instead, in Israel, we see the breakdown in the marriage leads to wider family breakdown. Verse 2, There is only cursing, lying, and murder, stealing, and adultery. They break all bounds.

[9 : 25] Bloodshed follows bloodshed. See, this is often where we start, isn't it? We see God's word being broken, his commands being trashed.

We see ourselves overstepping the boundaries of what we know to be right and doing wrong, and we say this needs to change. But see, Hosea is saying the family, the children, the nation, the city, the church, are broken because the heart of family life is broken.

Abandon the spirit of the law, says Tim Chester, and the letter of the law will soon follow. Lovelessness begets lawlessness.

It's a question lots of people have, isn't it? It's just what is going wrong? What is going wrong with our world? There's so much that is glaringly, obviously going wrong, the division and confusion and anxiety and hate.

Where has that come from? Your culture has changed so much, hasn't it, the last 15, 20 years. It's almost unrecognizable. The time when some of us were born, the time before some of us were born, the common ground that was once shared between the church and society has shrunk to almost nothing.

[10 : 49] And yet it's hard to find somebody who's willing to say that that is a great thing, that change has been a complete good, that the world is much better now than it was.

Why does it feel like our society is tipping into chaos? Because, says Hosea, somewhere along the way, we stopped knowing God.

People still try to promote Christian behavior. Do you notice that? Kindness, generosity, love, while cutting out the Christian heart.

But whenever we lose our love for God, the result cannot be godliness, but a free fall into sin, cursing, lying, killing, stealing, sleeping around.

To give an example that's really close to home, when we phoned the doctor, Susie and I had to tell them that Susie was expecting a baby.

[11 : 49] Do you know the first thing they asked? They didn't say, congratulations, that's wonderful news. No, do you want to keep it? That is the world in which we live.

The very first service, our National Health Service, offers every patient conceived in this country. Shall we keep you? Or not? It's one of a thousand heartbreaking outcomes, isn't it?

In our society of not knowing the living God, not loving his word. And as a result, a broken home. Because of this, the land dries up.

But all who live in it waste away. The beasts of the field, the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea are swept away. Now this is very old covenant, God's curse.

This land was part of his punishment for unfaithfulness in the old covenant. So it's not talking about climate change, anything like that. But Paul does say in Romans 8, doesn't he, the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

[13 : 02] From the first time we turned against God, God put his creation under a curse. And creation itself waits, says Paul, longs to be set free from that curse of our sin.

The language in verse 3 is almost like we get in Genesis with Noah, God sweeping away the animals in the flood when he punished human sin. Well, now it's happening again.

In fact, he says, chapter 5, I will pour out my wrath on them like a flood of water. And so the whole cosmos suffers the consequences of human sin, human unfaithfulness, not knowing God, broken marriage, broken family, broken home.

That is God's charge and it is unanswerable, isn't it? What can we say to that? Do we not see it ourselves?

Even some secular commentators can see it. They would put it like this. Our social decay is the result of cutting away the roots of our Christian heritage. And Hosea would tell us that even Christian heritage won't cut it.

[14 : 19] If we do not know God, life doesn't work. Now, perhaps we couldn't agree more. Perhaps you are sitting, nodding, thinking, yes, this is exactly what is wrong.

This is just what we want to hear. But God doesn't let us just nod along this morning. He wants our heads hanging and spinning because he's bringing his case, remember, not against the world at large, not against life out there, but against his people in the land.

Who is his finger pointing at? We've heard the charge, but now let's see how God builds his case. This is our second point, God's case. Firstly, there is no knowledge of God in the land, he says, and this is why, let me explain.

Now, verse 4 is a hard verse to translate, but I think it is better for us to go with the ESV rather than our NIV here, for my charge is against the priest, not those who bring a charge against the priest.

Notice verse 6, God's speaking to my priest. So when he says, verse 4, you shall stumble by day, the prophet also will stumble with you by night. the you there is probably still the priests.

[15 : 41] And God's case against the priests is this, my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you as my priests. Because you've ignored the law of your God, I will ignore your children.

And part of the role of the priests back then was to teach God's word. People didn't own their own copy of the Torah like we have our Bibles at home.

They couldn't read it for themselves. So the way that most people in Israel knew God was through the priests. So you can see the problem, can't you? If the priests stopped knowing God, if their Bibles were gathering dust on the shelf, well, how were the people to know God at large?

So when God says, my people don't know me, he turns straight to the teachers and points his finger. This is your fault, he says.

And friends, we know that teachers of God's word will be judged more strictly. James 3, verse 1 tells us that. And this is why. Because as goes the pulpit, so go the people.

[16 : 58] It's not hard to see this in our own context, is it? How did the land of the book become one of the most secular nations in the world? How did a city of spires become the most secular city in Scotland?

We love, don't we, pointing the finger out there at governments or universities or institutions. But God says, we just don't have to look that far.

It's the churches that stopped knowing God and didn't teach his word. Friends, we can nod along with God's charge, but his finger is pointing here.

You know, I speak to people regularly, even this week, who just can't get their heads around the collapse of churches in Scotland. You've been part of it, our national church.

I think it feels like the fall of Rome. It's that kind of catastrophe. It's the end of life as we know it. And I speak to people for whom this is a real question. Somebody asked me this week, why is the Church of Scotland folding?

[18 : 09] Well, here is why, says Hosea. When her teachers left Jesus, Jesus left the building. When they ignored his word, he ignored them.

To quote that article again, even if your doctrines were written by John Knox, your theology rooted in the Westminster Confession, your buildings made of granite, if you don't have the gospel, your church will fail.

And that is a stark warning to us, friends, isn't it? You let us never see a church close and be puffed up with pride. Let it bring us to our knees, to know God, ourselves, in tears, personally, closely, deeply again.

You know, the thing about that description is that it could be us. Couldn't it? Reformation roots, reformed Westminster theology, a granite building.

Could it not be us? And it's a reminder to me and to church leaders that what we need most, what our nation needs most, is not a new way of doing church, but as somebody puts it to me, the gospel, pure and simple.

[19 : 25] To know the Lord Jesus truly, personally, to know his heart, to hear his word. Because now the Lord turns from priests to people, to see the damage that not knowing him has done.

No knowledge means, he says, no love. From verses 9 to 14, there's two key words there. I wonder if you can spot them. Particularly verses 13 and 14.

Do you see them? Prostitution and adultery. And Hosea is using those words to describe what's gone wrong at the level of everyday life since his words stopped being taught.

Verse 12, a spirit of prostitution leads them astray. They are unfaithful to their God. Israel has gone off with her lovers, the idols. Bits of wood, he says, that pretend to be something that they are not.

But that failure to know God rightly, to worship him alone, that spiritual prostitution, if you like, has led to physical prostitution.

[20 : 36] Do you see that? Verse 13. Just have a look. They sacrifice on the mountaintops, burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth where the shade is pleasant. Therefore, your daughters turn to prostitution and daughters-in-law to adultery.

See, the failure, the result of not knowing God is a failure to love rightly in the land. Sexual sin.

And it's so relevant, isn't it? This could have been written yesterday as I worked on this. It's still so sharp. Friends, God gets us. His word x-rays our hearts.

He knows what is in us. As a nation, as a people, we have left God's word and as a result, we are vexed by sex. Our culture is at once saturated with it, isn't it?

And tormented with it. Your pornography is rife on the internet. And yet, recently on the London Tube, staring too long at someone was banned.

[21 : 41] Your sex is free and easy, but only when that works for me. Not when it hurts me. Not when it uses me. Our culture's sexual ethic is a walking contradiction.

It's no wonder that people are confused and hurt and obsessed by it all at once. Perhaps some of us here know that very personally. But why is it like that?

Well, God's answer is that a failure to love rightly stems from this failure to know him truly. Back then, that was so obviously true. Part of idol worship involved these fertility rituals, sleeping with women at shrines and the belief that the gods would fertilize the earth.

Hosea is talking about shrine prostitutes there. That's clearly going on in Israel. But it illustrates, doesn't it, for us how giving in to the gods of this world always means giving in to the world's sexual ethic.

The parallels in the church do not need spelling out, do they? But it's not just a problem out there. When we stop knowing God personally, our love lives become disordered.

[22 : 59] Sex stops being something beautiful to be shared between a husband and a wife and becomes problematic for us in the form of what?

Pornography? Pursuing wrong relationships? Fantasizing about a different life, a different lifestyle? These are big problems for Christians.

They exist in the church. So when we struggle with sexual sin, what we do with our bodies, who or how we love, the question we should be asking is, who or what am I worshipping?

Who or what am I serving with my body? Very often it's ourselves, it's our own desires. We can call it a lack of self-control, but really it's making our own wants and desires sacred, something that can't and shouldn't be denied.

It's the dogma of our day, isn't it? No one has the right to tell me what to do with my own body. It's a failure to love rightly, but at heart, see friends, it is a failure to know God rightly.

[24 : 09] My desires have become my God instead. But if we do know, if we are serving the one true and living God, then we will love rightly, even when that means saying no to our desires, even when that means denying our bodily instincts because we love the Lord more than we love ourselves.

we're all lovers. Friends, we know, don't we? We know only too well this is not only something that exists out there, but in here and in here.

The last block in God's case against his people is a lack of faithfulness. They say, don't they, a picture paints a thousand words. Well, here's a very eloquent one in verse 16 of Israel's unfaithfulness.

the Israelites are stubborn like a stubborn heifer. How then can the Lord pasture them like lambs in a meadow? Like a cow that won't budge, that won't go where she doesn't want to go.

God's people are stubborn like that. And the next question is totally disarming, isn't it? Not, what am I going to do with you? But what can I now not do with you?

[25 : 27] How now can I feed you full like a lamb that feasts in a rich meadow? That's what the Lord wants for them, to enjoy him, his blessings, to fill them full, but they are not having it.

Instead, they stick stubbornly to their unfaithfulness. They are joined to idols, verse 17. And when the drink runs out, verse 18, they carry on in their prostitution.

They dearly love shameful ways. And part of the reason why God wants us to see this is to guard us against this same unfaithfulness.

Whatever unfaithfulness is going on in Israel, he doesn't want Judah involved in it. Though you, Israel, commit adultery, do not let Judah become guilty. Some commentators even think that even though Hosea's preaching was for the northern kingdom of Israel, that the book was written for the southern kingdom of Judah.

Possibly this is some of his collected sermons that later were brought together and sent south to a faithful kingdom to guard them against going the way of an unfaithful kingdom.

[26 : 42] So we ourselves are overhearing here what God is saying to his unfaithful bride so that we will not do the same. I find that convincing for a few reasons.

I'm happy to talk more about it. But right here we see, don't we, that God's desire is that Judah, those who stayed faithful to him, would not be led astray by those who were unfaithful to him.

Friends, let us not be tempted to step off the hard and narrow way, even when it feels hard and narrow onto the broad and easy way, because they end in two very different places.

You could probably guess, couldn't you, that Psalm 23 is one of the most popular choices for singing at funerals. The Lord's my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. But the question that God is asking is, has that been true of you in life?

[27 : 48] To sing at your funeral, how can I do that for you, he asks. How can I give you rest? How can I feed you if you will not come? If you will not follow?

If you will not hear my voice? No knowledge, no love, no faithfulness. There is God's case. And so finally, as we close, we hear God's conclusion.

Chapter 5, if you read it later, is the prosecution summarizing statements and his call for sentencing. Spirit of prostitution is in their heart, verse 4.

They do not know the Lord. And so, verse 6, there will be a here and now judgment so that when they go with their flocks and herds to seek the Lord, they will not find him.

He has withdrawn himself from them. As Derek Kidner puts it, God is not the prisoner of his sacraments. They could bring herds of goats, flocks of sheep to offer him in sacrifice, but if it's only for show, he says, well, God is not coming to the ceremony because the true God does not share his worship.

[29 : 03] And so as long as we are in bed with idols, God will not answer our call. these are irreconcilable differences that tear us apart from him.

And if we leave it that way, he says, it will become a full and final separation, what C.S. Lewis called the great divorce. Ephraim will be laid waste on the day of reckoning.

I will pour out my wrath on them like a flood of water. No doubt is a devastating sentence to face the overwhelming flood of God's anger against sin, idolatry, unfaithfulness forever.

But God has presented his case. He has put it to us, friends, hasn't he? And what can we say? Can we say it's untrue?

Can we say we do not deserve it? Who has not ever been unfaithful to him? Who has not ever turned away from him to serve our other loves?

[30 : 12] Surely all we can do is put our hands over our mouths this morning and confess that what he has said is right, that we have been guilty, that we have sinned, that we have served the idols of our hearts, and turn to him for his mercy and his grace.

He promises that when we do, he will freely forgive. He promises that he sent his own son to take that great flood of anger on himself.

You know, the Lord Jesus died and suffered under the crushing weight of this wrath so that we would never have to. He served this sentence in our place. And so he today, friend, can save you from this punishment if you turn to him in faith.

But let us not think that this is cheap grace. Our God cannot be full friends. He won't have our words without having our hearts.

And so let our repentance be body, mind, and soul. Let us throw ourselves completely on his unfailing love as it is held out to us even in this judgment.

[31 : 29] And let us go from here knowing him and devoted to him, loving him, and serving him faithfully for as long as we shall live.

Let's join in prayer together. Let's pray. gracious Father, forgive us, we pray, for the arrogance of our hearts, for our pride.

Lord, when we hear of failure and unfaithfulness and think that it is not us, that it could not be us, that we are not capable of sinning against you in those ways.

Oh, Father, humble us, we pray. Give us hearts that are ready to repent. Oh, how we thank you that you speak to us so bluntly, so clearly.

Lord, take away our numb and dull hearts, we ask, that we would receive these words of life, that we return to you for rescue.

[32 : 45] Father, how we pray for ourselves, that you would revive us, and how we pray, Lord, for the many around us also, that you would give a new heart, that you would take away a heart of stone and give a heart of flesh, to know you, the true and living God.

Lord, help us to treasure you, help us to hold you out to a dying world, and Lord, we pray, help us as a church to worship you truly, to know you deeply, and so to shine brightly in a world that has forgotten you.

Lord, help us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.