

Promised Punishment

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[0 : 00] Well, growing up, our neighbor's garden out the back held quite a strong place in my imagination. I actually had dreams and nightmares about it because essentially they had let nature take over.

Nettles and brambles kind of exploded over the fence. It was a proper jungle. And if ever a ball got kind of kicked over there, it's like life-threatening to go and get it back.

There were benefits in the summer. It meant the really juicy blackberries hung over the fence. That was really nice. And one year, mysteriously, a grapevine started spreading through the garden, through the brambles.

It grew up over a shed. It grew up a tree. It grew really, really quickly. And it grew tiny wee bunches of proper grapes. This was the south of England, not Aberdeen.

Okay. But even then, I thought, brilliant, ripe grapes hanging over the garden fence. That'll be really tasty when they ripen up.

[1 : 09] So I watched. I waited until they went from green to purple. I had a few. And they were disgusting. Okay. Really sour, horrible things that hung over that fence.

Now, shortly after that, the neighbors decided enough was enough. Okay. They cleared the whole thing. Guys came around with trimmers, stripped it down to the earth. They cut away the brambles, the thorns, and the vine.

And they put it all in a pile. And they burnt it. Now, that happened a few times during our cycles like this. They clear it. Then the next year, the whole thing would kind of grow back again.

The thorns, the brambles, the vine, the grapes. And then they would clear it. The next year would happen again. And every year, every year, it was sour grapes.

Disgusting grapes. Now, that actually happened in my childhood. But strangely, that story is a version of the very parable that Hosea wants to tell us today.

[2 : 13] And why do we need to hear that story? Well, Hosea is telling us this story to warn us of God's judgment on his unfaithful people.

Remember, as we read, we're back in the 750s BC. We're in the northern kingdom of Israel. God has compared in this book his people to an unfaithful bride.

He's constantly sleeping around with other gods and kings and idols. That picture comes back in a really difficult way in these chapters that we're going to come to later.

But to that picture, he adds today a picture of a bad vine. And in the same way that at a certain point, my neighbor's rogue vine had to be cut down.

The sour grapes had to go away. It had to be gone. Well, so now, too, do his people, says God. At a certain point, the cycles of repeated sin and idolatry had to be broken.

[3 : 16] And Hosea wants us to know today that the cycle must end with the promise of God's punishment. You see that?

Chapter 9, verse 7, if you would. The days of punishment are coming. The days of reckoning are at hand. Let Israel know this.

God's patience is running out, says Hosea. And this is what will happen when it does. And so this morning, we're simply going to hear from Hosea God's promise of punishment.

And then consider how he wants us to respond. Firstly, then, let us know this. The church of God today, brothers and sisters, the days of punishment are coming.

The days of punishment are coming. Now, what kind of punishment is God speaking about in these verses? Just glance down at 9, verse 3 with me.

[4 : 18] This is as clear as it gets for the people there and then. They will not remain in the Lord's land. Ephraim will return to Egypt and the unclean feud in Assyria. Okay, so back then, Assyria was

the world power of the day.

And they were coming to destroy Israel. Okay, just 30 short years later, 722 BC, the Assyrians would bring the northern kingdom to an end.

And not just as a political reality on a map, but as a human civilization, as a family of people, the Assyrian strategy for conquering the world was essentially to forcibly mix people together so that there would be no distinct nations or families under their rule, which meant that when they invaded, they were going to take people out of Israel to other places in the empire.

And they were going to bring other nations into Israel so that people would be mixed together. And so the family of Israel in the north would essentially not survive.

There would be no more Israelite children born to them. They would be Assyrians. Now, if you know the history of Israel up to this point, people chosen by God, loved by God, people God had bound himself to in covenant through his promises to heal and restore and save and redeem, we know what a devastating punishment this is.

[5 : 55] Hosea reminds us sometimes only one tribe of the original 12 would survive this, the tribe of Judah at the southern kingdom.

But notice that by this time, that's not a tragedy in God's eyes. He's opened this section, verse 1, saying, do not rejoice, Israel. Do not be jubilant like the other nations, for you have been unfaithful to your God.

You've got nothing to smile about, he says. You've got nothing to complain about because this catastrophe is coming ultimately from God himself. It's a punishment, a terminal punishment.

This is the end of the end. The days of punishment are coming. So in a purely historical sense, what God's threatening here is the Assyrian invasion.

But in a much deeper sense, that invasion brings the threat of extinction. It is an existential threat. And this is God's threat.

[6 : 59] Now, we are not Israelites, and we're not living in 750 BC. So how does that, that promise, that word, come to us today, God's church?

Well, there's two images that Hosea uses to get this across to us. And first, Hosea says, this punishment is like the death of a vine.

The death of a vine. There's that story woven through these chapters. It begins in 9, verse 10. If you just look there, see that? God says, When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert. When I saw your ancestors, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree. Can you sense God's delight? Discovering fresh fruit in the desert, like those grapes hanging over the garden fence. Brilliant, he thought. Well, out of all the people in the world, this was to be his treasured possession. God took this fruit to himself.

[8 : 07] Israel was to him a fruiting vine, a budding fig tree. But that fruit soon turned bad. So this is 10, verse 1. Israel was a spreading brine.

And he brought forth fruit for himself. As his fruit increased, he built more altars. As his land prospered, he adorned his sacred stones.

So the fruit that was so promising, that first love, that early devotion turned sour. Those altars, those sacred stones, are not to worship the true God, but idols.

And so as they were blessed, they turned that blessing backwards, didn't they? Sin, said Martin Luther, is turning in on ourselves.

And that's what had happened with Israel. Notice he grew fruit, but fruit for himself. No longer living to please God, but to please ourselves. And we're still, as God grew Israel, but Israel grew away from God.

[9 : 16] Her fruit, her growth, her fruitfulness, did not produce faithfulness, but faithlessness. The opposite outcome to what was intended.

And as a result, we see 9, verse 16, the fruit stopped, the vine just dried up. Ephraim's blighted, their fruit is withered, they yield no fruit. The vine is dead.

Now that was reflected in the land physically. The actual grapes and the grain couldn't feed the population. Threshing floors and wine presses will not feed the people, says the Lord.

But the vine is telling the story of a much deeper spiritual reality in Israel. That their first love that was so good, so fresh, turned in time so rotten that the only right end for God's people was death.

You like the vine that grew over the garden fence at some point. It had to be cut and burned for the disgusting grapes to go away. Now that is the story of Israel, the story of the Old Testament writ

large.

[10:32] Okay, so vines, fig trees, these are classic images of Israel in the Bible. In our reading from John 15 earlier, actually, Jesus picks up on this.

We'll come back to his words later. But the clearest fulfillment of Hosea's words here actually come in Mark 11. When Jesus curses the fig tree, do you remember that really strange encounter?

Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, Jesus went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves because it was not the season for figs.

Then he said to the tree, may no one ever eat fruit from you again. That seems odd, doesn't it? Until you realize that it is actually this same parable being acted out.

Jesus goes to find fruit on the fig tree, but it's not growing fruit, and nor is it growing buds. It's just growing leaves. If there are no buds on it yet, there's not going to be fruit later on.

[11:40] It is a fruitless tree, and so Jesus curses that tree to be forever fruitless. It is doomed. Now, why curse a fig tree? Because the fig tree, the vine, are symbols of his people, of Israel.

It's the same parable being played out. Jesus came to find faith in his people, but when he came, what did he find? No buds of faith even, no true faith in God, but fruitlessness, faithlessness, and so they were doomed to die under his curse.

And friends, that is God's punishment. That is Christ's curse grace on his people, on his church, when the fruit of our faith curves inwards on ourselves and doesn't turn outwards to him.

This is still true, friends, isn't it? Simply being a church, simply coming to church, does not protect us from God's punishment if our faith is not in Christ.

if his gifts, his blessings, his presence don't turn us outwards to him in faith, but turn us inwards instead to feed our own pleasures, our own interests, while we are this bad vine.

[13:06] There's a warning for us there, it's bon accord together, isn't there? As our church family grows, as we are blessed, as we know more of God, well, the danger is that we spend that fruit on our idols, that we turn to pride and complacency and self-promotion instead of trusting in and thanking God all the more for his blessing, his goodness to us.

Friends, the end that God promises for that bad fruit is death. Not only in this life, but in eternity, he could not be clearer here, could he?

If you just glance down at these verses, 9 verse 9, see that God will remember their wickedness and punish them for their sins. Or verse 17, my God will reject them because they have not obeyed him.

Or 10 verse 2, their heart is deceitful and now they must bear their guilt. Friends, there is no safety from God's punishment.

punishment simply in being in a church, being of the church. Only the fruit of true faith in God, in Christ, can spare us from this punishment, this curse.

[14:30] That's what Hosea teaches through the vine and now also through the bride. The bride. Now, in lots of ways, this is recapping that same story.

But, if the vine didn't get under your skin, well, just listen to this. We've heard from the start of Hosea, the bride is his people.

Can I just check when we open this book that we still see that shadow, that figure of the bride?

Okay, that must still be in our vision as we look at Hosea.

Israel is God's bride, but she's a promiscuous bride. Nine, verse one. You've been unfaithful to your God. You love the wages of a prostitute at every threshing floor.

Picture this. This is the shady side to the book of Ruth. Okay, if you can imagine this, remember Ruth quietly sneaking up to Boaz on the threshing floor while he slept to propose to him.

[15:37] Well, part of the tension there is that that is what prostitutes would do. That is where prostitutes would go. On the night of the harvest, the men have been celebrating with a few drinks.

The threshing floor is where wedding vows were broken. Now, of course, Ruth turned out not to be a woman of the night, but a wonderful future wife.

We need to say that. But God compares his people to that kind of prostitute sneaking around in the dark on the threshing floor.

But the marriage that is broken as a result is her marriage to God, her covenant with him. And so, as a result of that unfaithfulness, the punishment God threatens like the vine is a kind of fruitlessness.

But of course, in a human sense, that is childlessness. And I think this is where the teeth of this passage really have to sink in.

[16:38] Because it is such a distressing thought, isn't it, that God presents to us. This is 9, verses 10 to 12. When they came to Baal Peor, they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved.

Ephraim's glory will fly away like a bird, no birth, no pregnancy, no conception. Even if they bring up children, I will bereave them of every one.

My people have slept with an idol, says God, and so I will make them unable to reproduce. And even if they do, he says, their children won't survive.

Now, that is a terrible thought. That is a terrible thought, isn't it? And perhaps it hits some of us here harder than it does others.

But friends, that is what happened to this nation under God's curse. The Assyrians came and they wiped out generations of children. And even those that were to be born to God's people down the line, well, they would no longer be God's people.

[17:51] They would be of Assyria, they would be of the world, they would be children of idols. And so their children were cut off. And God's unfaithful people would have no future.

And as terrible as that sounded to them then, well, surely it must sound all the more terrible to us today. Again, it's Jesus, Jesus, who picks this up in the New Testament in Luke 23.

So this is as Jesus is carrying his cross to the place he will die. We read a large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. And Jesus turned and said to them, daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, weep for yourselves and your children.

For the time will come when you will say, blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed. Then they will say, let the mountains fall on us, let the hills cover us.

For if the people do these things while the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry? Friends, what is the Lord Jesus saying to us here? That there will be a day of punishment for sin and unfaithfulness to God.

[19:09] Jesus is saying to these women in an unfaithful generation, better not to have children than for them to face God's wrath on that day.

Better for you if a landslide or an avalanche were to fall upon you than to face God's wrath for your sin on that day.

Because if they rejected Christ when he was on earth to save, well what must happen when he would return in glory to judge? Brothers and sisters, do we feel the weight what Hosea, what Jesus are saying to us?

That if we sitting in church today go on without Christ, without our trust in Christ, without living our lives in Christ, then any pain or suffering or hardship in this world is better and preferable than what we will face on the day that God punishes our sin.

However, distressing these chapters are to read, and they are distressing, aren't they? Well, it doesn't compare to the terror of God's wrath that is coming against sin.

[20:29] Hosea is saying there will be no future for those whose faith is not in Christ, not only in a human or historical sense, but in an everlasting and eternal sense.

There will be no way back from this punishment. Friends, the days of punishment are coming. the days of reckoning are at hand. Do we know this?

Let the church know this, says Hosea, that Christ is coming to judge the world fairly, truly, justly, to give what we deserve for our sin.

And he leaves us in no doubt that it is the worst thing imaginable, not to have our faith in him when that day comes, to be unfaithful to him, and to be found to be unfaithful on that day.

That day is coming, he is coming. So that is the threat. We've had two pictures of this promise of punishment, God's judgment, two ways for us to see how this is still true today.

[21:37] So how should we, how must we respond to this? Well, the good news, friends, is that this day has not yet come. Count the patience of the Lord as salvation.

Hosea is clear that there is still opportunity to escape that punishment. And really it centers on 10 verse 12. This is our second point, where he says it is time to seek the Lord.

It's time to seek the Lord. Just have a look down at that verse with me. We'll read 10 verses 11 and 12 again. Ephraim is a trained heifer that loves to thrash, so I will put a yoke on her fair neck.

I will drive Ephraim. Judah must plow, Jacob must break up the ground, sow righteousness for yourselves. Reap the fruit of unfailing love and break up your unplowed ground, for it is time to seek the Lord until he comes and showers his righteousness on ye.

time for a groundbreaking intervention, says God. Notice it's his personal intervention. He says, I will put a yoke, I will drive them.

[22 : 50] This is God saying he wants, he longs to put a harness on Judah and Israel, make them a pair of oxen to plow up his unplowed ground, to open up the hard soil of the heart of the nation, but their part is to pull in his direction.

He wants them to turn 180 degrees, to seek him, to sow righteousness, to reap the fruit of steadfast, unfailing love. In short, they must, they must repent, to turn back, to seek the Lord while he may be found.

That word, unfailing love, we've come across it before. Hosea in 4 verse 1, there's no faithfulness, no love, no knowledge of God in the land, he said. That was his accusation.

No unfailing love. So now, says the Lord, sow the seeds, put in the seeds that will grow that very love that I look for.

Begin now, he says. Grow that faithful covenant marital love for me, your God. He wants it to be new again, fresh again, for the fruit to be delightful again.

[24 : 10] He wants a total renewal, root and branch from the heart. And so we could say the solution to their sin, their unfaithfulness, is not a tidier version of the same old vine, but a brand new vine, a true vine, a new Israel that grows the fruit, has the faith, lives the life that God delights in, a true vine.

Now how do we begin again with a true vine? Well, wonderful news, we heard, didn't we, earlier in our service, Jesus told us this, I am the vine, I am the vine, you are the branches, if you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit, apart from me you can do nothing.

brothers and sisters, friends, this is the good news of these chapters in Hosea, that God has given us a new, a true vine, in whom we can grow and bear fruit for God.

How do we turn from fruitless and faithless living and worshipping to fruitfulness and faithfulness and faith in him? Well, we turn and live in Jesus through faith.

Remain in me, he says, and I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself, no branch, it must remain in the vine, neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me, he said.

[25 : 45] Friends, it is time to seek the Lord, and this is what that means, turn to the Lord Jesus, put your trust wholly in him, rest in him, live your life in him, abide in him, and you will reap the fruit of unfailing love, says Hosea.

God says in Christ, he will shower his righteousness on ye. It's a beautiful image, isn't it, that speaks of that glorious way that God credits the rightness, the righteousness of Christ to us, clothes us in a perfect life, a perfect righteousness in Christ.

And here's the big point, on the day that he comes then to judge, what will he see when he sees us if we are in Christ? Not our infidelity, not our unfaithfulness, not our faithlessness, but the perfect life of Christ, staring back at him.

He has showered us in his righteousness. And friends, that is how we escape God's punishment, not by running from him, but by coming to him and trusting in him to take away that sin and clothe us in a righteousness that is not our own.

It's only by abiding in Christ the vine that we can grow that fruit for God. And so if your faith isn't yet in Christ, it is time to do that. It is time to seek the Lord, says Isaiah.

[27 : 25] Turn to him and be saved. If you want to talk more about that, I'd love to have that conversation with you after the service. Only Christ, only the true vine can save.

So come to him, live in him, be in him, and he will save you. And as we close, as if to stress how necessary that is, that we cannot, any of us, leave here today without considering this.

Well, Hosea leaves us with one last thought. We either grow in a new vine, or we die in an old battle. For them, back then, Israel, that change of heart was not going to happen.

It didn't happen. God says, verse 13, you have planted wickedness, you have reaped evil, you have eaten the fruit of deception. They have not turned to the Lord for his grace and mercy.

And so he says, a war is coming. A war is coming. The roar of battle will rise against your people so that all your fortresses will be devastated. Hosea compares it to historic battle.

[28 : 39] We don't know when that happened, but we know that it was catastrophic for the nation when mothers were dashed to the ground with their children. This is the horror of the blitz.

This is total warfare. No one is safe. And God says that is what he is bringing on his own people because they will not turn to him from their sins.

So it will happen to you, Bethel, because your wickedness is great. When that day dawns, the king of Israel will be completely destroyed. That day will come again.

The old war will be repeated if you do not turn, he says. And that is still true. That is still true.

Friends, there are two ways that history will end.

Either we will be found in Christ in the true vine, with our faith in him and be safe forever. Or will we be cut off and destroyed forever by God for our sin and unfaithfulness.

[29 : 45] And let none of us think that we will be the exception. If the Lord did this to Israel back then, he will not excuse us if we ignore his warnings, his promises, his invitations to repent.

We carry on regardless today and do not come to him. Well, he will not respond in grace and kindness to us.

Know then that the days of punishment are coming. And let us respond then with true faith. Let us come to Christ. Let us repent. Let's throw our faith on him and be saved.

Because that is what Christ has promised to do for any who call upon his name. Let's pray as we close together.