

Return!

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[0 : 0 0] Oh man. Well, last night, some of you will know, some of you were there. We had a Christmas day with a cord at our house, and part of that, we had a couple of quiz rounds, guess the Christmas film and guess the Christmas carol. I'm so bad at quizzes that I had to ask the questions, but I did take part in a quiz once that was guess the soundtrack. So, 10, 10 soundtracks, 10 films were played. We had to guess which film the soundtrack went with, and I don't know how well you would do on a round like that. How well do you know soundtracks?

They're not the thing that we maybe pay attention to most in a film. They're just going on in the background, but if you listen carefully, the soundtrack is actually what makes the film what it is. The soundtrack sets the tone, creates suspense. It even tells us more about the characters as different themes come in and develop throughout to help us understand who these people are. If you've ever tried to watch a film on silent, you'll know how significant a soundtrack can be. Towards the end of any film, what you'll notice is that all the key themes throughout kind of come back and are put together to help us as viewers to understand that this is all the threads being tied together. This is the resolution of the story. And this last section of Hosea is very like that. You'll hear, as we heard, as we read, all the kind of key themes and key images coming back in, brought together one last time to help us sum up and understand what it is we've heard in this whole book. I'm not going to tell you yet what those themes are. Perhaps you've spotted them.

But we'll see as we go on that they are there. And as Hosea wraps up his prophecy, he wants us to be asking, well, what is there for us to take home with us? If there are going to be themes playing in our heads over the next wee while as a result of spending time in this book, there are things we're going to pray for, things we're going to come back to in our Bibles as a result of spending time with Hosea. Well, what does Hosea want those themes to be? Well, this morning as we finish, we close this book, there are three things that Hosea says for us again to help us understand what he said, to get it into our bloodstream. And out of these three big things flows the one great take-home message that he's got for us all the way through. One big word captures everything that he wants for us. The word return. Okay, it's a big long section we've got today, but you see it at the start in 12 verse 6, but you must return to your God. And at the end, in 14 verses 1 and 2, return Israel to the Lord, your God, take words with you, return to the Lord, return, he says, or repent. Why then does Hosea think we need today to return to God, to repent? Well, he gives us three big reasons again. And the first is because we have an age-old problem that we cannot fix on our own. So Hosea picks that problem up at the end of chapter 11, which is that verse at the end, verse 12. See that? Ephraim has surrounded me with lies, Israel with deceit, and Judah is unruly against God, even against the faithful

Holy One. So what's the problem here? Well, Ephraim, the northern kingdom of Israel, is deceitful, trying to pull the wool over God's eyes, telling God what he wants to hear. But all the while, thinking and doing what he hates, and pretending that God cannot see. And even the southern kingdom of Judah, the more faithful of the two kingdoms of God's people, even they are unruly, rebellious against God. So both these kingdoms have a problem, and the problem is God. Okay, one has gone further than the other in their sin, but they have both walked away from him in their hearts. So that in this relationship, there is only one faithful and holy one, and that is God himself. And that's something that Hosea does not want us to lose sight of. Is that image, I wonder, still burned into the back of our eyes from the beginning of the book. Remember the shadowy outline of the marriage?

Israel, the unfaithful bride, always skipping between one bed and another, one God, one king and another, and her faithful husband, the Lord, who in his great love is determined to win her back to himself to win back his bride, his people. Do we still see that image as we close this book, as we shut our eyes? Friends, it's something Hosea does not want us to forget, that the only hope for this relationship is not us is God and his unfailing love. And that is still true for us, brothers and sisters, as we sit here today, whoever we are, okay, we might look out at the world, we might read the news and think, well, I'm not as sinful as those people, much as Judah might have looked north to their neighbors, the kingdom of Israel, and said, well, at least we're not as far gone as all that. But God knows they are still set against him, rebelling against him. He sees that we have all sinned and fallen short of his glory. And so we see he's perfectly within his rights to bring a charge, verse 2. He will punish Jacob according to his ways, repay him according to his deeds. Okay, God's sharpest words in this book have been for the kingdom of Israel, but now they are for Judah too. None of his people are good enough. None of them measure up, none of them are faithful. And we ourselves, we cannot escape this verdict, can we? Okay, because God does not measure our sin as we often do, against what we imagine to be the worst possible sinner, or the person who's a wee bit more sinful than we are.

[7 : 21] No, God measures our sin against himself, his own great holiness. And in his presence, he finds us all wanting. He says in 14 verse 1, your sins have been your downfall. So this is our great big problem, friends. Whoever we are, the problem that we share is our sin against God. And Hosea points out for us, this isn't a new problem that started a few days ago. It's not even a problem that began for us on the day we were born. But no, it is an age-old problem. And to show his people this, he tells the story of one of their ancestors, Jacob. How far back does this problem go? Well, Jacob was the father of the nation of Israel. He was given the name Israel. And God traces the sins of the nation all the way back to him. See that there in verse 3, chapter 12. So he says, he will punish Jacob according to his ways and repay him according to his deeds. In the womb, he grasped his brother's heel. As a man, he struggled with God. See, he's shifted back, hasn't he, from speaking about Israel, God's people, back to this man,

Israel. We find in Genesis, when this guy was born, he had a twin. And he was born clutching his twin brother's heel, Esau's heel. And all his life, he kind of grasped after his brother Esau, so much so that his name, Jacob, actually came to mean cheat or deceiver. So later on, his brother Esau can say of him, isn't he, isn't he, isn't he? Isn't he rightly named Jacob? For this is the second time he has Jacobed me or deceived, cheated me. He took my birthright. Now he's taken my blessing. Now what do you notice? Jacob was an infamous liar and cheat. And God sees that his family are still liars and cheats.

Jacob famously also wrestled and fought with God, verse 3. And what does God see? While his family are still wrestling and fighting against God. See, God is saying this problem is an age-old problem.

It goes all the way back to their beginning. Look at you now, he says. You look just like your father, just like Jacob. You lie like him. You fight like him. You sin like him.

And so now you must turn like him. See that verse 4. He struggled with the angel and overcame him. He wept and begged for his favor. He found him at Bethel and talked with him there. The Lord Almighty, the Lord is his name. Later on in his life, Jacob, the rebel, was eventually brought to his knees.

[10 : 41] And he did cry out to God for his mercy and his blessing. And God graciously gave him mercy. He gave him his blessing. And from that day on, Jacob walked with his God or limped with his God. And God spoke to him, revealed himself to him, revealed himself to him from that day on. And so the take-home message for them back then is, well, be like your first father in this way too. Verse 6. You like him are a sinner, so be like him and repent. You must return to your God. Maintain love and justice and wait for your God always. Turn back from the lies, the deceit. Turn to this God of forgiveness and blessing again.

Now, we might think that we've kind of got that. We can put that in our back pocket this week, take that home with us. But lest we kind of chew too quickly, swallow without fully digesting it, get a kind of spiritual indigestion with this truth. Hosea slows us down. Because if we had time to look at the second half of this chapter, what would we see? Verse 7. Well, more lies, more dishonesty. The merchant uses dishonest scales he loves to defraud. And if we had time, we could go through and see that that whole same story of deceitfulness and lies repeated a few hundred years later with Moses and the Israelites. God saved them, but they rebelled against him in the wilderness. The cycle of sin, it repeats again and again and now again, says the Lord.

And the point of this is, friends, to get them back then to see it, us now to see that our problem with sin is not a simple, easy problem to fix. Our sin is much deeper, much bigger, much stronger than we are.

We cannot control it. We cannot negotiate with it. We cannot overcome it. We cannot play with it. Our problem with sin is very nearly as old as time itself. It began with us, not in Jacob, but our very first father, Adam. And it is not simply fixed with a nod in God's general direction or a quick prayer on a Sunday or an attempt to kind of throw a blindfold over God's eyes and live as we want. It is not solved, is it, by heartless religion. We've all been there and done that. I hope for many of us, most of us, if not all of us today, we are done with that. Some of us today might still be doing that. But friends, lying to God about the depth of our problem just will not fix it, will it?

John in the New Testament puts it this way, if we claim to be without sin, we say this isn't a problem for me, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. We are lying to ourselves, lying to God, if we say we do not have this problem. But John goes on, if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all our unrighteousness. What's he saying?

[14 : 45] He's saying that when we have a sickness, okay, that doesn't go away on its own and that we cannot fix it by ourselves, what do we do? We go to the doctor. So with our sin, friends, we must confess our problem, that we cannot fix it and return to the only one who can forgive and cleanse and heal us from our sin. We must return to him, says Hosea, because of our age-old problem.

The second reason Hosea gives us to return to the Lord is what we deserve for our sin. So a second point then, God's present threat. And this is where we get lots of those old themes, images coming back round for one big final hearing, because Hosea wants us to know that this is crunch time, okay, for God's people. This is where it all comes together, the great decisive battle. His point here is that in our sin, we will either be saved by God or we will be punished by God.

And I hope by now we can see why God would threaten to punish our sins. If we've forgotten, Hosea recaps for us chapter 13 and verse 1, in the face of this great big problem, her age-old problem, what did Israel do? Well, she turned to other gods for rescue. She went to fake doctors to have the problem fixed.

She used her great wealth and beauty to find new gods, new kings to satisfy her heart. And the problem that Hosea has all throughout diagnosed with that is not only were these lovers, ones that she had made with her own hands out of silver and gold, but these gods also slowly killed her. Israel became guilty of bowel worship and died, verse 1. And not only kind of in a spiritual sense, but also in a physical sense, too, is said of these people, verse 2, they offer human sacrifices.

They kiss calf idols. You know, these new lovers, they sounded great at the start, but the hidden costs. The small print exacted a price far, far higher than God's people would dare to ever imagine. It started with just innocent flirting at the shrines, but it ended in child sacrifice.

[17 : 40] And the lesson for us in this is in Paul's words, be careful if you think you stand lest you fall. Israel was strong, but she fell into this abominable sin. If we think that we are too strong in our faith, if we think we've been a Christian long enough for this just not to be a problem for us anymore, well, then when we do fall, we will fall hard. We can end up doing things we just never imagined in the service of a false god. You know, I can't think, okay, that God's people back then ever imagined, ever imagined that they would be offering their children as sacrifices, but offer their children as sacrifices they did when the gods they served demanded it.

And that is why God hangs this threat over them now, not only because they have sinned, but because they have cheated on him with terrible, terrible gods who cannot save them.

Therefore, he says, verse 3, what does he say? They will be like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears, like chaff swirling from a threshing floor, like smoke escaping through a window. Your hearts are like vapor, he says. Remember this? Chapter 6, your love is like a morning mist, just a breath. We see this at this time of year, don't we? The dead, the dry leaves being swirled along the street into the gutters. Hot breath on a cold day drifts for a moment, and then it's gone. What is happening to God's people? They are being disappeared.

This is what they are like in their hearts. They are nothing, empty, chaff. And God will sweep them away in a moment because they had forgotten who he was to them. They had broken faith with him. God had saved them, cared for them, spoke to them. But verse 6, when they were satisfied, they became proud, and they forgot me. It's the danger, isn't it, of taking God for granted, taking his grace as a given, chasing after the gifts and not the giver. It is possible, isn't it, in our sin for God's very goodness and grace to us to become the fuel for our rebellion. That is how deep the problem is, isn't it?

It's so often what Hosea has warned us about in this book. Do we think that we can take hold of God's grace with one hand and push God himself away with the other? Do we think that that is how he works?

[20 : 46] Well, we need to recognize if that is us today, if that's where we are, that's our heart, we need to see it because God says he won't be fooled. In fact, he threatens, verse 7, his punishment.

I will be like a lion to them. Like a leopard, I will lurk by the path. Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack and rip them open. Like a lion, I will devour them. A wild animal will tear them apart. You know, God's compared himself often to a lion in this book. It's a way of thinking about him that we don't often turn to his majestic power, his great and infinite strength. And God is not scared to tell us this morning that his strength can turn against us. And if it does, then we are right to be afraid. If you've ever seen videos on the TV of what it's like when something comes between a mother bear and her cubs, the ferocity, the violence, the terror. That is the image that God chooses to describe himself towards us if we do not trust him to save us. It's a picture of his wrath against our sin. But only when we do turn against him. You see that verse 9, you're destroyed, Israel.

Why? Because you were against me, against your helper. It doesn't have to be this way. It doesn't have to be this way, he says. God's repeatedly said in this book. He desires to save.

I long to redeem you. I long to redeem you. Those were his words in chapter 7. So why now is he tearing them open? Because they would have none of it. See, the Lord is the only Savior for us. He is the only helper we have. And so to turn against him, to refuse to recognize him as God, to deny him as our Savior, is to invite his anger. He will deal with our sin either, either through the death of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, carrying our sins to the cross and taking our punishment in our place or by laying on us the punishment that we deserve and sentencing us to hell forever. And he threatens that punishment, friends, now to warn us so that we will not turn turn against him, but turn to him for his forgiveness. Which will it be for us?

Perhaps this is quite shocking for you this morning. Maybe you're not sure where you stand with God. Maybe you're still working it out. Or perhaps you know, you know who God is, how to come to him. But you just haven't yet come to him. Hosea is insisting this morning that we can't sit on the fence with God forever. We can consider him, weigh up his claims, count the cost.

[24 : 22] But the time comes when we have to decide whether we will put our trust in him to save us from our sin. And so if you are on the fence today, how long do you think you can stay there?

Okay, as it stands, if your trust is not in Christ, this is the punishment you face. This threat is a real threat. And there is no other Savior to turn to but the one who makes that threat and who promises to save us from it. Okay, turn to him. Do not leave it for another day.

Or perhaps, as I say, you are still working it out, weighing it up. Who God is? Can I trust him? Well, if you are asking those questions, let me encourage you to keep asking until you have your answer. Okay, do not put off those questions. Seek until you find. That's his promise. Those who seek will find. So seek until you have found him. And do not stop seeking until you've put your trust in him to save you from this punishment. Because coming to our very last point, and the last word in Hosea, Hosea says, we need to repent. Because God promises his love to those who turn to him and ask his forgiveness.

I asked a few weeks ago how you think this book might end. Some of you may have read to the end. Well, it ends incredibly with the promise of God's love. And here's Hosea's key kind of take-home point in a nutshell. This is 14 verses 1 and 2. Return, Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall. Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to him, forgive all our sins and receive us graciously that we may offer the fruit of our lips. God calls us friends in his great love to return to him, to repent. He promises to forgive when we do. I had a wonderful conversation a few weeks back. Somebody just asked me, how do I do that? And what does it mean to repent? How do we come to God with our sin? And Hosea just sets that out really clearly for us. Turn to God, he says, and say to him, forgive all our sins. You're turning to God. It is not a kind of vague feeling that we have. It's not a kind of general intention. No, we use words. We pray to God. We tell him how sinful, how desperate we are, how much we have sinned against him. We ask him to forgive our sins.

And perhaps some of us are afraid to do that. We know how serious our sin is, but here is God himself calling us to do it. This is not something that God kind of just puts up with.

[27 : 43] Jesus tells us. Jesus tells us it is something that he rejoices in. There is rejoicing in heaven, he said, over one sinner who repents. God delights when we take him up on this call, turn to him, and say these words. And notice that this is not just for our most recent sins or our really bad sins. The prayer is forgive all our sins, all our sins. The gods that we invent or imagine for ourselves, religion in general, tells us if forgiveness works, then surely I must have to set the record straight kind of over and over. I ask for forgiveness, then I sin, then I ask for forgiveness, then I sin, and I ask for forgiveness, and on and on, and hope that at the end of my life, I've kind of set the record straight with God. Now, Jesus does teach us to ask daily for forgiveness, but not to get right with God again and again and again. Though this turning to God that Hosea is speaking about is a once-for-all turn, a total, a full forgiveness that we receive when we turn to God for the first time and lay before Him all our sin and ask us to forgive us forever.

In that moment, all of our sins, past, present, and future, are dealt with. They were nailed to the cross in the death of Christ. In that moment, we receive the full forgiveness that He has paid for with His blood.

He did that so that we can come to God and ask His forgiveness for not just some, not one or two, but all our sin. And we do it on the basis of His grace, graciously receive us.

You're not claiming anything that we have done or could do, not making any excuse for our sin, but purely and simply based on His willingness to forgive, His love towards us in Jesus that we do not deserve. His forgiveness is therefore free. But one thing that we have seen throughout Hosea is that it's not cheap, if I can put it like that. Turning to God means giving up our idols. We confess the emptiness of what we've spent our lives trusting in instead of Christ. And for them back then, that meant recognizing, verse 3, Assyria cannot save us. We will not mount war horses. And they make a promise, Luke, to God. We will never again say our gods to what our own hands have made. For in you, the fatherless, let us find compassion. We do not add Christ to the collection of things that we trust in, but we come abandoning those things to trust in Christ alone for our rightness with God.

And we pledge ourselves from now on to Him that we may offer the fruit of our lips. My friends, that is God's promised love towards us, that when we do that, when we come to Him like this, He will forgive and give us new life. Perhaps you do need to turn to Him like that today.

[31 : 24] Do not wait to do it. God Himself is waiting for you to forgive. And if we doubt that He would be so forgiving, well, just look what He promises His people from verse 4. He says, I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them.

Christ's death on the cross has turned God's wrath away from us, onto Himself. He was punished in our place so that God now can love us freely, put us right, heal us from our sinfulness.

And this is just beautiful. The rest of this promise is full of garden imagery, plants, trees, as if God's love were like a garden. I'll be a dew to Israel. He will blossom like a lily.

People will again dwell in His shade. I am like a flourishing juniper. Your fruitfulness goodness comes from me. Why the garden language? It's a picture, isn't it, of eternal life.

When God first planted His love in the world, He planted it in a garden. When He first planted life in this world, He planted the tree of life. This eternal, everlasting, abundant goodness and life with God comes from Him. And this is what He promises for us, His people, when we turn to His grace from our sin. Life with God forever, without end. And so, as one writer sums up this book, Hosea's message in the end is less turn, for in front of you is destruction, and more turn, for behind you is God.

[33 : 21] The living God of holy, fierce, true, pure, and unfailing love. A God who burns with compassion for His sinful people, and who promises to forgive every one of our sins through the death of His Son.

So, then, let us turn to Him now as we pray together. Let's pray to God. Gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, how we praise You for Your steadfast and unfailing love towards us. How we thank You that You are a God who does not give us up to our sin, to our rebellion. Even, our Father, when we stubbornly turn against You and stubbornly cling to other things to replace You, how we thank You that in Your great grace, You continue to speak to us, You continue to speak to us, to call us, to come after us, until we are Yours.

And so, Father, we pray that we would be Yours, in heart and soul, in body and mind, that we would belong wholly to You.

Our Father, we do turn to You and say to You, forgive all our sins. Receive us in Your grace. Help us, we pray, to offer You the fruit of new lives devoted to You.

Father, we pray this especially for those who, as yet do not have their trust in Christ. And Father, how we pray by Your Spirit that You might give them a new heart, even now, to be turned to Him, to give their lives to Him, to be saved by Him.

[35 : 23] Lord, help us all, we pray, to live a life of repentance, a life of faith, and to know that when we live this life, we live it forever in Your presence.

Give us joy, give us new life, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.