

Lesson 30

Hosea 8:9a, Continued...

9a For they have gone up to Assyria, a wild donkey wandering alone;

Assyria was the most powerful earthly kingdom during the days of Hosea, but why? **Why** was Assyria so powerful?

Historians have asked themselves that same question. Here is a quote from the recent book *Assyria: The Rise and Fall of the World's First Empire* by Eckhart Frahm (shown on the handout for Lesson 30):

"When Tiglath-pileser III died in the winter of 727 BC, Assyria was more than twice as large as it had been at the beginning of his reign. The country's new western border was no longer the Euphrates River but the Mediterranean Sea, and in all other directions the king had made enormous territorial gains as well. **This turn of fortune is nothing but amazing**, especially given that the years of plague and internal unrest prior to Tiglath-pileser's reign has been joined by other mounting problems." (Page 130)

"Nothing but amazing," he says! How can it be explained?

And here is another quote from another secular historian in a recent book about Babylon (also shown on the handout). (The book is about Babylon, but the quote is about Assyria.)

"To supplement their national resources, Assyrians needed to trade, offering both woolen goods produced at home from their flocks, best quality textiles bought from neighboring Babylonia, and commodities like metal ores originally sourced from the mountains to their east. ... The precise details of how this nation of roving merchants became, in the course of little more than a millennium, the most awe-inspiring and feared imperialist power of the ancient world, are not at all clear. Records are sparse. Archaeology has been able to open no more than a few narrow windows, at widely different times, on to the grand saga."

Listen as the Bible answers those two historians' questions.

Isaiah 37:21-26 – Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria, this is the word that the LORD has spoken concerning him: [skipping to verse 26] "Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins..."

Isaiah 10:5 – Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury!

1 Chronicles 5:26 – So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria, the spirit of Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, and he took them into exile.

Isaiah 7:18 – In that day the LORD will whistle for the fly that is at the end of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria.

Yes, Assyria was powerful, but that power came from God. Assyria was just a tool that God used

for his own purposes. "I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins." Assyria was just a dog, and when God whistled that dog came running!

The handout gives some other examples (about Greece and Rome) where the Bible provides the answer to questions from historians. Whenever a history book about the time leading up to the first century throws up its hands and can't answer a question about how something came to be – we can almost always find the answer to that question in the Bible!

Hosea 8:9b–10

9b Ephraim has hired lovers. 10 Though they hire allies among the nations, I will soon gather them up. And the king and princes shall soon writhe because of the tribute.

Here we see a third metaphor describing Israel's faithlessness. First, they were an empty useless cup. Then they were a wild and lonely donkey. And now what are they?

Now, Israel is like a man who seeks love by giving money to prostitutes, but who soon discovers that he has squandered his money and gained no love in return.

We should pause and notice how verses 9 and 10 take the central metaphor in the book of Hosea and turn it around completely.

In most of the book of Hosea, Israel (like Gomer) is the prostitute and the nations are the men hiring that prostitute. But here we see the opposite – the nations are the hired prostitutes, and Israel (here called Ephraim) is the one hiring them.

Should that reversal bother us? Not at all.

In a sense, Israel was the prostitute trying to make herself attractive and to hire herself out to the nations all around her. But in another sense, Israel was seeking to hire out those nations by giving them money and asking them for their favors. The metaphor makes perfect sense either way, and that is why we see it both ways in this book.

And what was God going to do about it? Israel wanted to hire lovers – how would God respond?

God responds by giving Israel exactly what it wanted – and sometimes that is the very worst punishment of all – to give us exactly what we ask for!

Israel wanted these nations as its lover, and so God says, “I will soon gather them up.” Israel would get exactly what it wanted, and Israel would be destroyed as a result.

Even now, Israel was suffering. Assyria was exacting a very heavy tribute, and as a result the king and the princes were suffering. And when the leaders are suffering, you can be certain that the people are also suffering.

By the time the suffering finally reaches the **least** vulnerable in society, you can be sure that the **most** vulnerable have already been suffering for a long time. And here the kings and the princes would soon be writhing in pain after God gathered up their customers and turned them against Ephraim.

Hosea 8:11

11 Because Ephraim has multiplied altars for sinning, they have become to him altars for sinning.

In the previous verses we saw three **metaphors** describing the **political** sins of Israel. In the next few verses, we will see three **ironies** describing the **religious** sins of Israel.

Why three? Keep in mind that the number three is playing an important role in this book. We started off with three children, and we have seen waves of three ever since. And, as we said, one reason for that may be that the kingdom was divided into three parts for much of this time. Here we find three ironies.

We find the first irony in verse 11. The people had built altars to expiate their sin, but those altars had instead led to more sin. The altars **for sinning** (that is, altars to deal with sin) had instead become altars **for sinning** (that is, altars providing an excuse to sin more and more)!

Rather than dealing with their sin, the altars for their false gods had instead become the

locations for their immoral worship of their false fertility gods.

And most likely those altars to their false gods were located in the same places where they had previously built true altars.

In fact, we have already seen how Bethel – the place where Jacob built an altar to God – had instead now become a place where the people came to worship their golden calves. That altar **for** sinning had now become an altar **for** sinning.

There is an important lesson for us here. Do we have any altars for sinning that have become alters for sinning? Do we have any altars that are now doing the opposite of what they were intended to do? Something that was originally intended to keep us from sinning, but that is now causing us to sin?

The answer is yes if we ever find ourselves just going through the motions. The answer is yes if we ever turn our back on God while keeping the rituals of God. The answer is yes if our worship in spirit and truth ever becomes empty and vain.

All of that had happened to Israel in the days of Hosea, and so God told them that their altar for dealing with sin had instead become an altar that caused them to sin. In a book full of reversals, that one may be the worst.

Hosea 8:12

12 Were I to write for him my laws by the ten thousands, they would be regarded as a strange thing.

In verse 12, we see the second of the three ironies. The first irony was an altar for sinning (that is, to deal with sin) that had instead become an altar for sinning (that is, to cause more and more sin). Here we see the second irony – the people of God were treating the law of God as if it were some foreign document describing a foreign religion.

The people had moved so far away from the law of God that they no longer recognized it. Instead, when they saw the law of God or heard the law of God, it seemed so strange to them that they thought it must have come from somewhere else and must have been intended for some other people.

And, of all the sad verses in Hosea, verse 12 may be the saddest!

When we think about the wonderful law of God, and about how that law was delivered to the people, and received by the people, and revered by the people, and preserved by the people – to see that law now unrecognized by the people and considered a strange thing by the people – we see just how far they had fallen!

The attitude toward the law of God at the end of Israel's history that we see here in verse 12 is about as far as it could possibly be from the

attitude toward the law of God that we find at the **beginning** of their history.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 – Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The people had gone from “these words that I command you today shall be on your heart,” to this: “Were I to write for him my laws by the ten thousands, they would be regarded as a strange thing.”

Yes, they had the law of God, and yes, God could have given them even more laws – by the ten thousands, in fact, as we see here! But the problem with the people was not a lack of laws. The problem with the people was a lack of knowledge of God, a lack of faithfulness to God, a lack of gratitude to God, and a lack of love for God. The problem was a hard heart that had by now become so hardened that it could not even recognize God’s law.

When the people saw the law of God, they did not see it as having any relation to them. Instead, they saw it as a foreign thing.

They did not read it. They did not follow it. They did not teach it to their children. They

treated the law of God in the same way that we today treat the Hindu scriptures or the Koran. They are a strange thing, and they have nothing to do with us!

And is that still a problem today with God's law? It certainly is in the wider religious world. I think the famous religious pollster, George Gallup, has summed up the problem pretty well: "We revere the Bible, but we don't read the Bible."

And what did his polling show about America's Bible knowledge?

- Fewer than half of all adults can name the four gospel writers.
- Few can identify more than two or three of the apostles.
- 60 percent of Americans can't name even five of the Ten Commandments.
- According to 82% of Americans, "God helps those who help themselves" is a Bible verse.
- At least 12% of American adults believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife.
- Over half of high school students think that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife.

In Hosea's day, the people had substituted the orthodoxy of Baal for the orthodoxy of God's word. Are we in danger of making such a substitution?

I know it is tempting to say that will never happen to us, but whenever we say such a thing all we have done is alert Satan about a spot

where we have no defenses set up. Why guard against something that we believe will never happen to us?

The truth is that if it could happen to physical Israel, it can happen to spiritual Israel. If we fail to study and love the word of God, then one day we too might see the word of God as a strange thing.

And how would that happen? It would be a slow process.

Rather than being known far and wide as a people who know the book, we would lose that distinctiveness. Instead, we would begin substituting our vague recollections about what the Bible says for what the Bible actually says. And we would substitute our own politically correct cultural opinions about the Bible for the actual words of the Bible. **That is happening all around us today! Do we think we are immune?**

But do we need to know it all? Can't we can know what we need to know about the Bible without worrying about all of those details?

Is that the attitude of someone who delights in the law of God? In fact, is there anything in Psalm 119 that tells us we should ever have that attitude about the Bible?

Psalm 119:159-160 – Consider how I love your precepts! Give me life according to your steadfast love. The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever.

Do I need to know everything about the Bible to be pleasing to God? No.

Do I need to want to know everything about the Bible to be pleasing to God? That is a very different question!

If I have grown tired of God's word, or if I think I know all I ever need to know about God's word, it is difficult to see how God would be pleased with me.

I think we see in King David the attitude that God wants us all to have about his word.

Psalm 119:97 – Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.

And anyone who has that attitude about the Bible wants to know all about it!

Hosea 8:13

13 As for my sacrificial offerings, they sacrifice meat and eat it, but the LORD does not accept them. Now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins; they shall return to Egypt.

In verse 13, we see the third of our three ironies. The people sacrificed to God to obtain a certain outcome, but their sacrifices instead achieved for them the opposite outcome.

As we have said, the people had rejected God, but they had kept the rituals of God. Earlier, in Hosea 2:11, we saw that they were still keeping the feast days and the Sabbath days. And here we

see that they were still making their sacrificial offerings.

In short, they were still going through all the motions. They were trying to cover all their bases. If one God was good, then many gods must be better.

They were like the Greeks in Acts 17 who were fearful of leaving some unknown god out, unintentionally bringing that god's wrath against them. The people here, like those Greeks in Acts 17, had replaced religion with superstition.

And how did that work out for the people? God had earlier told them what would happen if they mixed the true worship of the one true God with their false superstitious worship of their false gods.

Deuteronomy 28:64 – And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known.

Exodus 23:32–33 – You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.

And here we see that snare. Here we see that scattering.

Why did they continue to sacrifice to God even while they were worshipping Baal? Because they wanted protection and bounty from God, as well as from all of their false gods. That was the

outcome they wanted, but that is not the outcome they obtained.

Instead, as we read in verse 13, God did not accept their sacrifices. And instead of the protection they sought, what they received was punishment. Instead of forgiveness of their sin, God said he would remember their iniquity. Instead of freedom from bondage, God said they would be returned to bondage.

Let's look at two more issues about verse 13 before we move on.

First, why do we see in verse 13 both first person and third person pronouns for God?

"As for my sacrificial offerings, they sacrifice meat and eat it, but the LORD does not accept them. Now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins; they shall return to Egypt."

Why does God suddenly start talking about himself in the third person?

I think the best answer is that God is parroting back to the people the very words that they had said to him during those rejected sacrifices.

When they made those sacrifices, the priest likely said: "God has accepted them. He will not remember your iniquities. He will not punish you for your sins. He brought you out of Egypt."

But none of those promises was true. Those priests had it all exactly backwards. What those priests should have been saying about those sacrifices is what God says here: "The LORD does

not accept them. Now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins; they shall return to Egypt.”

What the priests were telling the people was the exact opposite of the truth. It was the opposite of what God tells the people here.

God in verse 13 is, in effect, taking the falsehoods from the mouths of those priests and replacing them with the truth. And I think that is why we suddenly see God talking about himself in the third person.

Second, what is meant in verse 13 by the promise that “they shall return to Egypt”?

Yes, some of the people fled to Egypt, but most of the people were carried off, not by Egypt, but by Assyria. Most of them did not return to Egypt. So why then does verse 13 say that they shall return to Egypt?

To any Israelite, the word “Egypt” meant one thing – bondage. The Jews had once been in literal bondage in Egypt, and from that time on the name “Egypt” could be used figuratively to depict another bondage.

We see something similar with Babylon. As with Egypt, the people of God were also held captive by Babylon, and so “Babylon” was later used to depict other examples of bondage.

But how do we know that? How do we know that Egypt in verse 13 is not literal Egypt? We know that because Hosea tells us that.

Here in verse 13 we read that they shall return to Egypt. What do we read in Hosea 11? We read the opposite.

Hosea 11:5 – They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me.

Here in Hosea 8:13 we see the symbol. Later in Hosea 11:5 we see the explanation for the symbol. The bondage this time would come from Assyria rather than from Egypt, but it would be just as if they were heading back to Egypt.

And again, think about how sad that statement is. God had led this same people up out of Egypt – setting them free and giving them his wonderful law.

And now? Now, they had turned their back on God and on his word; they saw his wonderful law as some foreign document that was unrelated to them; and they were heading into Assyrian bondage just as surely as if they were all heading right back into Egypt bondage.

We see in Hosea both a reminder of the literal exodus out of Egyptian bondage and also the figurative return to Egyptian bondage (with Assyria playing the role of Egypt).

Hosea 8:14

14 For Israel has forgotten his Maker and built palaces, and Judah has multiplied fortified cities; so I will send a fire upon his cities, and it shall devour her strongholds.

There is always a temptation to trust in someone or something other than God. And perhaps we think we can continue to trust in God while we also turn to someone or something else – to hedge our bets, so to speak. The Bible has many warnings against such an attitude.

- The Bible warns us not to trust in uncertain riches (1 Timothy 6:17).
- The Bible warns us not to trust in ourselves (2 Corinthians 1:9).
- The Bible warns us not to trust in other people (Jeremiah 9:4).
- The Bible warns us not to trust in lying words (Jeremiah 7:4).
- The Bible warns us not to trust in our military might (Isaiah 31:1).
- The Bible warns us not to trust in foreign powers (Isaiah 30:2).
- The Bible warns us not to trust in princes (Psalm 146:3).

Instead, we must place our trust in God and in God alone.

Psalm 56:11 – In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me.

Psalm 25:2 – O my God, I trust in thee: let me not be ashamed, let not mine enemies triumph over me.

Psalm 91:2 – I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.

But neither Israel nor Judah were doing that in Hosea's day. Instead, they were trusting in their own military power and in their own military fortifications (called palaces and fortified cities in verse 14).

And why were they doing that? Because they had forgotten their Maker.

That is the charge against **Israel** in verse 14, and we can be sure that **Judah** was not far behind. I think that is why Judah is mentioned here – because Judah was following the bad example of her sister, Israel.

And what would be the result? God would send fire against those fortifications, and that fire would devour those strongholds.

What is that promised fire? That fire could be symbolic of the coming invasion by Assyria, but it could also include literal fire that would be used as a weapon during a military siege.

And so we see here in verse 14 the reason why we must trust in God and in God alone. It is because everything else and everyone else will ultimately fail us. It is God and God alone who offers salvation.

Acts 4:12 – Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

And if we ever look elsewhere for our salvation, it must be because we have forgotten our Maker. It must be because we do not know God. Those who

know God will always trust in God and in God alone.

Hosea 9:1-2

1 Rejoice not, O Israel! Exult not like the peoples; for you have played the whore, forsaking your God. You have loved a prostitute's wages on all threshing floors. 2 Threshing floor and wine vat shall not feed them, and the new wine shall fail them.

What is happening in chapter 9? Most likely what we are seeing here is a message that Hosea delivered to the people at a specific occasion. And what was that specific occasion? I think we will see that it was a failed harvest.

What is the evidence for that view?

The best evidence is in verse 2 – “Threshing floor and wine vat shall not feed them, and the new wine shall fail them.” That verse is describing a famine caused by a failed harvest.

But the evidence for that view starts with the opening phrase of verse 1: “Rejoice not, O Israel!”

When the harvest was successful, the people were told to rejoice.

Joel 2:23-24 – Be glad, O children of Zion, and rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given the early rain for your vindication; he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the latter rain, as before. The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

But here the people are told the opposite – do not rejoice! What could have been a proclamation of joy has instead become a lamentation.

And why is that? Why are the people told not to rejoice? Why are they told not to exult like the peoples?

Verse 1 answers those questions: It is because they have played the whore. It is because they have forsaken God.

And we already know whom the people embraced instead. They left God for Baal. They turned their attention and devotion to a false fertility god.

And what did that false fertility god give the people? Rain? An abundant harvest? Fertility? Prosperity? No – they received none of that, but instead they received the opposite of that.

And what we will see in chapter 9 is that much worse was coming: Famine in verse 2; Military defeat in verse 3; An inability to make suitable offerings to God in verses 4–5; Treachery and death in verse 6.

But all of that started with a failed harvest. All of that started with a failure to obtain the one thing for which they had turned to Baal – fertility. They rejected God, and then bad things happened. Many bad things happened!

And how can we describe that situation? We have already seen the answer to that question.

Hosea 8:7 – For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.

What did they sow? They turned to Baal for a good harvest.

And what did they reap? A failed harvest; famine; military defeat; an inability to make suitable offerings to God; treachery; death.

They sowed the wind, but they did not reap the wind. Instead, they reaped a whirlwind!

They sowed seed, but they did not receive the harvest they expected to receive. Instead, God gave them a harvest that they neither expected nor wanted.

Verse 1 tells us something we already knew about Israel – they wanted to be like all of the nations that surrounded them! In fact, that is why they had asked Samuel for their first king, Saul.

1 Samuel 8:5 – Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations.

Other nations looked to their fertility gods for fertility. Other nations got good harvests and then rejoiced in those fertility gods.

But not so with Israel. Israel wanted to be like the other nations, but that was not working out too well for Israel. Why? Because God had a plan for Israel. They were supposed to be the special people of God whom God could use to bless the entire world.

They wanted to be like other people, but they were not other people. They had made a covenant with God, and now they had broken that covenant. They were no longer useful to God, and so God was bringing the calamities down upon them that had been promised long ago for those who broke the covenant.

Is there a lesson there for the church? Yes, there is, and Jesus tells us what it is.

Matthew 5:13 – You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

We are not called to be like the people who surround us, and that should never be our goal. And anytime we ever say that we should do this or that just because all the other religious groups around us are doing this or that – then we need to be very careful how we proceed! Why? Because that is precisely how this people in Hosea 9 started out! **They are all doing it – why don't we do it, too?**