

# Knowing God

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[ 0 : 00 ] But we're going to turn now to our Bible reading this evening, which is in the prophecy of Hosea, near the end of the Old Testament. It's page 755, if you have one of our visitors' Bibles, after Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos.

You should be able to find it. And we're looking at chapter 8 and the first nine verses of chapter 9. Hosea 8 and verse 1.

Set the trumpet to your lips. One like a vulture is over the house of the Lord, because they have transgressed my covenant and rebelled against my law.

To me they cry, my God, we, Israel, know you. Israel has spurned the good. The enemy shall pursue him.

They made kings, but not through me. They set up princes, but I knew it not. With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction. I have spurned your calf, O Samaria.

[ 1 : 13 ] My anger burns against them. How long will they be incapable of innocence? For it's from Israel. A craftsman made it.

It is not God. The calf of Samaria shall be broken to pieces. For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind. The standing grain has no heads.

It shall yield no flour. If it were to yield, strangers would devour it. Israel is swallowed up. Already they are among the nations as a useless vessel. For they have gone up to Assyria.

A wild donkey wandering alone. Ephraim has hired lovers. Though they hire allies among the nations, I will soon gather them up. And the king and the princes will soon writhe because of the tribute.

Because Ephraim has multiplied altars for sinning, or better, for sin offerings, they have become to him altars for sinning. Were I to write for him my laws by the ten thousands, they would be regarded as a strange thing.

[ 2 : 22 ] As for my sacrificial offerings, they sacrifice me to eat it, but the Lord does not accept them. Now, he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins.

They shall return to Egypt. 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. Rejoice not, O Israel. Exalt not like the peoples.

For you have played the whore forsaking your God. You have loved a prostitute's wages on all threshing floors. Threshing floor and wine vat shall not feed them, and the new wine shall fail them. They shall not remain in the land of the Lord. But Ephraim shall return to Egypt. And they shall eat unclean food in Assyria. They shall not pour drink offerings of wine to the Lord.

[ 3 : 24 ] And their sacrifices shall not please him. It shall be like mourner's bread to them. All who eat of it shall be defiled. For their bread shall be for their hunger only.

It shall not come to the house of the Lord. What will you do on the day of the appointed festival and on the day of the feast of the Lord? For behold, they are going away from destruction.

But Egypt shall gather them. Memphis shall bury them. Nettles shall possess their precious things of silver. Thorns shall be in their tents.

The days of punishment have come. The days of recompense have come. Israel shall know it. The prophet is a fool.

The man of the spirit is mad because of your great iniquity and great hatred. The prophet is the watchman of Ephraim with my God.

[ 4 : 23 ] Yet a fowler's snare is on all his ways and hatred in the house of his God. They have deeply corrupted themselves as in the days of Gibeah.

He will remember their iniquity. He will punish their sins. Amen. May God bless us.

These solemn words of the scriptures. Well, please do turn back to that passage we read in the book of Hosea, page 755 in the Visitor's Bibles.

And as you find it again, we have a second reading this evening. Not from the Bible this time. But from the end of a story I'm sure many of you will recognize. A churchyard.

Here then, the wretched man whose name he had now to learn lay underneath the ground. It was a worthy place walled in by houses, overrun by grass and weeds.

[ 5 : 35 ] The growth of vegetation's death, not life, choked up with too much burying. Fat with repleted appetite. A worthy place.

The spirit stood among the graves and pointed down to one. He advanced towards it, trembling. The phantom was exactly as it has been, but he dreaded that he saw new meaning in its solemn shape.

Before I draw near to that stone to which you point, said Scrooge, answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that will be?

Or are they shadows of the things that may be? Still the ghost pointed downwards to the grave by which it stood. Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends to which, if persevered in, they must lead, said Scrooge.

But if the course be departed from, the end will change. Say it is thus with what you show me. The spirit was immovable as ever.

[ 6 : 43 ] Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went, and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave, his own name, Ebenezer Scrooge.

Hosea chapter 8 verse 1. Look up in the air, says the prophet. The vultures are circling. Chapter 9 verse 6.

Memphis shall bury them. Nettles shall possess their precious things. Thorns shall be their tents. Creep up to the grave, says Hosea.

Pull back the weeds, and see whose name is on the crumbling stone. Here lies Israel, the most privileged nation who ever lived.

Hosea chapters 8 and 9 are God's final warning to his ancient people. You'll notice it begins in verse 1 in exactly the same way as the last section.

[ 7 : 47 ] Blast the trumpet. Wake up. And just like Dickens goes there, Hosea gives his listeners a horrifying glimpse into their future.

Shows them where the road they're traveling down is about to lead. Now I think the key to this section is the famous proverb that comes in chapter 8 verse 7.

For they sow to wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind. We've seen quite a few of these planting and reaping metaphors in various bits of the Bible recently, haven't we?

Quite a few in Sunday morning in Corinthians. But this one works in a slightly different way. The point is that sometimes when you plant a seed in the ground, the thing which comes out later down the line is much more than you bargained for.

Israel had been sowing to the wind. And if you've been with us over the summer, you might remember that that word wind or spirit, same word, has alarmingly sinister overtones in this book.

[ 8 : 57 ] It's always negative. Israel was in bondage to a spirit of whoredom. That was chapter 4. A wind, a spirit, had wrapped her in its wings.

And that, I think, is the thing she's sowing to here. It's all the false hopes that she's cultivated because at the time, they looked so helpful.

All those adulterous lovers, she set her heart on and invested her security in. Those were the seeds that she'd sown, hoping desperately that something good would come from them.

But what's coming, says Hosea, are consequences far, far worse than you realize. So to that spirit. And you've made a terrible, terrible trade.

And so this whole passage works by teasing out the logic of verse 7. First, Hosea shows them just what it is that they've planted in the ground.

[ 10 : 02 ] Chapter 8 is all about the emptiness of their religion. Religion without any interest in God himself. And then chapter 9 shows them what they'll reap as a result.

He points to that abandoned grave. That road of religion without God leads to far more than you're bargaining for.

It leads to death, alienated from his presence and his love. Plant an empty religion, and you'll reap an alienated relationship.

That's the warning of Hosea chapters 8 and 9. So let's learn then what led Israel down that road, shall we? Because it's a road that religious people are always tempted to travel.

Chapter 8, plant an empty religion. You'd make a big mistake to think of this lot as irreligious. No, they were much more clued up to matters spiritual than the average modern atheist is.

[11:07] Every one of them believed in God, and they thought he was on their side. And so when Hosea points to that vulture, verse 1, circling above them, smelling death, they just can't believe it.

But God, they cry, we know you, we're Israel, verse 2, the chosen ones. You see, the people Hosea wrote for were very religious indeed. They talked about God.

They knew all about the sacraments. In fact, verse 11, they multiplied altars. They put them up left, right, and center, because worship meant an awful lot to them.

But what God exposes for all their formal religion is that they don't really know him at all. Don't even really want him.

You can see that right from verse 1, can't you? Notice how Hosea says the same thing in three different ways. They've transgressed my covenant, rebelled against my law, spurned the good, verse 3.

[12:14] All amounts to the same thing. If we aren't interested in God's ways, his law, then we aren't really interested in him, the covenant, the relationship.

If we spurn him, well, we're spurning goodness itself. We want religion just without him. And to show that, Hosea points right through the chapter to one particular giveaway, and it's their total dependence on human things.

You see it both in their church life and in their political life. A reliance not really on the Lord, but on the things they've made for themselves.

They made kings, verse 4, but not through me. They made idols, next line, but to their own destruction. Do you see how he links those two things together?

Both are things they've fabricated for themselves to make them feel more secure. As the nation collapsed, remember, they set up king after king after king, hoping that one of those men would deliver them.

[13:24] And at the same time, their worship got more and more desperate as they looked for something tangible they could rely on, something they could see and touch that felt solid and impressive.

Israel prayed to something a craftsman made, verse 6, but look how the chapter ends. He forgot the one who made him.

The mark of an outward, formal religion is that no matter what we say in church, we rely on the things we can do for ourselves.

She looked for a political savior, a king, or an ally. She hired herself out to Assyria, verse 9. Or she printed some money, verse 14, and got to work on a building project.

Some defenses to make her feel safe. Empty, formal religion is when God himself gets pushed out of the equation so that as a church, we start to rely more and more on ourselves.

[14:29] What will rescue the church in Britain, we'll ask. And of course, we'll talk about spiritual-sounding solutions, formally at least. But because we don't really think that God has an answer, we'll look for something else to make us relevant.

Maybe politics will do it. We can invite the Occupy movement in with their nice fancy tents. Or we could hold a rally for the living wage or the next party leader or whatever the trendy thing is this month.

Maybe some more rituals will do it. We could hold a cafe church or a messy church or a slightly more dignified church. Better music, better liturgy.

Maybe we could smarten up our buildings, verse 14. Maybe if we look more like a proper church, people will come in. Or maybe if we look less like a proper church, people will come in.

But of course, there's one thing we don't consider in all our panic, and that's the boring old prayer meeting. When we ask the Lord to help, as if we actually believe that poor old God had it in him.

[15:38] And as for listening to him, well, here's the real tragedy. Because for all her talk about the Lord, Israel had forgotten what his voice really sounded like.

Were I to write for him my laws by the 10,000, verse 12, they'd be regarded as a strange thing. Religion?

Just without God. And the tragedy, of course, is that without him, none of those rituals could do her any good at all. She could multiply the services and the sacraments, verse 11.

But God didn't want her offerings. He wanted love, not sacrifice. And without that, what we saw last week, didn't we?

It counted for nothing. So all those human fixes Israel chose just set herself on the path to her own destruction.

[16:38] The politics would blow up in her face, verse 8. Already she was swallowed up. What a cruel savior Assyria would turn out to be. And all the security she tried to find in church, well, it only made things worse.

Far from accepting her sacrifices, verse 13, God would remember her sins. Well, we're not Israel. And on the whole, by his grace, we belong to a church that knows God and loves him and tries to worship him as he really is, not as we'd like him to be.

But we'd be very foolish, wouldn't we, to miss the danger that Israel fell into. So before we pass over Hosea's warning, let's each one of us ask ourselves the obvious question.

What brought me along to church this evening? It is possible, isn't it, to be up to the eyeballs in the life of God's church without really having much taste for him, to look to ourselves and to all the world like we're about God and his work, when really what keeps us here are much more human things.

We bought an old house a few years ago and eventually the time came to deal with the bright peach textured ceiling running down the hallway. The problem was that below this ceiling was a drop onto a very tall, very hard and decidedly marble staircase.

[18:17] So one evening my pregnant wife watched rather anxiously as I unfolded a long ladder and balanced it on top of a more or less stable pile of bricks on the stairs and began to climb across the gap, scraper in hand.

And as the ladder began to bend and buckle a little bit, I reassured Jen in a very confident-sounding voice that it must be stress-tested on people far heavier than me.

Well, she went to make a cup of tea and then I looked down. And a few minutes later, I asked in a rather casual voice whether we'd got round to buying life insurance yet.

Back from the kitchen came the sound of my wife frantically typing comparethemarket.com into her laptop. When would you like your coverage to begin, madam?

About half an hour ago, please. Now, how truthfully was I depending on that ladder? All appearances said very confidently indeed.

[19:27] But we both knew the truth, didn't we? What we say formally and what we look like outwardly and what we tell ourselves confidently don't necessarily match up to what we depend on inwardly.

Did I come along to church tonight because I love the Lord and want to know Him more? Or was it because something about His church reassures me?

The company? Getting noticed? Being given a job? Being thanked for a decent sermon? What am I really depending on?

I remember once hearing a minister in Cambridge talking about how he could tell when their church was strong enough to plant a new one. He pastored a very large, successful-looking church full of students.

But he'd learnt over the years that the numbers on a Sunday could be a very dangerous thing to judge. Just because people liked coming along to church didn't mean that everything was healthy.

[20:38] But whenever about 50 people or so could be bothered to turn up to their little prayer meeting, well then he started to feel like they might be ready. Not because the prayer meeting itself was magic, but because he knew then that whatever else, there were at least 50 people who depended on the Lord's help enough to ask for it.

50 people who didn't put all their confidence in the buzz and the programs and the staff team and the numbers of new members because for them, religion was about a God they knew and a God they could depend on.

Well, what a terrible shock it can be when God exposes what really matters to us. Israel loved their religion, just not their Lord. And so in the end, he gave them what they wanted.

They lost him altogether. And that's chapter 9, verses 1 to 9. Sow an empty religion. And secondly, chapter 9, you'll reap an alienated relationship.

What they got was the fruit of all their empty self-reliance. God simply turned his back on them in the end. Now you get the first sense of what that means in verse 3 because God talks about his judgment there as a kind of national unbirth.

[ 22 : 05 ] Notice how he draws a parallel between the exile he's sending them into in Assyria and the past he rescued them from, slavery in Egypt.

Hosea likes to use Egypt as a metaphor for the exile in Assyria that's about to come. It's a picture we haven't picked up on much yet, but it's one of his favorites.

God's judgment, the exile, is a return to life without him. It's as if God is wishing them away, casting them back into that lonely abyss.

So what happens when God takes away his presence from his people? Well, Hosea shows us that alienation by highlighting three things in particular that Israel are going to lose in exile.

God takes away his wealth, his worship, and lastly, even his word itself. God's wealth is something he's warned them about before, but Hosea repeats the point in verses 1 to 3.

[ 23 : 12 ] There are certain things we have not because we deserve them, but because God is kind and generous, and the promised land flowed with that generosity.

Of course, Israel took the gifts, but didn't care all that much for the giver. Every harvest time, verse 1, on every threshing floor, they got down in the dirt and gave the thanks for his gifts to these things of their own invention, just as we might give the thanks to our employer or our stockbroker.

But if they didn't want God, verse 3, then they couldn't have his blessings either. Estranged from God, they would lose his wealth, and secondly, verses 4 to 6, they'd lose his worship.

Never again, once they're sent into exile, could they come into his presence and sing his praise. It's as if God says in verse 4, you'll be dead to me there.

A defiled people living amongst the dead, eating the food of the dead. By all means, he says, eat the things the pagans eat, live the way the pagans live, but I'm a holy God.

[ 24 : 30 ] So don't you dare come into my presence like that. Of course, God had given them away to him, hadn't he? He'd given them a temple to meet him in, and sacrifices to cover their sin.

Those were ways to share in Jesus himself. But they didn't want Christ, really. Just the rituals, and the festivals, and the feast days.

So now they'd lose it all. But I think it's the third one which is the most haunting, because it takes us back to that theme of blindness and enslavement that we've met so often already.

When God's presence is removed from a people, when they're alienated from a relationship with him, then sometimes he takes away his words.

And I think that's what we see in verses 7 to 9. You see, we don't have a right to hear from God, do we? He doesn't have to stoop down so graciously and keep on speaking to our turned backs.

[ 25 : 34 ] And so there comes a time when he lets us go our own way. Now if you're reading in a different translation, you'll see that some people take these verses to be Israel's words. This is them rejecting God's messengers as nothing but lunatics.

So the NIV, for example, smooths it out a little by adding the word considered in verse 7. The prophet is considered a fool. And that is possible, but I suspect what Hosea is getting at here is a little more chilling than that.

Notice that these three verses begin and end with the word punishment. This is what alienation from God looks like. There comes a time when he simply stops talking, takes away his loving pleas and his gracious warnings like this one, and gives us the past as we deserve.

One's foolish enough to tell us the things we want to hear. So instead of being a watchman keeping Israel from disaster, verse 8, Israel's prophets would stumble right into the trap.

Now friends, we live in a world that ridicules the thought of a God with anything worth saying. But what does that say about us, do you think?

[ 26 : 57 ] Does it say that we, in all our modern sophistication, have examined God's words and rejected them? Or might it actually mean that God has taken a long and patient look at us, and in his infinite wisdom, decided that the church in Britain is no longer worth speaking to?

It's a worrying thought, isn't it? Could it be that after years of formal religion, obsessed with buildings, obsessed with politics, uninterested in a living love for the Lord, that he's simply given us the thing we wanted?

No wealth, no worship, no word, no relationship. And so Hosea points down that road that Israel are traveling.

You think you're heading to freedom, he tells them. You think, verse six, that by turning to Assyria, you're running away from destruction. But that road ends at a graveyard in Egypt, buried in the sands, overrun, forgotten.

Here lie the remains of my people Israel, the most privileged nation who ever lived. There's the fruit, says Hosea, of religion without God.

[ 28 : 26 ] Well, there's one natural question to ask, isn't there, when we're shown that grave. before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point, said Scrooge, answer me one question.

Are these the shadows of the things that will be? Or are they shadows of the things that may be only? Did this have to be Israel's future?

Does it have to be our future? Well, the very fact that God cares enough to warn us shows that in his mercy, these things are a maybe.

There is a way back to a real and living faith, even from dead religion. The problem is, it is ever so easy to sit in church and never believe those vultures are circling for you.

Jesus spoke to a big religious crowd, not unlike us, gathered here, and gave them exactly that warning. Many will say to me, Lord, Lord, it's the cry of us too, isn't it?

[ 29 : 41 ] Where, Israel? Where, the Tron? We know you, Lord. But even to some of them, Jesus' answer was very honest.

I never knew you. Get away from me. So what does it look like to really know and love him?

Well, a relationship values precisely those things that God took away from Israel. If we know Jesus, then we'll value his gifts, verses 1 to 3.

We'll thank him for every blessing we have because we know that we don't deserve them. If we know Jesus, then we'll value his presence here with us, verses 4 to 6.

We'll worship his way with love and mercy, not just ritual. We'll talk to him sincerely with real prayer, the way you might talk to a real person.

[ 30 : 44 ] And we'll live as though we actually believed he was here among us. And if we know Jesus, then above all, we'll value his word, verses 7 to 9.

If you care about someone, you listen to them, don't you? And ultimately, listening to Christ is the only way to really know God.

For some reason or other, we will always be tempted into that trap of formal, self-reliant pretending. So God's answer to that problem was to reveal himself not through religion, but through a person. God isn't a force or a thing, but a character with real loves and real hates. And so the way out of empty, dead religion is coming to terms with the person of Jesus Christ.

God's love and God's love. God's love and God's love. God's love and God's love. We get to know God's love and God's cares by seeing the things his son loved and cared for.

[ 32 : 02 ] We get to know what it means for God to desire mercy and not sacrifice by seeing the way that Jesus faithfully loved and obeyed his father for our sake.

we get to know God as one we can trust and depend on by seeing the trustworthiness of his son.

Real religion begins and ends with knowing God in his son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Not knowing about him or knowing what he's supposed to be like, but actually getting to know him.

So Hosea asks you and I the same question, whether we've been here the last 50 years or the last 50 minutes, how well do you know him?

Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that in your son and by your spirit we can know you as our father and lord.

[ 33 : 20 ] And so we pray that in your grace you would spare us that trap of knowing all about you, but never coming to know you. We pray, Lord, that as your children in Christ, your loves would become our loves more and more, so that our greatest joy would be to belong to you and follow after him.

In Jesus' name, amen.