

The Terrible Trade

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to read God's Word together in a moment, and we're coming back, as Willie said, to the prophet Hosea, reaching the home straights now. So brace yourselves for chapters 9 and 10 on page 756 in the Church Bibles.

But for those of you who haven't been with us over the summer, it might just be worth a little reminder of where we are and what we've seen so far in this prophet. It's Hosea, you'll remember, is a prophet writing in the 8th century BC in the northern kingdom of Israel, or Ephraim as he tends to call it.

Many years before, the nation had split into two. There's Judah in the south and Israel, or Ephraim, where Hosea was based and ministered. And although Judah still has a son of David on the throne, Israel has been ruled by a long succession of rival kings.

Notionally, they still worship the Lord. But what Hosea has been exposing so far is that by now, they don't really know him at all.

Instead, they've put their hopes in a whole host of adulterous lovers. And almost all of those lovers will surface in tonight's passage.

[1 : 21] I think there are basically four affairs, and Israel has them all on the go at once. There's her kings, her calves, the Canaanites, and foreign cavalry.

Four affairs. The kings are all those northern rulers she's got into bed with, hoping for a political rescue. The golden calves are the national institutionalized religion set up by her kings to mimic true worship.

And the main center for those calves is a place called Bethel. Although Hosea prefers to use a nickname for it. Beth-Avon, you'll see tonight. House of evil, it means.

Kings, kings, calves. The Canaanites are the neighbors whose customs and superstition Israel has borrowed. Especially their fertility rituals.

And Baal, their fertility god. We'll meet him tonight. And finally, the cavalry. The cavalry are the foreign armies that Israel desperately hopes will come to help every time war threatens.

[2 : 31] But what Hosea knows is that none of those alliances will do her any good. Because just around the corner, in fact, just a few years from where we are tonight, God's judgment is coming.

And for Israel, that judgment meant invasion by Assyria. And in the end, the loss of her king and everyone else into slavery and exile.

So then, four adulterous lovers. Her kings, calves, Canaanites, and cavalry. But judgment is around the corner. And with that whistle stop tour, let's read from Hosea chapter 9 verse 10 through to chapter 10.

God's word to Israel and his loving warning to each of us. Isaiah chapter 9 verse 10. Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel.

Like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season, I saw your fathers. But they came to Baal Peor and consecrated themselves to the thing of shame and became detestable.

[3 : 46] Like the thing they loved. Ephraim's glory shall fly away like a bird. No birth, no pregnancy, no conception. Even if they bring up children, I will bereave them till none is left.

Woe to them when I depart from them. Ephraim, as I have seen, was like a young palm planted in a meadow. But Ephraim must lead his children out to slaughter.

Give them. Oh Lord, what will you give? Give them a miscarrying womb and dry breasts. Every evil is theirs in Gilgal.

There I began to hate them because of the wickedness of their deeds. I will drive them out of my house. I will love them no more. All their princes are rebels.

Ephraim is stricken. Their root is dried up. They shall bear no fruit. Even though they give birth, I will put their beloved children to death. My God will reject them because they have not listened to him.
[4 : 54] Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. But the more its fruit increased, the more altars he built.

As his country improved, he improved his pillars. Their heart is false, slippery. Now they must bear their guilt. The Lord will break down their pillars and destroy their altars.

For now they will say, we have no king. For we do not fear the Lord. And the king? What could he do for us?

They utter mere words. With empty oaths, they make covenants. So judgments spring up like poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field. The inhabitants of Samaria tremble for the calf of Beth Arvin.

Its people mourn for it. And so do its idolatrous priests, those who rejoiced over it and over its glory. For it has departed from them, literally gone into exile.

[6 : 01] The thing itself shall be carried to Assyria as tribute for the great king. Ephraim shall be put to shame. And Israel shall be ashamed of his idol.

Samaria's king shall perish like a twig on the face of the waters. The high places of Arvin, the sin of Israel shall be destroyed.

Thorn and thistle shall grow up on their altars. And they shall say to the mountains, cover us. And to the hills, fall on us. From the days of Gibeah, you have sinned, O Israel.

There you have continued. Shall not the war against the unjust overtake them in Gibeah? When I please, I will discipline them.

And the nations shall be gathered against them when they're bound up for their double iniquity.

Ephraim with a trained calf that loved to thresh.

[7 : 00] And I spared her fair neck. But I will put Ephraim to the yoke. Judah must plow. Jacob must harrow for himself.

Sow for yourself righteousness. Reap steadfast love. Break up your fallow ground. For it is time to seek the Lord. That he may come and rain righteousness upon you.

You have plowed iniquity. You have reaped injustice. You've eaten the fruit of lies. Because you have trusted in your own way.

And in the multitude of your warriors. Therefore, the tumult of war shall arise amongst your people. And all your fortresses shall be destroyed. As Shalman.

That's Shalman Asa. The king of Assyria. As Shalman destroyed Beth Arbol on the day of battle.

Mothers were dashed in pieces with their children. Thus, it shall be done to you, O Bethel.

[8 : 01] Because of your great evil. At dawn, the king of Israel shall be utterly cut off. Amen.

And this is God's word to us. Well, do have a seat. And turn back to Hosea, if you would. Page 756 in the Blue Church Bibles.

Sometimes the Bible says things that it's just not meant to say. We all know what the Bible is supposed to say about God's grace, don't we?

Because it says it so clearly and constantly from cover to cover. God chooses human beings not because there's any good in us. But because he is undeservedly kind.

He doesn't need us. He wasn't won over by us. And there's nothing beautiful that he saw within us. That was true for Israel. And it's true for you and me.

[9 : 04] But sometimes the Bible refuses to stick to the script. And for all Hosea has had to say about God's love for the ugly and the cold-hearted, it seems that as we come back to the prophet tonight, things begin a little bit off message.

You're not supposed to say nice things about people when you talk about God's election. But three times tonight, amid all the gloom, we have little pictures of God just delighting in Israel on the day he rescued them.

I'm one of those odd people who loves taking something out of its box for the first time. I guess because that's the only time I'll ever hold it before it's dropped or scratched or lost.

Believe it or not, there are thousands of YouTube anoraks just posting videos of that, breaking the cellophane on some expensive purchase, and opening up the packaging, and gently prizing out what lies inside, turning it over in their hands, so pristine and unspoiled and full of promise.

And as Hosea begins this section, it's God doing the unboxing. Except that God doesn't get excited by things. He gets excited by people.

[10:32] Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. I took such delight in them. They were so refreshing, so beautiful, so unspoilt.

Of course, we know that Israel was anything but pretty, but that's not how God talks about her here. I took such joy in them belonging to me.

Down in chapter 10, verse 1, we get a similar picture. Israel is a luxuriant vine. She's dripping in beautiful fruit, full of potential for my kingdom.

And then it comes again a third time in verse 11. Israel was a trained calf, a beautiful young heifer, so fair that I could hardly bear to put a yoke around her neck.

So instead of putting her to the plow, she spent her youth just threshing the grain. Now, if farming's not your thing, let me explain this one. If you're a cow, then landing a job threshing grain is like being appointed as head taster in the chocolate bar factory.

[11:49] All you have to do is wander around the barn, crushing whatever lies under your hooves. And in exchange, the farmer lets you eat as much as you want.

The law used it to show how generously people ought to treat their workers. You don't muzzle the ox while it's threshing the grain. It's a wonderful job. And on the day God took Israel out of the box, that was what he had planned for her.

She was such a precious thing in his eyes that all he wanted, verse 11, was to see her serving happily.

Isn't that such an unexpected way for Hosea to begin? Three different pictures he gives us of the sheer joy God took in a people belonging to him.

And then Hosea sticks in the knife. He was so thrilled to call you his, so delighted to unwrap you and cherish you and put you to work in his world.

[12:57] And look how quickly you spoiled it for him. What a bitter disappointment you turned out to be. Chapter 9, verse 10.

Like those first delicious fruits on the fig tree are still your fathers. But they came to Baal Peor and consecrated themselves to a thing of shame and became vile, detestable, like the thing they loved. That was Israel's first real love affair. The first time she got into bed with Baal. And that first fling changed everything.

He's talking about a moment you can read about in Numbers chapter 25. Israel were just on the brink of the promised land. And that was when she began something that would dog her for the rest of history.

The men started to sleep around with the Canaanite women. And as soon as they got into bed with pagan women, they got into bed with a pagan god.

[14:02] And the more they became tangled up with Baal, the more detestable they became in the Lord's eyes. They started to look more and more like that repulsive thing they served.

One thing I always used to enjoy working as a vet was seeing how closely so many people seemed to resemble their dogs. You get the posh poncy dogs and the tough mean dogs and the tall spindly dogs and the short dumpy dogs.

And nine times out of ten, you get an owner to match. But this is saying something more than that, isn't it? It's not just that they came to look like Baal.

It's that they came to be like him. They joined his camp. Those people God took such delight in became co-conspirators with the one trying to steal the Lord's throne.

It wasn't just a fling. It wasn't just sex. Look how Hosea describes it, verse 10. They consecrated themselves to him. They belonged to him now.

[15:15] This was cosmic treason. Moses uses another word in Numbers. It's one that's worth remembering because it's going to become very important later on.

they yoked themselves, says Moses, yoked themselves to Baal. These three pictures tonight are all about a people called into the joyful service of God only to refuse it.

They're not just stories about worship. These are stories about rule, about how quickly we can start to resent joyfully serving our king in heaven.

Now, we're not going to walk through this passage tonight section by section because as you've probably noticed by now, we've got three cycles with a very similar pattern. Each time we get a beautiful picture of God's joy as he delights in his people and then his grief as Israel disappoints.

And alongside those pictures, each time round, we get an example from Israel's history to show what they've been like all along. A time when Israel betrayed God's loving rule in a grotesque way.

[16 : 33] And then each time round, the cycle ends with God's judgment. And that judgment is haunting tonight. There's no denying it, is there? The infertility, for example, in that first cycle.

Now, that isn't just some cruel, arbitrary punishment. punishment, it was a consequence of what they'd rejected. They thought of Baal as the one who gave those blessings, the fertility God.

And so they'd lose the very thing they trusted him for. But the big thing they lose tonight is their king, the one whose rule and protection they looked to instead of God.

and that turns out to be a far greater disaster. Three cycles then with a very similar pattern. So what's the message of this passage as a whole?

How is it that all that promise of God's people could turn so fast into such terrible disappointment?

Well, I think the clues to tonight's passage lie in those examples Hosea picks from Israel's history.

[17 : 49] We've looked at the introduction already, that first affair at Baal Peor, but then Hosea picks two other places to illustrate Israel's addiction to the same sort of behavior.

First, Gilgal in verse 15, and then in chapter 10 verse 9 at Gibeah. So the question we have to ask tonight is this, what is so significant about those two places things that Hosea chooses them as his examples?

If you just want a random example of somewhere that Israel has a pagan shrine or a time when Israel messed it up, well, then you're not exactly spoiled for choice, are you?

so why Gilgal and why Gibeah? That means we've got to begin tonight by digging a little bit into Israel's history, and I think that will help us learn two very simple truths about human nature, and once we've seen those, then we should be ready for two very straightforward lessons for us from Hosea's message.

Now I think the best place to begin our rummaging through the Bible is in the place that seems particularly significant in Hosea's mind, because chapter 10 verse 9 is not the first time Hosea has compared his generation to the people of Gibeah.

[19 : 17] Whatever happened there seems very important to him, and what it teaches us is our first simple truth for tonight. Mankind desperately needs a king.

If you were here when Edward preached through Judges earlier this year, then my guess is that you won't have forgotten completely what happened at Gibeah. The thing I remember was Edward choking back the emotion as he read out the passage, because Judges chapters 19 to 21 must be one of the most awful stories in the Bible.

A Levite and his concubine who was abused so horribly one night as they traveled through Gibeah that she never recovered.

And the shock of that crime led to a war so damaging that it nearly wiped out the whole tribe of Benjamin. But the key thing for our purposes was the point of that story.

The point was that without a king, Israel was slipping into disaster. Not only horrific moral chaos, but all the consequences that came with it.

[20 : 37] That was how the story began and ended, remember? In those days, Israel had no king. So what is Hosea doing by comparing his generation to the people of Gibeah?

Well, look closely at Hosea chapter 10 verse 9. His point is that all these years later, Israel are no better. There they have continued.

As far as their moral chaos goes, Israel was still that nation without a king. And you don't have to read Hosea chapter 10 very carefully to notice that kingship is a big issue in this chapter.

That word gets a lot of repetition. Now, I think that at first glance, that's a slightly odd comparison for Hosea to make.

If there was anything that Israel wasn't short of in Hosea's day, it was people trying to grab hold of the throne. Right now, they're living through the last of six kings.

[21 : 43] In the few short years that Hosea was writing, they had kings coming out their ears. And surely, Gibeah teaches us that that instinct of Israel's to look desperately for a champion, to look for a king, that was a right instinct.

They crowned king after king after king because they knew that human beings need someone to lead them and defend them. We need a king.

But just remember God's great hope for Israel. Right back at the start of this book, chapter 3, verse 5, God's hope was that Israel return and seek the Lord their God and David their king.

Israel's problem wasn't really a lack of kings. it's that they were looking for those kings in the wrong place. And that brings us to the second simple truth we're going to learn from Israel's history

tonight.

Mankind habitually seeks out the wrong sort of king. We desperately need a king, but we look for that king in the wrong place.

[23 : 02] And I suspect that's what Hosea's other example in, chapter 9, verse 15, is there to teach us. Every evil is theirs in Gilgal. There I began to hate them because of the wickedness of their deeds.

I will drive them from my house. I will love them no more. All of their princes are rebels. Now again, it could perhaps be that Hosea just picks Gilgal at random.

Certainly it had its share of altars and shrines. But a look back through Israel's history shows you pretty fast that Gilgal also had plenty to do with the sort of people Israel put on their throne.

In fact, Gilgal is where Israel's first ever human king was crowned. King Saul was the king Israel got because they wanted a man to rule them and lead them into battle like every other nation.

And God tells us in 1 Samuel that they cried out for a king, a man, because they were rejecting him. They didn't want his rule, his protection.

[24 : 18] They wanted a human being to fight their battles. And so the Lord gave them Saul. They crowned him in Gilgal, and he let them down there in Gilgal.

he tried to beat their enemies in a very human way by turning to superstition and religion. And so there in Gilgal, 1 Samuel tells us that God rejected him as king.

What Israel learnt in Gilgal was that choosing a human king who wouldn't listen to the Lord led to disaster for God's people.

Saul. So I think Saul lurks in the background right through this passage. Gilgal was where he was crowned, and guess what? Gibeah was where he was born.

In fact, Gibeah was where Saul ruled from. It was his headquarters. So both of these places have strong links to the person who represented mankind's attempt to choose a king for themselves.

[25 : 26] Saul stands for every human being, every human king Israel would turn to in place of the king of heaven.

Just flick back to chapter 8 verse 4 of Hosea. Chapter 8 verse 4. And notice how that's been a problem in Israel. They made kings, said Hosea, but not through me.

princes. But I knew it not. Ever since Gilgal, Israel was prone to making that same terrible trade, choosing their sort of king instead of God's.

They wanted a Saul and not a David, a human king and not the king of heaven. And with human kings came human religion and human solutions.

those nice institutional golden calves and hopeless battles and worthless allies. So how did all of Israel's promise and joy come to such a bitter end?

[26 : 41] Well, because she was habitually drawn to choosing the wrong kind of king, throwing off God's rule and protection for a man she thought could do a better job.

Israel knew they needed a king, but right through their history, they resisted the king of heaven. Like that luxuriant vine in verse 1, they refused to bring him their fruit.

The more he showered goodness on them, the more they built up their altars. Like that calf in verse 11, they refused to serve joyfully.

under God's loving rule. Why do we look for human kings? Because we are so quick to resent the king that loves us.

We persuade ourselves that somehow he isn't generous enough or that he asks too much of us. I can't tell you how easily I start to resent the king who gave me everything.

[27 : 48] even those few chances we get to serve become a burden to us. What a privilege it is to do this, to feed God's people with the gospel.

I must have the best job in the world. And yet, I've got to be honest, even this sermon was something that I just dreaded sitting down to write. How quick we are to begrudge our king of a few evenings.

A few pounds. And that was how it started. Israel looked for a Saul instead of a David because like all human beings everywhere, they were drawn to human fixes for their problems.

They trusted in their own way, verse 13, their warriors, their politicians. Maybe if we serve our boss, spend more time at work and less time with church, life will be better.

If we could just get the right leader, maybe everyone would prosper. Maybe it's Donald Trump, maybe it's Jeremy Corbyn. We just need to find the right man. Well, we do desperately need

someone to rule us and protect us, but we habitually look for that king in the wrong place.
[29 : 13] well, you've concentrated valiantly. Well done through the history lectures. They're over now. But hopefully the little pieces of this passage are starting to fall into place.

So in the time we've got left, what are the lessons Hosea is wanting us to learn from all of this? I think there are two big things, and they're both very straightforward.

Number one, life under a human king will always end in disaster. It's very hard, isn't it, to admit that something you've always depended on is a lost hope.

Why is it, for example, that every time a bush fire rages in Australia, you hear of people refusing to leave their homes? Everybody can see that it's madness to stay put.

Nobody's little house can survive those flames. But time after time, some poor old man loses his life because that house means so much to him, and he just can't bring himself to admit that it won't keep out the heat.

[30 : 31] Well, friends, don't be like that man who clings on and clings on to a weak human hope until it's far too late. Chapter 10 is in our Bibles because Israel clung on and clung on to an impotent little human king.

And it was only when the trouble came that they saw just how powerless he was. Look at verse 7. There goes the last great king of Israel.

Verse 7 shows their great king, their great hope, floating away like a little twig on the face of the water. Never heard from again. That was King Hoshea, sixth of Israel's kings, swept away into exile in Assyria, never seen from again.

And so at long last, verse 3, Israel would grasp what God had said right back at the beginning when they chose Saul, that it's not a man they need to fight their fights because a human being can't do it. For now, when that disaster comes, verse 3, then they will say, we have no king because we did not fear the Lord. And anyway, what could the king do for us now?

[31 : 53] Human words, verse 4, they're just empty words, aren't they? Human promises come to nothing. And when those human hopes are swept away like their great king, verse 8, it'll be far too late to cry for help.

So, friends, please hear this one thing, even if it's the only thing we learn tonight. It would be a terrible mistake to think that this passage was simply a warning for people back in the 8th century. Because as long as we're able to make the same terrible trade, then you and I are in danger of ruining our souls, just like Israel. And the Bible could not do more to make that clear for us. Right at the very moment when heaven's true king was rejected once and for all, he repeated Hosea's words all over again. Jesus, God's king, was on his way to the cross, the place of rejection. And he turned to the women lining his way, and Luke tells us exactly what he said. Don't weep for me, daughters of Jerusalem, weep for yourselves.

[33 : 11] That disaster that Hosea was talking about, that disaster is still to come for you. What happened back then was just a shadow of what lies ahead for every human being who turns their back on me.

And then he quoted from Hosea chapter 10 verse 8. When that disaster comes, they'll say to the mountains, fall on us, and to the hills, cover us.

God could not do more to warn us, could he? Life under a human king, a life lived in rebellion to Jesus Christ, will always end in disaster.

But of course, none of that is what God wanted for his people, was it? Remember that sheer joy he took in them back in the beginning, the joy that he longed to take in them again, longs to take in every one of us here.

So finally, what we mustn't miss is the beautiful invitation that all these loving warnings imply. And that's our second lesson from Hosea.

[34 : 22] life under heaven's king will always be worth the pain. What does it mean to live under Christ's rule?

Well, there's no denying that it means a certain amount of pain. You see that in verses 11 and 12, don't you? It was time for that carefree young calf to put on the yoke.

repentance was going to be costly for Israel. There were cherished things that she had to give up. Break up your fallow ground, verse 12, that hurts.

But it's time to seek the Lord, to recognize that Jesus is Lord, to make him king, does mean taking up his yoke, putting on a harness, surrendering control.

And yes, his yoke is easy, and yes, his burden is light. It's a joy to serve under God's king, but there is still a yoke.

[35 : 30] For Jesus to be our king, it means Jesus has to rule, and that will show itself in ways that cost us. The signs that Israel served a human king, they were moral signs, weren't they?

They didn't listen to God, chapter 10, 17. Their hearts were false, verse 2. They didn't live as though he ruled, verse 9. They plowed iniquity, reaped injustice, verse 13.

But if Jesus is king, it has to mean more than simply trusting him to rescue us. It means trusting him to rule.

it means that he's lord. Now, if the cost of that is something that we resent, well, we have to remember what kind of king he is.

Look at what he longs to do for them, verse 12. It's time to seek the lord that he might come and rain righteousness upon you. Isn't that the kindest sort of king there is?

[36 : 39] friends, repentance does hurt. It hurts to say I'm wrong. It hurts to say that for all my words and all my religion, it isn't really Jesus' rule I've been living under.

But life under God's king will always be worth that pain. He rules with such joy and love in his people. Like grapes in the wilderness I found you.

like a calf that loved to thresh under my smile, under my care. I took such delight in you belonging to me.

Why couldn't you delight in serving under my care? Where's your joy in serving under my grace? Wouldn't it be wonderful for Christ to say those words of us without the but?

love. So take my yoke upon you says the king and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls.

[37 : 56] Let's pray. love. Loving heavenly father we confess that we've long resisted your grace and often resented your rule.

Make us glad lord to serve Christ our king with joy and real love. Free our hearts from the grumbling and self-pity that would let us serve any king but Christ.

We ask, Lord, that in him and by your Spirit's work in us, you would delight to be our God and that we would delight to serve you.

In Jesus' name, amen.