

Words to Come Home With

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Preacher: Rupert Hunt-Taylor

[0 : 00] Well, do please open your Bibles and turn back to Hosea chapter 14, page 759 in the Blue Church Bibles.

And we'll read tonight all of this last chapter of Hosea. Turn, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.

Take with you words and return to the Lord. Say to him, take away all iniquity, accept what is good, and we will pay as bulls our lips.

Assyria shall not save us, we will not ride on horses, and we will say no more, our God, to the works of our hands.

For in you, the fatherless finds mercy. I will heal their turning away. I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them.

[1 : 16] I will be like the dew to Israel. He shall blossom like the lily. He shall take roots like the trees of Lebanon. His shoots shall spread out.

His beauty shall be like the olive and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow. They shall flourish like the grain.

They shall blossom like the vine. Their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon. O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols?

It is I who answer and look after you. I am like an evergreen cypress. From me comes your fruit. Whoever is wise, let him understand these things. Whoever is discerning, let him know them. For the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them.

[2 : 21] But transgressors stumble in them. Amen. And may God bless to us this, his word. Well, do please turn back to Hosea chapter 14, page 759 in the Blue Bibles.

And as we look at this last chapter together, I wonder if you would just take a moment for me to remember feeling something I think everyone in this room would have felt before.

Perhaps you can think of a time something went badly wrong in a friendship. So wrong that suddenly a person who once cared for you doesn't even want to see your face.

Perhaps you dread going anywhere that you might bump into her, church or school or a family gathering. Any mention of her name and a slightly sickening guilty ache floods into your stomach.

Perhaps you're married and you remember a day you walked out the door with harsh words still ringing in the air. And for hours you wandered around the block or sat in the office, totally unable to concentrate, almost sick with worry.

[3 : 46] And all you can think of is how you're ever going to put things right when you have to go home. What will you say? What will she say?

Perhaps you remember the day you ran away as a little child. And of course when you ran you were full of anger and righteous indignation. But just a few minutes later that was all gone and instead there were hot tears flowing down your cheeks.

How will I go back? Can I swallow my pride? What will happen if I walk through the door? I think the word for that feeling is probably estrangement.

And real estrangement must be one of the most horrible things a human being can feel in this world. It's not quite bereavement.

But it's still a feeling that we were obviously never meant to know. Well, if you can remember what that feels like, then try to hold on to it for a moment because I think we'll need it for Hosea chapter 14.

[4 : 58] You see, the Bible is full of stories about estrangement, stories of prodigals. There was Adam, of course. Dreading the moment God would come walking in the garden.

Learning for the first time what sin does to a relationship. The first time a human being ever had to hide from someone else.

Then, of course, there's the story of the lost son. The boy who ran away from home, squandering his father's love. But there's another story which gets a lot more space in the Bible.

And that's the story Hosea has been telling. Not of one prodigal son. But of a prodigal nation. A whole people who God loved and cared for as his own.

But who turned away from him. Well, listening to Hosea telling that story has not been easy, has it? And perhaps last week, chapter 13, was the darkest moment of all.

[6 : 09] That's when we saw the true horror of what would happen to Israel once her relationship with the Lord was through. And that's where chapter 14 picks up the story.

You've stumbled because of your iniquity. That's not someone who's tripped up over their shoelaces. That's the drunk who's fallen flat on his face.

Never to stand again on his own feet. Someone written off as dead. But scattered through this little book, there have been shafts of light.

Little moments of hope. Hosea looked forward to a day when God's estranged people would return. When they'd come home to him in repentance.

But what we've seen is that it wouldn't be Hosea's readers who made that journey. No. The way back home would not open up until long into their exile.

[7 : 09] In fact, it wouldn't open up until the day God's own king stepped into the story to make right her sin and lead her home out of slavery.

Just look back, would you, at chapter 2. Chapter 2, verse 14. God's talking about what will happen beyond the wilderness and the estrangement and the terrible judgment he's about to send.

Hosea chapter 2, verses 14 and 15. Behold, says God, I will allure her and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her.

And there, in the wilderness, in exile, I'll give back her vineyards. And I'll make the valley of Achor, that's the place of judgment and despair.

I'll make it a door of hope. You see, Israel's judgment would be the way that one day the Lord would bring her back to himself.

[8 : 17] The place of judgment, Assyria, and ultimately, of course, the cross itself, would be the way her sin would be put right. And so as Hosea closes now, he looks forward to that day when true Israelites say, I know I've done a terrible thing, but now I desperately want to come home to my father.

That's what this chapter's about. There's one question, though, which until now, Hosea's left unresolved. Now's the moment you need that dreadful pit of your stomach feeling, that horrible guilt. Because that's where God's people are now, isn't it? They're cut off from him and sick at the thought of what they've done to the relationship. They're wondering how on earth they could ever make it right.

And not just the Israelites, of course, but every human being who truly knows themselves and knows the distance between them and God. How could we ever come home?

Yes, Hosea has hinted that one day it's God who would absorb the pain and open a door. But walking back through that door is not an easy thing to do.

[9 : 40] Just notice the words he's used again and again and again in this book. It comes five more times tonight, just in these nine verses. Return.

Turn around. Repent. Why does he have to say it so many times? Well, because repentance is not an easy thing to do.

What will you say? When you see the one you've wronged so badly. And more importantly, what will he say? Could he ever have you back?

Our words matter, don't they, at a time like that? We worry so much about getting our words right. Because we know that what we say gives away what we think.

And God's words matter too, don't they? So we put off that prayer again and again because we worry about whether he's ready to hear it. How will he answer?

[10 : 40] How will he answer? Well, that's where chapter 14 helps us enormously because Hosea knows just how hard it is for that worried son to turn around.

And as he closes, he gives us words to come home with. And not just that, but he tells us what to expect when we come face to face with our father again.

First, from verse 2, we get words for a prodigal son. Take these words with you, he says, and go home to your Lord. And then in case we're dreading his response, from verse 4 onwards, we get to hear in advance what the words of our pacified father will be.

So if you've ever struggled with how to go back to the Lord when you're feeling a long way away, well, Hosea gave the last drops of his ministry to help us find the right words.

So let's begin with our words, shall we? In verses 2 and 3, words for a prodigal son. And this must be one of the clearest pictures of repentance anywhere in the Bible.

[11 : 58] It's such a beautifully simple prayer, isn't it? Notice two things before we look at it carefully. Real repentance means both turning towards the Lord in his mercy, return to him, verse 2, and it means turning away from everything else, the iniquity and pretense and falsehood.

So repentance is much more than saying sorry and feeling convicted of sin. Repentance means a fundamental turn in the direction your life is set on, away from your way of doing things and towards God's rule.

But there's a problem with our repentance, isn't there? At least I seem to have a problem with mine. Often we go to bed feeling full of remorse for the things we've done.

But by the time we get up in the morning, it's as if we'd never prayed this prayer at all. And that was Israel's problem, remember? Your love is like a morning cloud.

Here today, gone tomorrow, that's what God told them. That just seems to be a problem with human nature. So real repentance has to reckon with that fact.

[13 : 17] Real repentance means both a decisive once for all surrender to the Lord Jesus, but also a daily commitment to keep walking in his direction.

Real repentance isn't one prayer. It's a lifetime of the same prayer. The prayer Hosea gives us here. So these aren't just words for the prodigal out there.

These are words for the prodigals in here. Words for us to be reminded of day after day, because it is so easy to start pretending that we're sorry, like Israel.

Well, Hosea gives us three very simple things to say here. When we go back to our father, there's something to recognize, something to request, and something to renounce.

First, something to recognize. And it is the most basic thing of all. We recognize that we need forgiveness, verse 2. But basic as that is, there's a world of difference between owning up to bad things and owning up to being a bad person.

[14 : 34] So that little word, all, is a very important word. In fact, it comes right at the start of verse 2 in Hebrew. All our iniquity, all of it, take away.

That's what we need God to do. Which means not just acknowledging our sins, but recognizing our sinfulness. You know what I mean by a politician's apology, don't you?

The kind of apology that's really a not apology. Mistakes were made. There are lessons to learn here. I want to express real regret if any offense has been caused.

Here's a good one. This is how Lance Armstrong, the cyclist, tried to not apologize when he was caught out cheating. Who got cheated, he said? Well, my fans, my friends, the foundation, other people that came into the crosshairs.

They got cheated. And I'm very sympathetic to that. Well, don't you think the Almighty must be relieved that Lance Armstrong has sympathy for him?

[15 : 44] Now, of course, we think that we Christians would never say that sort of thing to God. But there is a big difference, isn't there, between admitting something and acknowledging responsibility for it.

Think of some of the language we might use to not really apologize. Yes, we'll talk a good game about sin and guilt and even sinfulness. But when I say sorry, often I'm just admitting to being a bit inadequate, not to being iniquitous.

I let someone down and that was a mistake. But how often do I admit that I let someone down because the truth is I didn't care enough about them?

How often do I pay lip service to my sin rather than call it what God calls it? So confessing means not just admitting sin because I want to unburden myself, but taking responsibility for it, asking forgiveness for who I am.

Something to recognize that we need God's forgiveness. And secondly, there's something to request. The rest of us, too, is a little tricky, but I think he's asking something very simple there.

[17 : 14] He's asking that God would accept their prayers because they're the honest, humbled words of a people with nothing else to give except what is good, verse 2, and more literally, we will render as bulls our lips.

You see, bulls are what Israel had been bringing to God all along, making all sorts of elaborate sacrifices to win their way back to him. But God was sick of those sacrifices.

Remember chapter 6? I desire love, not sacrifice, knowledge of God, not burnt offerings. Well, now they've lost their temple and their shrines and their altars.

They didn't have any more bulls to bring him. But at last, they've recognized what he's really after, and it's the only thing they've got, the offering of humbled lips and humbled hearts.

So accept that, Lord, they pray. It's nothing fancy, nothing proud, but at least this time, it's something real, something to recognize, something to request.

[18 : 32] And thirdly, in chapter 3, sorry, verse 3, something to renounce. Real repentance is renouncing every other thing you turn to for security instead of your loving father.

So no more deals, no more relying on horses or armies or idols, because nothing we can make or do with our own hands can make things right with the one who made us.

Real repentance is exclusive. It's wholehearted. It means there's no way out of trouble without facing up to the God we've wronged.

Nothing else can help. Not even throwing ourselves into a mission or a morning Bible study or the church prayer meeting. Nothing.

But there is a great reason to face up to him, isn't there? Because although nothing else can make things right, he loves to. In you, the fatherless, find mercy.

[19 : 48] Now that word mercy is one we met right at the beginning of this story, isn't it?

Remember what Hosea called his little daughter? No mercy. No mercy. Unloved.

Unpitied. Mercy, remember, was a special kind of love. The love a father has when he holds something helpless in his arms. Something with no claim on his love at all.

And that was Israel. But the thing is, God longs to be a father to that sort of child. God, it's the helpless that he loves.

If only they'll admit that they've got nowhere else to turn. So those are words to come home with, aren't they? Words for a prodigal son.

I'm sorry. Accept me back. I've given up on everything about me that I was proud of. But how will he treat you if you walk back through the door?

[20 : 51] That's the thing that always holds us back, isn't it? Is my wife ready to accept my apology? Will that friend even want to talk?

Will dad still be angry? And sometimes we can be afraid of God in the same way. I'd like to become a Christian, but can I really, after all this time, I want to admit that I've not been living right for a while, but can I really go back to him again?

Ask for forgiveness yet another time. Well, before I give the standard Christian answer to those questions, let me say that there is something right about that sense of fear.

If you're someone who's never been afraid to ask for God's forgiveness, well, there might be something you're missing about his character. Remember, fear is what God was looking for on the day Israel repented.

That's how he described their return to him back in chapter 3. After exile, he said, they'll return and seek the Lord their God and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the Lord and his goodness in the last days.

[22 : 09] Even chapter 11, that wonderful fatherly passage, that's how it ended, wasn't it? They'll come back to me with trembling because God's anger and his goodness, those are real.

He'd be a very stupid son to walk back up to the angry God who was speaking last week and just assume everything was going to be fine.

So if we're ever going to come home to him, well, we need to know what God will do with his anger. And wonderfully, Hosea gives us his words in verses 4 to 9, and they're the words of a pacified father.

Words of a pacified father. In fact, that child who is terrified to turn around could not hope for more encouraging words than these.

friends, I will heal their turning away, says God. I will love them freely for my anger has turned from them. Friends, I don't think there are better words than that to be heard anywhere in this world.

[23 : 23] It's God's promise to everyone who turns back to him with an honest, humbled heart that he will turn as well. he'll turn his anger into love.

Now, there's a fancy word for that. It's propitiation, the pacifying, the turning away of the anger that we deserve. And here, from eight centuries before the cross, Hosea can't see all the pieces of exactly how that could work, but he sees enough, doesn't he?

he sees that one day in an age when God's people are scattered and suffering, God would work it out. He's seen that that's going to happen through the very judgment and anger God sent, that there in the valley of curse, a day would come when God spent his anger.

He's seen that that would happen under a true king, a son of David. He's told us all this before, hasn't he? A son who would lead his people home from exile.

And I suppose he must see that somehow a true sacrifice would have to be made. Not another calf or bull, not more religion or pretense, but a sacrifice made God's way in love from a heart that truly knows him.

[24 : 58] what Hosea sees might be shadowy and it might be a long way off, but there is no doubt that it's the cross because that is the only basis on which it could ever be safe to come home.

God turning away his own anger. And incredibly, that is exactly what he promises to do. I will love them freely, verse 4, not because I have to, but because I choose to, because I'm the father who runs to my prodigal son to scoop him up in my arms.

And as soon as he's through that door, everything is right once again. That's what the cross does. Verses 5 to 7 are like stepping into a world that we've seen somewhere before, a world where everything is perfect.

And that's what it's like, according to the Bible, to step into the world that God is preparing for his children. Often the Bible pictures that world like a new garden of Eden, everything man needs, provided for him through God's love.

Blossoming plants and beautiful trees, oil and grain and wine. And most important of all, verse 7, there is no more need to hide ever again.

[26 : 33] No more shame, no more pit of the stomach worry, because the relationship which matters most is right as it should be.

You've come home, says God, to live under my shadow. Isn't that a beautiful picture? Life under his protection and his care.

God's people in God's place, living under God's rule and his blessing. That is how this exile ends in a new world.

The world Jesus opened up to us by turning away his father's wrath. So you see, Hosea was not some angry prophet who just wanted to shout at people and beat them up.

No, Hosea was a kind husband who just wanted the best for his horrid wife. he was a tender father who wanted a future for those children of his.

[27 : 46] And most of all, Hosea was a loving pastor. He loved Israel enough to tell them the truth because he wanted them to know this world with all its life and its joy.

And friends, he'd want that for you and me too. But there's only one way that we can have it. And it's a way that even as Christians, we tend to grow tired of honestly, sincerely facing up to our sin and turning back to face the Lord day after day.

So Hosea ends his book with a real loving appeal from our father in heaven. Not just to Ephraim verse 8, but to the wise in every age.

It's as if God is reintroducing himself here to the nation who forgot him. I'm the one, he says, who can answer your cries for forgiveness, verse 8.

No one else. I'm the one who looks after you so kindly. No one else. Not your husband, not your job, not your ministry.

[29 : 03] No, from me comes all your fruit from God. Only from me, says God. From me comes every good thing you have, both in this life and in the next.

Comfort, laughter, the knowledge that you're forgiven, all of it, says God, comes from me. So if you want that, verse 9, well, you need to know the way to find me.

Notice there aren't two ways, there aren't two paths, only his way, the ways of the Lord. Here's the way home, he's saying.

You can walk back to me with my words of repentance on your lips, or if you insist, you can stumble your own way in your pride and your blindness and forgetfulness.

But if you do that, you will never make it home. Whoever is wise, let him understand these things. Jesus put it another way, didn't he?

[30 : 20] He who has ears to hear me, let him hear. I have turned God's anger into love and joy and the warmest welcome you could possibly imagine.

You don't even need to worry about what to say. I've given you the words. All you need to do is turn around.

So let's do that together. Right now, let's pray to the father who welcomes home his prodigals with open arms. Let's pray. Father God, we recognize that we don't simply do wicked things, but that we are wicked people.

We request that in your great grace, you would accept our desire to turn back to you with empty hands honesty and honesty about our hearts.

And we renounce every hope we might hide in, but the cross of your son who alone can turn away your anger and welcome us into your love.

[31 : 40] So hear our prayer, father, in his strong and precious name. Amen. Amen.