

What if the Gospel hasn't changed me?

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Preacher: Rupert Hunt-Taylor

- [0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn back to the book of Hosea now, and to what I have to say is a very difficult passage indeed tonight. Difficult in two ways, I think.
- It's tricky to follow at times. We need to concentrate this evening. But more than that, it's a difficult passage to hear. But listen, we must, because this is our Father talking.
- So then page 758 in the Blue Church Bibles, chapters 12 and 13. And you'll see from the little footnotes that in the Hebrew Bibles, chapter 12 begins, rightly I think, with the last verse of chapter 11.
- So we'll read from there through to the end of chapter 13. Ephraim, that's the northern kingdom, Israel. Well, Ephraim has surrounded me with lies and the house of Israel with deceit.
- But Judah still walks with God and is faithful to the Holy One. Or if you're reading in an NIV, you could see that could be taken very differently. Judah is unruly against God as well, even against the faithful Holy One.
- [1 : 15] Ephraim feeds on the wind and pursues the east wind all day long. They multiply falsehoods and violence.
- They make a covenant with Assyria while oil is carried to Egypt. The Lord has an indictment against Judah and will punish Jacob according to his ways.
- He will repay him according to his deeds. And now Hosea reminds them about Jacob, their ancestor. In the womb, he took his brother by the heel.
- And in his manhood, he strove with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed. He wept and sought his favor. He met God at Bethel.
- And there God spoke with us. The Lord, the God of hosts. Yahweh is his memorial name. So you, by the help of your God, return.
- [2 : 15] Hold fast to love and justice and wait continually for your God. But no, a merchant in whose hands are false balances.
- He loves to oppress. Ephraim has said, Ah, but I'm rich. I found wealth for myself in all my labors. They cannot find in me iniquity or sin.
- I am the Lord, your God from the land of Egypt. I will again make you dwell in tents as in the day of the appointed feasts. I spoke to the prophets.
- It was I who multiplied visions and through the prophets gave parables. If there is iniquity in Gilead, they shall surely come to nothing.
- In Gilgal, they sacrifice bulls. Their altars also are like stone heaps on the furrows of the fields. Jacob fled to the land of Aram.
- [3 : 14] There Israel served for a wife. And for a wife, he guarded sheep. But by a prophet, the Lord brought Israel up from Egypt.
- And by a prophet, he was guarded. Ephraim has given bitter provocation. So the Lord will leave his blood guilt on him and will repay him for his disgraceful deeds.

When Ephraim spoke, people used to tremble. He was exalted in Israel. But he incurred guilt through Baal. And died. And now they sin more and more.

They make for themselves metal images. Idols. Skillfully made of their silver. All of them the work of craftsmen. It's said of them, Those who offer human sacrifices kiss calves.

Therefore, they shall be like the morning mist. Or like dew that goes away early. Like the chaff that swirls from the threshing floor. Or like smoke from a window.

[4 : 20] But I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt. You shall know no God but me. And besides me, there is no savior.

It was I who knew you in the wilderness, in the land of drought. But when they had grazed, they became full. They were filled and their heart was lifted up.

Therefore, they forgot me. So I am to them like a lion. Like a leopard, I will lurk beside the way.

I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs. I will tear open their breasts. And there I will devour them like a lion. As a beast would rip them open.

I will destroy you, O Israel. For you are against me. Against your helper. Where now is your king to save you in your cities?

[5 : 20] Where are all your rulers of whom you said, Give me a king and princes? I gave you a king in my anger. He's talking about Saul and Jeroboam and every human choice of king to follow.

I gave you a king in my anger. And I took him away in my wrath. That's a reference to Hosea, the current king, who's just about to be dragged away to Assyria.

Verse 12. The iniquity of Ephraim is bound up. His sin is kept in store. The pangs of childbirth come for him. But he is an unwise son.

For at the right time, he does not present himself at the opening of the womb. Shall I ransom them from the power of shale? Shall I redeem them from death?

O death, where are your plagues? O shale, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes. Though he may flourish among his brothers, the east wind, the wind of the Lord shall come, rising from the wilderness, and his fountain shall dry up, his spring shall be parched.

[6 : 32] It shall strip his treasury of every precious thing. Samaria shall bear her guilt because she has rebelled against her God.

Therefore they shall fall by the sword. Their little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open. Amen.

And this is God's word, somber though it is. And he wasn't joking, was he? When the Assyrians attacked, it was every bit as savage.

Well, I do have Hosea 12 and 13 open, page 758. I'm afraid tonight we need to talk about something that I find a bit embarrassing.

We need to talk about the reason we tell each other lies. How many of these sound familiar? Don't worry, Daddy.

[7 : 47] Mummy said I could have it, I promise. Mummy said I could play in the oven. Mummy said I could feed the sister cat food. But it's not just the children, is it?

No, officer, I wasn't going too fast. He just came out of nowhere. No, darling, I've never seen that website before.

Yes, I've been doing fine, thanks. Just too busy to make it out to church. Why do we tell those lies?

Well, a simple reason that I lie is that I want people to think well of me. We don't want to give away what we're really like.

Lies are the way we cover up the things we know about ourselves and don't want anyone else to see. So the fact that I tell lies says something about the way my heart is.

[8 : 52] For from within, said Jesus, out of a man's heart comes deceit, slander, pride. The fact I tell lies means I'm not okay.

There's a twistedness, which you and I know is there inside us, but in our twistedness, all we want to do is cover it up. Well, deceit is a big issue in tonight's passage.

They've surrounded me with lies. Chapter 11, verse 12. Lies on every level. Lies to God, verse 1. They're pretending at religion while chasing after the wind.

Lies on the political stage, toting up to Assyria, but kissing Egypt behind his back. Lies in the marketplace, verse 7, and the office.

And even lies in the depths of their own heart, verse 8. Deceiving themselves lies on every level. Deceit is a big issue in this passage, but it raises an even bigger question, and here it is.

[10 : 09] What if the gospel hasn't changed me? You see, Hosea goes for Israel's falsehood to show that God's grace has done nothing to change their hearts.

That cheating and grasping and deceiving, that sounds an awful lot like Israel's ancestor, doesn't it? In fact, that's what Hosea calls them there in verse 2.

Not Israel or Ephraim, but Jacob. Jacob was the great grasper, the one who even managed to cheat his way out of the womb, verse 3.

He grabbed his twin brother by the heel. In fact, that's what his name meant, he who grasps at the heel. It's just a Hebrew way of calling someone a cheat, a deceiver.

But the point Hosea makes is that all these years later, his children are just the same. Twistedness is in the family DNA, and it seems like the gospel hasn't done a bit to change them.

[11 : 23] Well, I wonder if your heart sank when we read the passage this evening. I have to admit that on Monday morning, mine did. Do we really need more of this, Hosea?

More about sin and more about judgment? Haven't we got that by now? But then we have to remember what we learned last week, that God is a loving father who doesn't give up on his children.

And God's answer is no. No, we haven't got it. Because Jacob's problem, that twisted heart, is our problem.

So we have to trust tonight that our father knows what we need to hear. And in fact, there's a strangely reassuring message here for some of us. in this passage.

If you're a Christian who's worried that the gospel hasn't done much to change you, then I think Hosea has some helpful things to say.

[12 : 27] So however the reading made you feel, remember that tonight is one more precious opportunity to listen to our father and let his loving warning work on our hearts.

If you recognize Jacob's problem, that desperate need to cover up the truth, and if you fear the gospel doesn't seem to be working, well, there are two lessons for us to learn this evening.

One from a man who fell on his God. That was Jacob. And another from the nation who forgot their God, Israel.

What if the gospel hasn't changed me? Well, firstly, chapter 12 tells us to learn from a man who fell on God. And here's what we'll learn from Jacob.

God is willing to transform the twisted. If you know that you're a Jacob, well, then Hosea says, dust off your Bibles and see what the Lord can do for a twisted heart.

[13 : 35] Yes, in the womb he strove with his brother, verse 3, but as a man, he strove with God. You see, the Lord met Jacob and he changed him.

In fact, he even changed his name. Hosea is hinting at that there in verse 3. Jacob meant he grasps at the heel, but God called him Israel. It means just what he says here, he strives with God.

So in that one verse, you've got the story of Jacob's whole life. In fact, all these years later, it's the only thing really that matters about him. Jacob was a man who God did business with and straightened out.

And if he did it for twisting Jacob, then he can do it for you and for me. Now the important thing for us is how that happened. And so in telling the story of Jacob's life, Hosea is not too fussed about the chronology and all the details.

What he wants his readers to know is just two things about how he was changed. And he tells us them both in verse four. He was broken and God met him.

[14 : 50] Firstly, Jacob was broken. The Lord did enough to leave scheming Jacob a humbled man. He's talking there about the story you can read in Genesis chapter 32, the night Jacob wrestled with the Lord at Peniel.

And in his very gentle way, God left his mark on Jacob. In fact, he left him permanently lame. Now that story is quite a tricky one to understand, but actually Hosea's point here is very simple, really.

Jacob was broken that night. He wept, verse four. He sought God's favor. In fact, he wouldn't let go of the Lord until he blessed him.

Twisting Jacob was humbled and he knew that it was God he needed to fall on for help. And that's the first thing that we need to know. And the second comes in the next line.

God met that humbled man and God changed him. Where? Well, verse four, in the very place where now Israel worships that little golden calf.

[16 : 04] And so for once, Hosea gives that place its real name, not Beth Arvin, his name, house of evil, but Bethel, house of God, the real one, the living, eternal God, verse five, the God who can actually speak and heal and mend human beings.

So if you're worried that the gospel hasn't made any difference, if your heart still seems twisted and your life is still full of things that you need to cover up, well, Hosea is saying that it's this God you need to turn to to sort it out.

And the wonderful news, friends, is that if that is you, then it sounds like this God is meeting you already because he helps the ones like Jacob, the ones he's broken and humbled, the ones who know that their hearts need straightening out.

And so like a good preacher, Hosea makes his application blindingly obvious in verse six. Jacob is the model for what he's been calling Israel to do all along, to repent, return.

So you, just like Jacob, by the help of your God, return. No more striving, no more cheating, hold fast, he says, to steadfast love and justice, and just like Jacob, wait continually for your God.

[17 : 39] Depend on him to fix you. And that's the Christian life, isn't it, friends? It's not being delivered in an instance. Lord knows that Jacob wasn't.

No, the real Christian life is one of begging him to sort you out day after day after day, daily repenting, daily recognizing your twistedness and the need for God to meet with you again.

Jacob met God and God changed Jacob. Slowly, yes, and painfully, yes, a little at first, and a little the next day, and I guess like most of us, an awful lot right at the end as he was taken to glory.

But he was changed. Now, Hosea is going to come back to his example once more before the chapter ends, but he's not done applying it yet because his readers have had all the same chances that Jacob had.

They've met God too, haven't they? Look at verse 10. He sent them the prophets to humble them and call them to fall on God just as Jacob had done. They'd sat through sermons just like us here.

[18 : 57] It's not like God wasn't speaking to them. So what had Israel done with their encounters with the Lord? That's what Hosea does here, isn't it?

He compares their response to their father Jacob and the short answer is that although Jacob had been changed into Israel, Israel never stopped being a bunch of twisting Jacobs.

In verse 7, we're given a picture of the marketplace and that crooked family DNA is right on show. Maybe you can imagine a widow turning out to do her shopping and week after week she shells out every penny of her pension and the trader weighs it all out, but there's never quite as much food to go on the table as she paid for.

Had the gospel changed Israel? Well, that widow doesn't think so. There are a bunch of merchants, verse 7, who love to exploit, literally a bunch of Canaanites.

That's what that word means. Canaanites were the market traders of the day, like our cockneys, I guess. But of course they were pagans, weren't they? It's as if you've never met God at all.

[20 : 20] That's what Hosea is saying to them. Maybe you have a job where your integrity is on show from time to time. I wonder what your customers might say.

Has the Lord left his mark on you, do they think? Well, this lot are just pretending at religion and they're pretending to themselves as well, aren't they? I'm rich, verse 8, I've got all I need.

No one can catch me out. So much for Jacob's example, so much for weeping and falling on God to mend their twistedness.

No, this lot are quite content. They're happy with the way they are. God hates that, doesn't he? Is this really what I called you out of Egypt for, verse 9?

To live like a bunch of satisfied, crooked pagans. So until they grow up and learn how much they need him, it's out of his sight, back to the wilderness and the tents.

[21 : 27] And in verse 12, it's back to the history lessons. This time, it's the old Jacob, the Jacob who did things their way with schemes and deceit. You see, Jacob's lies once landed him in slavery.

He had his own personal exile away from the land, guarding sheep for Uncle Laban. Schemes and self-reliance, that ended with slavery.

But when Israel came home, next verse, it's a picture of the Exodus, it was because God guarded them, giving up the schemes and listening to God's prophets.

Well, that way, Israel found a shepherd of their own. So look back, says Hosea, and learn, learn from a man who threw himself on God, a God who is more than able to transform the twisted.

But there's a flip side to this message too, isn't there? And that is loud and clear in chapter 13. Learn from the nation who forgot their God. Just notice how that theme of Israel's self-reliance and contentedness carries on through chapter 13.

[22 : 56] It was I who knew you in the wilderness, says God, verse 5. I who fed you and cared for you like a shepherd. But when they had grazed, they became full, verse 6.

As soon as they were filled, their hearts were lifted up, they became proud, and they forgot all about me. So much for hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

Israel thinks they've got it all. They've got their calves and their kings to save them. They're flourishing, verse 15, with treasuries full of precious things.

Why do they need God? And so learn from them, says Hosea. Now what happened to them is not easy to read, is it?

This chapter is ugly. It's not the sort of thing we like to preach. But remember, this is the same God who was the patient husband of chapter 3 and the loving father of chapter 11.

[23 : 59] And he knows that sometimes we need a long, hard stare into the abyss. Because Israel's pride and contentedness, that's a trap that we should be terrified of falling into.

So here's what we'll learn from the nation who forgot their God. Yes, God is willing to transform the twisted, but he's also waiting to crush the contented.

That's the big message of this chapter, isn't it? God is waiting to crush the contented. It's not that God was longing to punish Israel. No, look at verse 12. Look how patient he was.

He's kept sin after sin, stored up for all those years. He's passed it over, waiting for the day she would turn to him, like her father Jacob, but that day never came.

Israel's problem was that she was too proud to turn to the only person who could help her. I am the Lord your God, verse 4, the God who brought you up from the land of Egypt.

[25 : 16] You shall know no God but me, and besides me there is no savior. Now, aren't those words familiar? the words God used on the day he married his bride back in the desert, the day he gave her the Ten Commandments, those were words of hope, words of promise.

But Israel took those very words and they twisted them to fit the little golden calves that they'd made for themselves. Behold your God, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.

That's what they said about those calves right there in Bethel, in the very place God had met with Jacob to rescue him and change him.

No thank you, Lord. Our way is working just fine. We write to acknowledge receipt of your kind offer to die in our place, but politely suggest you don't go to the trouble.

Kindly keep the gift of your only son as we've made our own arrangements. Yours, Israel. And how twisted and perverse their way is.

[26 : 37] Look at verse 2. They'll sacrifice people, but then bow down and debase themselves to a statue of an animal. Friends, isn't there something so distorted about a life like that which denies the truth about humanity and sin and God?

I once worked in a university hospital that specialized in spinal surgery for dogs, and for six weeks, we kept one of those dogs alive on a ventilator, because nobody could face up to reality.

In the end, the bill was in the tens of thousands. all of that for a dog. A lovely dog, but a dog, not a man. I wonder how far 15,000 pounds could go in India, training men to teach the gospel.

Isn't that a warped, twisted view of humanity? Well, Israel were denying reality when it came to their problem, and their ability to fix it by themselves, and God's standard of holiness, and God will not let that go on forever.

So verses 7 to 16 give us a hideous picture of what happens to people who don't want God to change them, rescue them.

[28 : 07] I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs. I will tear open their breasts, devour them like a lion, rip them open like a wild beast. I will destroy you, O Israel, because you're against me, against your only helper.

So much for your kings and your schemes, verse 10, it was me you needed. Now, there are two things we need to remember about a passage like this, and the first is that Hosea was not exaggerating a word.

it was 722 BC when the Assyrians finally crushed Samaria, and those 10 lost tribes of Israel have not been seen since.

They vanished, just like the mist and the dew and the chaff in verse 3, and it was every bit as brutal. But we also need to remember this, God sent that army.

The same God who loved them like a husband and like a father. Notice that in verse 15. He calls that army the east wind, the wind of the Lord.

[29 : 26] It rounds off what we read in chapter 12 verse 1, doesn't it? Israel were chasing a wind, a spirit, the spirit of falsehood that we've seen all along. But where that leads, verse 15, is God's wind, God's spirit.

coming in judgment. In fact, that's the only reference to God's spirit in this whole book. God sent that army. He waited and he waited, but he wouldn't wait forever.

And he makes no attempt to hide that from us, does he? Or excuse himself? Because we need to know that what he warned Israel of, he warns every human being who lives and breathes.

Jesus warned of a judgment that was just as real and a hell that was just as hideous. And not one of us in this room tonight can twist or turn our way out of that judgment.

So where's the hope in this passage? Where's the gospel? Well, the honest answer is that by the time chapter 13 was fulfilled, it was just too late for that.

[30 : 44] The gospel came in chapter 12. The gospel came with God's repeated pleas for Israel to fall on him. And although those words here in verse 14 are ambiguous, I think in context we have to understand them as the bleakest words of all.

Yes, like last week, God's heart is torn. This was a people he longed to redeem, but the final line is pretty decisive, isn't it?

Compassion is hidden from my eyes. By verse 14, God is calling down plagues of death on his proud, deceitful people.

He's summoning the sting of the grave because God is just. And he has to give them what they deserve. And yet Paul was able to turn these words on their head, wasn't he?

He quotes these very words in 1 Corinthians 15 as a taunt that for the Christian death has no sting. The grave has no victory.

[31 : 58] So what had changed? Well, some suggest that it was just Paul's Hebrew. He was using a different Bible translation and he wasn't very good at context and he just didn't know that these words were so full of despair.

Doesn't sound likely. Some suggest that what's changed between Hosea's time and Paul's was the cross. That because Jesus died, the sting of exile and death had been taken.

And although that's true, I don't think it's any more helpful. Because the cross of course worked backwards too, didn't it?

It's the cross that Hosea has been offering his people the chapter after chapter. It's the cross he was offering in chapter 12 verse 6. It's the cross they could have clung to in repentance just like Jacob did.

Now I think what matters is not where they stood in history. What had changed when Paul wrote was really something far more simple than that. Paul was writing to different people.

[33 : 10] Yes, like Israel they were twisted and proud and they needed God's change. But fundamentally Paul was treating them as believers.

For all the problems in Corinth, and there were many, Paul talked to them as people who knew their needs, and were trusting God to put it right.

And that makes all the difference in the world. So what if the gospel hasn't changed me? What if I still feel like the old Jacob, twisted and broken?

Well we do need the warning of this passage, don't we? people who don't care about their problem are the sort of people God cannot stand, will not stand.

But friends, there is a great encouragement here too, because feeling empty and broken, that is the only safe place to be.

[34 : 18] That's the way of the cross. it's not a place for the rich, or the religious, or the fool. It's a place for the hungry, the empty.

It's a place for Jacob's. Don't be like that foolish baby in verse 13, who when the time came, never showed up for delivery.

I'm quite comfy enough here in the womb, thank you. that is a pregnancy that only ends in heartbreak. No, it might not be pretty, but surely even Jacob's way out of the womb was better than that.

At least he knew he needed help. Better to be a grasper who grasps at the cross than a proud man who won't admit that he still has a problem.

Maybe Jacob cheated his way into life. Maybe he cheated all the way to heaven on Jesus' coattails, but at least he realized that he couldn't get there on his own.

[35 : 33] Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord, we do need you every hour.

Lord, we do need you every we look into our hearts and see nothing but darkness and failure, and yet we look to heaven and see the one who made an end of all our twisting and deceit.

So spare us, Father, from falling back into that lie that we're doing okay on our own, that we've come far enough, and help us instead today and tomorrow and every day we live, to throw ourselves on your grace and ask you to change us for the sake of your only son and our only helper.

Amen. and information and help us even with harm.