

# The people who couldn't repent

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's turn to God's Word, shall we? Hosea 4 this week, page 752 in our church Bibles. And it's a somber passage.

Hosea 4. Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel. For the Lord has a controversy, a contention against the inhabitants of the land.

And here it is. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love or knowledge of God in the land. There is swearing, lying, murder, stealing and committing adultery.

They break all bounds and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish.

And also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens and even the fish of the sea are taken away. Yet let no one contend and let no one accuse.

[ 1 : 12 ] For with you is my contention, O priest. You shall stumble by day. The prophet also shall stumble with you by night. And I will destroy your mother.

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge. I reject you from being a priest to me.

And since you have forgotten the law of God, I also will forget your children. The more they increased, the more they sinned against me. They changed their glory into shame.

They feed on the sin of my people. They are greedy for their iniquity. And it shall be like people like priests. I will punish them for their ways and repay them for their deeds.

They shall eat, but not be satisfied. They shall play the whore, but not multiply. Because they have forsaken the Lord to cherish whoredom, wine and new wine, which take away the understanding.

[ 2 : 22 ] My people inquire of a piece of wood and their walking stick gives them oracles. For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray and they have left their God to play the whore.

They sacrifice on the tops of mountains and burn offerings on the hills under oak and poplar and terebinth because their shade is good. Therefore, your daughters play the whore and your brides commit adultery.

I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore, nor your brides when they commit adultery. For the men themselves go aside with prostitutes and sacrifice with cult prostitutes.

And the people without understanding shall come to ruin. Though you play the whore, O Israel, let not Judah become guilty.

Enter not into Gilgal, nor go up onto Beth-Aven, and swear not as the Lord lives. Like a stubborn heifer, Israel is stubborn. Can the Lord now feed them like a lamb in broad pasture?

[ 3 : 28 ] Ephraim is joined to idols. Leave him alone. When their drink is gone, they give themselves to whoring. Their rulers deeply love shame.

A wind, a spirit, has wrapped them in its wings. And they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices. Hear this, O priests. Pay attention, O house of Israel.

Give ear, O house of the king. For the judgment is for you. For you have been a snare at mitzvah. And a net spread upon table.

And the revolvers have gone deep into slaughter. But I will discipline all of them. I know Ephraim. And Israel is not hidden from me.

For now, O Ephraim, you have played the whore. Israel is defiled. Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God.

[ 4 : 27 ] For the spirit of whoredom is within them. And they know not the Lord. The pride of Israel testifies to his face. Israel and Ephraim shall stumble in his guilt.

Judah also shall stumble with them. With their flocks and herds, they shall go to seek the Lord. But they will not find him. He has withdrawn from them.

They have dealt faithlessly with the Lord. For they have become alien children. Born illegitimate sons. Now the new moon shall devour them with their fields.

This is God's word to us. And there's no hiding that it is a word that does not sound hopeful. But it was people in hopelessness and despair that the Lord Jesus came to seek and to save.

Well, please do have Hosea chapter 4 open. And follow along with us. Page 752 in our church Bibles. And let's pray.

[ 5 : 38 ] Father God, you've given us eyes to read these words. And ears to hear them. But without your help, we know our minds are too closed.

And our hearts too hard for them to do us any good. And so we pray for your grace now and the help of your Holy Spirit.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Two types of stories sell newspapers. One is tragedy. And the other is scandal.

And playing out in front of us tonight is a story which combines the two. Our passage this evening is a kind of courtroom drama. And at the heart of this trial, there's a terrible human tragedy.

Israel, that fallen woman we met back in Hosea's introduction, is now sitting powerless in the dock. And the question which haunts everyone watching her trial, is how on earth did it come to this?

[ 6 : 46 ] How did a woman so loved and full of promise fall so deep into darkness and disgrace? This is a trial that, in large part, is played out for us, sitting in the gallery.

As an onlooker, everything in you wants to turn away, to find a happier story. But the tragedy compels us to keep watching, to try and understand how things went so badly wrong.

And only as the drama unfolds and all the evidence is laid before the court, do we start to grasp how Israel slipped so deep into the darkness.

Verse 1 is the moment that Hosea the prophet steps forward as special prosecutor of God's covenant. The Lord has a controversy against you.

It's a legal word. And as God brings formal charges against his people, we learn at last what was going on on the ground in Israel.

[ 7 : 55 ] We see the things that so far we've only had little pictures of through Hosea's heartbreaking marriage. And we start to make sense of how God's special people ended up as Goma, the prostitute.

So I'll try to move us fairly quickly through the passage tonight. We'll spend about 15 minutes or so watching as the trial unfolds. And then at the end, we'll see if we can make some sense out of Israel's fall with two fairly major implications for you and me.

So let's begin with the trial itself. In many ways, this is not like sitting before any human judge. But there's enough process in this passage that we can still follow it like a courtroom drama.

First, the charges are read. Then the accused is named. Next, Hosea turns to the gallery, to those of us watching on. And we have the findings explained.

And then finally, in chapter 5, the judge speaks. So firstly, what does adultery actually mean when God sees it in his people?

[ 9 : 07 ] Well, in verses 1 to 3, the charges are read. And they boil down to three extremely loaded Bible words. No faithfulness.

No steadfast love. No knowledge of God. Israel lacks everything you need for a meaningful relationship.

Those three charges, when you put them together, effectively say that Israel does not care about God's covenant. Charge number one, no faithfulness.

How can I have a relationship if I can't trust you? That word really means truthfulness or honesty. It's the thing you need to have before you can ever look someone in the eye.

Without it, two people can never interact. Charge number two, no steadfast love. It's the word that our friend Terry McCutcheon wants to have tattooed onto his body, if his wife ever lets him.

[ 10 : 11 ] Not because Terry loves Hebrew words, but because he loves the thing that this word stands for. In Hebrew, it's cheseth, loving kindness, faithful love.

It's the words right at the heart of God's gracious commitment to us. And it's the very thing we lack when we betray our God and get into bed with another.

And then comes the major charge, the one that makes sense of all the other two. You don't know me, says God. To know someone in the Bible is to know their heart.

It's not to do with intellect, but intimacy. To know God is to have met him, to love him. And that, as we saw last week, was Israel's big problem.

They'd forgotten what the Lord is really like. They were full of knowledge about him. But real knowledge means acknowledging him for who he really is.

[ 11 : 16 ] There are the charges against Israel in three words, three little words that speak of a betrayed relationship. That's the allegation. It's treason. And the proof of that betrayed relationship is the broken rules of verse two.

If we don't know God, we won't care about the things he loves. And so Hosea holds up the whole second tablet of the Ten Commandments in evidence.

You lie. You steal. You sleep around. You treat each other as if you lived in a moral jungle. You see, if we cheat on God, then we'll cheat on human beings, won't we?

Sooner or later, spiritual adultery gives way to physical adultery. That's why the church today is so often full of predators.

When people turn away from God in their hearts, the church suffers. And so Israel stands in the dock, accused of casual love.

[ 12 : 22 ] Everything that's wrong in this book comes from her casual attitude to the Lord, not knowing him and not caring about what he cares for. That's the type of religion which God calls whoredom.

Well, having read the charges in verses four to 14, the accused are named. And here's where the drama takes a very unexpected turn.

In verse four, Hosea, the prosecutor, plays his master stroke. You see, what Israel badly needed at this point in the trial was an advocate.

Someone to defend her before the bar. And the people whose job it was to stand before God on Israel's behalf were the priests. But just as they prepare to open their mouths and give a defense, it's as if Hosea sends a little signal to the bailiff.

And their attorney himself is handcuffed and thrown in the dock alongside them. Let no one contend and answer back, for with you is my contention, O priest.

[ 13 : 34 ] It's the priests on trial. You see, Israel's priests had another very important job, and that was to teach and train God's people.

They were the ones who showed Israel God's character, his holiness and his mercy. They were the ones who taught God's law. So if the problem behind Israel's cold love was that they simply didn't know the Lord, then those priests bore a terrible responsibility, didn't they?

Imagine how brave or how blind a pastor has to be to sideline the Bible. Just picture the day that God holds his pastors to account for the people they cared for and finds them as ignorant as Israel was here.

Two times, verses 11 and verse 14, we're told that they'd lost all understanding. And in between, you see a people searching for meaning wherever they can think of.

My people, verse 12, my people, says God, look for guidance in sticks and stones. They're so clueless about life in my world that they'll speak to a walking stick and ask it for directions.

[ 14 : 59 ] But notice those chilling words that come three times through this passage. Three times we're told that Israel was not simply misguided. They were enslaved.

A spirit of whoredom has led them astray, verse 12. They can't even repent, chapter 5, verse 4, because a spirit of whoredom is within them. Isn't that terrifying?

They couldn't repent. Or verse 19. A wind, a spirit has wrapped them in its wings in a prison of ignorance.

In fact, almost every time the word spirit is used in this book, it is something dark and sinister. An idol is not an inanimate thing like a walking stick or a statue.

An idol is the spirit which enslaves a human mind into worshipping something that empty. And if a church is left in the dark about what God is really like, then it only takes a moment for the wolves to sweep in.

[ 16 : 10 ] They were not misguided. Israel was enslaved through lack of teaching. With pastors like that, what chance did they have?

What mattered to them, their pastors, wasn't that she knew the Lord and turned to him. What mattered to them was that the sacrifices kept coming. That the salaries got paid.

They feed on my people's sin, verse 8. That's the priests feeding off Israel. They preyed on people's ignorance. Fine to live that way, they'd say. Just keep coming to church.

We'll do whatever we can to make it appealing. We'll make sure the music is nice and the teaching is short. And the shade under the trees is good, verse 13. Everything will feel just right.

As a young Christian, I have a friend who once confessed to his pastor that he and his girlfriend struggled terribly with sexual temptation. And I suspect that pastor worried that if he told my friend the truth, he would never come back.

[ 17 : 16 ] What matters to him wasn't really that his flock came to know the Lord. It was that these young students came to need him. And this man's advice to my friend was ruthlessly evil.

God doesn't really mind what you do with your girlfriend, he said. The important thing is that you love each other. It sounds so right, doesn't it, if you want to believe it.

But what a cruel thing it is for a pastor to mislead someone about God's character. Her teachers rejected knowledge, verse 6.

They refused to know me. And for lack of knowledge, my people are destroyed. It's Israel's pastors sitting in the dock.

Well, soon the judge will speak. But before he gets there, Hosea wants to make sure that his audience have understood the message. Remember that although he's written this book to Israel, Hosea knows full well that Judah, her neighbors, are listening in, watching this trial take place, just like you and me.

[ 18 : 23 ] And so before he sums up, he turns his attention to them. And in verses 16 to 19, the gallery is warned. And the message to Judah is loud and clear.

Don't get dragged down with Israel. Learn how she ended up in such a sorry state. Learn how easily she was trapped by that empty love.

And keep your distance. The places there in verse 15 were two shrines right on the border with Judah. Places where they could very easily become infected with the same disease.

Beth-Aven wasn't its real name. That's Hosea's little joke. It means house of evil. What Israel called it was Beth-El. House of God.

It's where they set up a little golden calf. And liked to pretend that they still believed all the same things. And that little game of pretending is something that we catch very easily from the world around us.

[ 19 : 31 ] So keep your distance, Israel, he says. Our world loves to downplay the differences, doesn't it? To pretend that we basically all believe the same thing. So who God really is doesn't matter all that much.

The problem is that when we get too close to a false idea about God, it starts to wrap itself around our hearts. It becomes very hard to get away from.

Worshipping something changes us, verse 17. It's just like making love. That's what Hosea compares it to. Israel has joined itself to something false.

It's a conjugal word. And that's the danger. If we get too close to falsehood. If we join ourselves to a church where listening to God is not a priority.

Then before long, we start to forget what his voice really sounds like. If we join ourselves to a partner who's not really committed to the Lord in the same way.

[ 20 : 38 ] Then the ways that they think and the things that they love always start to work their way into our hearts. And so Hosea looks at us sitting in the gallery alongside Judah.

And warns us not to end up the same way as Israel. Keep your distance. And then finally in verses 15 to 19, the judge himself speaks.

And brings the trial to a close. Hear this, O priests. Give attention, O house of the king. For the judgment is for you. You're in charge, he says.

I left you to feed and lead and protect my people. So what have you done with that responsibility? Now lots of us in this room care for God's people in one way or another, don't we?

We've got responsibilities. And so let's not miss the challenge in verse 3. You may not know me, he says. But I certainly know you. I know that your shrines and cathedrals, verse 1, and mountaintops and praise gatherings, they were nothing more than a snare for my sheep.

[ 21 : 52 ] You were rounding them up for slaughter. And so the verdict when it comes, I think, is one of the most terrifying things I've ever had to preach.

Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God, verse 4. Israel had become the people who couldn't repent.

A people in such bondage to that spirit of whoredom that there was no way back to the Lord. Even if they wanted to, they wouldn't know where to turn anymore.

That's the chilling thing you see about becoming a stranger to God, an alien child. That even when you seek him, verse 6, you can't find him. They wouldn't know Christ if they saw him.

Every week so far, we've come across the same two little words, seek and return. Seek and return. Those two words are the whole reason Hosea writes this book.

[ 22 : 56 ] But there comes a point when the human heart is so enslaved that it's no longer even able to cry out to the Lord God. Now, as a father of little girls, you learn quite quickly that there are certain things that need to be done, but are frankly miles beyond you.

One problem with girls is that as they grow, their hair seems to keep getting longer. And they seem to expect you to do something with it. And let me tell you that something as simple as symmetrical ponytails or pigtails can completely defeat even a modern man like me.

There have been times that we've arrived in the playground and the other children have run in sheer terror at the sight of my little girls. You see the mothers in Pollock Park anxiously fidgeting for their phones and wondering how long it might take child protection to arrive.

It's not that I'm not clever enough. The theory seems pretty simple. You kind of grab a bunch of hair and truss it all up in an elastic band. My wife can do it. It's not that I don't want to get it right.

In fact, frankly, I'd do anything to get them out of the door sooner. It's not even really that I lack the dexterity. Give me a cow that needs a caesarean section, I'll have a pretty good go at it.

[ 24 : 19 ] But pigtails, they just seem to be beyond me. Something in my nature itself means that for whatever reason, I will never ever conquer the art of sorting out a little girl's hair.

Now, it's a very silly illustration for a deadly serious truth. But Israel's problem is not to do with their intellect. They know plenty about God, don't they?

And it's not even really their will. They're looking for answers up mountains and under trees. No, the problem is that their nature is enslaved. Even if you told them how to do it, their hearts wouldn't let them repent.

And that is a far, far more terrifying prospect. Well, you can't walk away from that courtroom without trying to make some sense of her tragedy, can you?

So before we close, let me raise two big implications for all people everywhere. The first, very bleak. And the second, a little more encouraging.

[ 25 : 28 ] First, the dark one. Unbelief is a prison. It's not progress. The worship of false things is something that human beings are utterly trapped inside.

We can tell ourselves that one day, when we're ready, well, then we'll repent. We can kid ourselves that we'll seek the Lord when we're just a little bit older or a little bit sicker or a little bit wiser.

And many of us desperately hope that for our parents or our children, don't we? But unbelief is far more incapacitating than we appreciate.

And often when the time comes, we find ourselves no more able to turn to God than we are now. The problem is that we massively overestimate our ability to make rational choices.

We think that believing whatever we want to believe is a sign of progress and enlightenment. But the Bible sees it as a sign of enslavement.

[ 26 : 42 ] This wasn't progress for Israel, was it? They worshipped anything and nothing because their minds were darkened. They fell into this. Now, we instinctively think there's something different about us.

We just live in a more enlightened age. We make rational choices today. But notice the straight line that Hosea draws between Israel's spiritual slavery and her moral decay.

Her daughters slept around, verse 14, because their fathers slept around spiritually. I suspect Hosea would look at us and ask what on earth is so enlightened about a society with an abortion rate like yours?

What's enlightened about a world where little boys harass little girls for explicit texts and photographs? Hosea tells us that those are not simply moral issues.

Those problems are spiritually transmitted. They're signs of enslaved hearts and minds. So Israel's fall ought to make us very pessimistic indeed about human nature.

[ 28 : 04 ] We simply don't have the ability to reason our way back to God with good arguments. Even if they wanted to look for him, the cleverest person in this world would not know where to begin.

Because unbelief is a prison. It holds human beings, as the hymn puts it, fast bound in sin and nature's night.

So what if that's you? What if you desperately want to know the Lord and Hosea seems to be saying that there's nothing you can do? Well, that leads to our second massive implication of this story.

And here it is. Only if God himself breaks into our darkness can we ever be free. If we can't reach out and find our way back to God, then somehow God himself has to come down and rescue us.

It's the only way to solve the paradox of this book. Chapter 3 told us that God is determined to have his bride return, to repent. And the very last chapter of this book just hammers home one single word.

[ 29 : 22 ] Return, return, return. And yet the very thing that Israel must do is the one thing they can't do. So if we can't find our way back to God, then somehow God himself has to make himself known.

If their deeds don't permit them to return to him, verse 4, then somehow God himself has to deal with their deeds. We cannot do it.

So either we can despair or we can ask him to do it. Jesus entered a world and a nation enslaved to unbelief.

And he told Israel that only knowing him, acknowledging him, could take away their chains. If you abide in my words, you are truly my disciples.

You will know the truth. And the truth will set you free. There is one who can free our minds from slavery.

[ 30 : 31 ] But that can only happen if we meet him. When we come to know him. That's why if we really care about someone coming to know God, we pray for them.

Because if God doesn't break into their darkness, then there's no point us doing evangelism. That's why when we do share the gospel, we don't just try to argue someone into the kingdom.

Evangelism is what happens when someone who could never know God by themselves actually meets him face to face in Jesus Christ. You could have thrown all the arguments in the world at me before I came to faith.

And I would have gotten more and more stubborn. But when someone opened up the Bible, then God himself started to break down the walls.

It's Jesus we need. We have to meet him. Friends, if you're in a similar position tonight, this is why you mustn't leave it to another time to ask this God for help.

[ 31 : 35 ] If right now you sense that despair and helplessness, then please leap at the chance to run to him. Don't believe that you can always do it tomorrow or the next day.

There may well come a moment that you can't. And it's why we Christians so badly need pastors whose only goal is that we know Jesus better.

Because human beings who do not know what their God is like will always fall back into the darkness. Israel's story tonight was not a pretty story.

I'm sorry we had to face it. But that pity we felt gives way to something far more hopeful when we realize that her story was our story.

That we were blind and unresponsive and unable to love God until he broke in to open our eyes.

[ 32 : 40 ] Let's pray. Father God, what huge relief we feel when we see the darkness that you rescued us from.

When we realize that we belong to you not because we are clever enough, but because you are kind enough. We thank you that in Jesus Christ you met us so that we who could never know you became your children.

And so we pray that knowing him would be the thing we treasure above everything in this world. In Jesus name. Amen.