

The Hollow Promises

Hosea 6:1-7:2

Sometimes we depend upon a person to do a task or a job and the results are not really great. When this happens, then we take into account that perhaps the person did not have the needed skills or tools. On the other hand, if someone tells you that he or she will do a particular thing at a specified time and place and nothing happens and there is no communication, then that lack of action cannot only cause problems, it also creates a lot of questions regarding the integrity of the person. I think that most of us would see the lack of integrity to be a much bigger problem than the lack of skills. When we make promises that we have no intention of keeping, then we should not be surprised that relationships will be severely damaged and even severed.

We can think of a lot of situations in our world today in which people make promises in order to gain a short-term advantage such as being hired to do a repair job or to obtain money from a donor or even to get votes and be elected to a position of leadership. We may even find ourselves making promises in times of trouble in an effort to extract ourselves from a dangerous condition. We call such situations “foxhole conversions.” As we study the history of Israel and the interactions of God with them, there were repeated instances in which they would go through cycles of drifting or even running away from God, find themselves in big trouble, realize that they really did need God, go through a time of repentance, find relief from the problems and then forget about God which would restart the cycle.

If we recall the time of the Judges in Israel and up until the destruction of the ten tribes of the northern kingdom and the exile of Judah in Babylon, we can see this pattern again and again. God sent multiple prophets to point out to the people what they were doing and to call them back to being in a right relationship with Him. Hosea’s prophecy has several clear messages of this call to return to God and not put their trust or confidence in other gods or other nations.

In the latter verses of Chapter five of Hosea’s writings, we discover that Israel (and to some extent Judah) had turned to and relied on Assyria in their problems with Syria only to find that Assyria was worse than Syria and what they imagined would be their salvation turned out to be a terrible trap in which they were afflicted. God’s response was that He would just wait until the problems became bad enough that they would seek Him for relief. We see this turning to God for help in the beginning of Chapter six.

Return – 6:1-3

¹ “Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. ² After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. ³ Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.” Hosea 6:1–3 (ESV)

Apparently, the situation in the Northern Kingdom had gotten so bad that some of the people were ready to turn away from seeking help with Assyria and realized that the only real help that would be beneficial to them would come from God. So many times, when people approach us to offer their help, then there may be a hidden agenda that what they really want is to control us. This was Assyria’s agenda in everything they did.

Scholars are unsure if these verses are a record of what the people were saying when they finally realized the error of their ways or if this was what Hosea admonished them to do in calling them to repentance. God had said (last verse of Chapter five), “In their affliction they will seek me”; now, the prophet (and/or the good people) was encouraging their neighbors to do what needed to happen.

The Israelites were like Gomer the unfaithful wife that Hosea married and because of their disloyalty God told them that He would be like a lion that would “tear and go away with none to rescue them.” In a vain effort to find relief, Israel went to Assyria for help and that did not work. The plea to “turn to the Lord” implied turning away from Assyria since there was no salvation for them apart from God.

An important fact that the people of Israel needed to realize was that the problems they were having were sent by God to get their attention regarding their unfaithfulness and if and when they responded properly that God was the only One Who could heal the wounds they had.

It was mentioned that Assyria’s help was not beneficial to them since they had an agenda. Did God have an agenda? Absolutely! God’s agenda was to bless Israel and have them prosper and become more and more conformed to His character so that His salvation could impact the other nations and restore them to a proper relationship with Himself as was promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The reference to “two days for new life and rising up on the third day” was likely meant to tell the people of Israel that their genuine return to God would be welcomed by God and His blessings and prosperity that He would pour out on them would be immediate. Hosea was so confident that it would happen he compared it to being sure that the sun is going to rise each day and the blessing would be comparable to having rain that made their crops grow. Many commentaries see this as a direct prophetic reference to the death, burial, and resurrection of the Messiah that would happen seven centuries later. They point out that there was no other specific incident in the history of Israel or Judah that could be linked to such a time frame or the events mentioned. The reason that this was not fulfilled in their time is likely linked to the fact that they did not have a “genuine return” to God but their times of “repentance” were motivated by seeking short-term relief from their suffering or chastisement. It was not the kind of turning around that would lead them to continue to be in a long-lasting relationship of “living in His presence” as a way of life.

In verse three, we read of a recurring admonition found throughout Hosea’s messages of the importance of “knowing God.” Previously, in chapter four, God had said, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” What the Lord expects from His people is that we are to be intimately knowledgeable of the nature and character of Who He is and so motivated by our love for Him that we become as He is. One of the characteristics of God that Hosea mentioned is His consistent faithfulness (dawn) and His basic goodness as evidenced in His continuing blessings upon all the earth (rain).

Matthew Henry noted the following in his commentary on this verse: “We should also know that when we pursue the knowledge of the Lord, He blesses it. It must be more than superficial; it must be a pursuit. But when we endeavor to know the Lord, especially through His word, He reveals Himself to us. He who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)”

Loyalty – 6:4-6

⁴ What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away. ⁵ Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light. ⁶ For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. Hosea 6:4–6 (ESV)

In contrast to God’s faithfulness, we find the repeated hollow promises of the people of Israel. When they were in trouble, they would undergo a “foxhole conversion” which would fade away as quickly as the dew lasts on the grass each morning. The only thing consistent

about them was their inconsistency. We can remember seeing evidence of such behavior in our own nation when the twin towers of the World Trade Center were destroyed and there was a brief period of many doing “religious things” which lasted less than a month. In the case of Israel, God was not pleased with such instability and the failure to keep their promises of repentance made during their professions of faith in God during the midst of a crisis. It wasn’t that there was no faithfulness among the people of God. It’s just that whatever faithfulness there was quickly dissipated like the early dew.

God’s reaction to their actions (which gave evidence of the shallowness of their convictions) was that He sent His prophets to cut them down to size which they had inflated in their prideful arrogance. God had the prophets make use of the Scriptures to destroy the false precepts and ideas that were leading them away from God. The third thing was that the problems they were having such as famines, invasions, droughts, earthquakes, fires, floods, and crime were all clear evidences of God’s judgment on the nation.

God then had Hosea remind them of God’s expectations from them since they were His covenant people. For I desire mercy (which is the character of God) and not sacrifice (which were burnt offerings). Even though the people of Israel were pridefully arrogant and did not show love to each other, they were very “religious” and were going through all the rites and rituals of celebrations, sacrifices and offerings. They had failed to make any connection to their religious practices to how they lived their ordinary, everyday lives. Instead of identifying with Yahweh and His character, they were identifying with the pagan gods of the Canaanite people and the surrounding nations. This same problem was still evident seven hundred years later when Jesus quoted this passage of Hosea to the religious leaders of His day since they were focusing on the wrong and superficial things.

Paul emphasized the importance of making sacrifices even for Christians. However, it was not animal sacrifice but the expectation is to present ourselves as a living sacrifice which is the ongoing work of the cross in bringing us into a deep, close personal relationship with God.

Judgment – 6:7-7:2

⁷ But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me. ⁸ Gilead is a city of evildoers, tracked with blood. ⁹ As robbers lie in wait for a man, so the priests band together; they murder on the way to Shechem; they commit villainy. ¹⁰ In the house of Israel I have seen a horrible thing; Ephraim’s whoredom is there; Israel is defiled. ¹¹ For you also, O Judah, a harvest is appointed. When I restore the fortunes of my people, ¹ when I would heal Israel, the iniquity of Ephraim is revealed, and the evil deeds of Samaria, for they deal falsely; the thief breaks in, and the bandits raid outside. ² But they do not consider that I remember all their evil. Now their deeds surround them; they are before my face. Hosea 6:7–7:2 (ESV)

Their continuing violation of God’s covenant had prevented the fulfillment of those expectations that God had for His people. In many ways they had followed the pattern of Adam in the Garden of Eden account. Adam and Eve literally had everything they needed in their relationship with God; however, they listened to the enemy of God and threw away what they had. In a similar way, the Israelites were given the land of Canaan and they failed to ignore the snakes in the land (the traditions and religious practices of the pagans) and they defiled what God had provided. They had a choice of following God and being blessed or following some other god(s) and having problems. It was not that they were oblivious to what would happen. There were many examples available to them in the oral traditions of world history of what had happened when people don’t trust God and when they do. They were aware of the Eden account, they knew the story of the Great Flood, they had heard of the failure at the Tower of Babel, they were familiar with the call and response of Abram to God, they had accounts of Joseph’s experience, the deliverance from Egyptian slavery, the consequences of unbelief in the

wilderness wanderings, the poor choice of Saul as their king, the blessings that David experienced as well as the results of his poor choices, the glory of Solomon's reign, and yet they apparently had not learned the lessons of their own history.

Maybe they could learn from what was happening in the world during their time. Hosea pointed out several situations which were currently going on during their time. The city of Gilead was a city of refuge that was to be managed by priests and Levites and provided a sanctuary for anyone who accidentally caused the death of another person. This was to prevent a family member of the person who was killed from taking revenge since the death was not murder or done deliberately. Apparently, the priests and Levites who should have been familiar with the laws and commandments had become corrupt and were allowing murderers to come into the sanctuary cities (probably for a bribe to look the other way). Instead of it being a city of people who were innocent, it became a city of the guilty that were escaping the judgment they deserved. We could probably think of situations in our own nation in which policies are in place that allow the criminals to run the city and not be punished so that the lives of others are in peril.

God was not through with the priests and Levites since they had become so corrupt that, in other areas, they were behaving more like criminals than like priests should behave. There are many examples today of those who are involved in "religious work" have been found guilty of misrepresenting themselves and have committed fraud and outright theft. This would be equivalent to the priests of Hosea's day of committing crimes on their way to the worship centers. While that is a clear violation of trust and is terrible, it pales in comparison to those who are identified as clergy that take advantage of and abuse children and teenagers.

Even worse than the sins against people, Hosea saw what he called a "horrible thing" ("prostitution and defilement") which was a reference to worshiping other gods. In relating this to what is happening today, we might realize that some in religious work never steal money or abuse others but are guilty of preaching a false gospel that can have eternal consequences for those who follow them. While Hosea was primarily addressing the Northern Kingdom, he also mentioned that a similar thing was happening in Judah and there would be consequences for both groups of Israel.

God wanted to restore His people to a right relationship with Him, but every time He tried, there were the continuing iniquity and failure to acknowledge their past sins and seek forgiveness. They failed to know God in that they did not realize the profound truth that God remembered all their evil and it is always before His face. This sounds like a hopeless situation, however, there is also the profound truth that when we confess our sin and repent, that God removes that sin from us as far as the east is from the west and He remembers it no more.