

LOVE'S CHALLENGE – SIN

This was the second of four evening sermons by Dr Nat Schluter on the Old Testament book of Hosea, in which he dealt with Chapters 4 –7.

INTRODUCTION

In these chapters, we move from family life to the courtroom, an image that makes us sit up and take note : God is bringing serious charges against his own people, the Israelites.

More importantly is that what was true of them is true of us and of South Africa today.

"1.....There is no faithfulness, no acknowledgement of God in the land.

There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery;
they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed."

Even though everything seemed fine with Israel – there was prosperity and religion – and to all outward appearances, Israel was doing well and yet the reality as God sees it is very different.

How should we respond to God exposing the sin of his people? Well, we should pray that the Lord brings us to conviction of our own sin.

One of the problems that confronts us, however, is that sin is deceptive. It does not allow you to see its true nature or to see its ongoing consequences.

- sin will take you farther than you wanted to go
- sin will keep you longer than you wanted to stay (it's agonisingly difficult to go back)
- sin will cost you more than you wanted to pay (the cost affects family, church, ministry).

So it is important for us to understand the nature and seriousness of our sin. Until we do, we will never understand the anger of God and the need for forgiveness and will never know what its like to be forgiven and to live in a sweeter and closer – more intimate – fellowship with the One who made us.

One of the blessings of Hosea is precisely that its chapters show the rot for what it is. And the Lord laying it out is a potentially life-giving thing – like a dermatologist telling you that various moles you have need removing because if they are not removed, they will destroy you.

OUTLINE OF SERMON

The heart of the matter : the people don't know God (4 : 1,6; 5:4; 6:6).

Images of sin

- 1. Like the morning mist – your love is superficial (6:4)**
- 2. Like Smouldering Oven – there is lust in your heart (7: 1-7)**
- 3. Like an inedible cake – you are compromised (7: 1-7)**

4. **Like an ageing man – you are complacent (7: 9 – 10)**
5. **Like a dove – you are fickle (7:11)**
6. **Like a faulty bow – you are not true (7:16)**

...let us return to the Lord (6:1)

...let us acknowledge the Lord (6:3)

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

The heart of the problem is that the people don't know God....don't have a personal knowledge of God, that is accompanied by love and faithfulness. And this is when things start to degenerate.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian dissident and a great prophetic voice of the C20th who died earlier this year said at an address at Harvard (1983):

"If I were to be asked today to formulate a reason as succinctly as possible for the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our (Russian) people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat : *'men have forgotten God – that's why all this has happened'* ".

Hosea does not blame just the people. He blames the rulers and especially the priests. We get sermons today on the ideas of preachers rather than on the ideas of God, sermons about being prosperous, sermons that actually undermine the word of God and sermonettes (five minute blessed thought) that over time produce Christianettes!

The heart of the problem in Hosea's day – and the main reason that the church is not more effective in our own day perhaps – is that the people do not know God.

Key Verse

Hosea 6 : 3 "Let us acknowledge the Lord: let us press on to acknowledge him."

IMAGES OF SIN

From Chapter 6 : 4 to the end of Chapter 7, Hosea draws a series of images that explain what the people are like, explain what happens in the human heart when there is no knowledge of God. These are the images he draws:

- ***Like the morning mist – your love is superficial***

It's not that the people weren't religious....they went to church, attended the shrines, made great statements of devotion and love to God. But God's question to us is: Is this for real? Do you have a heart of mercy towards others, are you acknowledging me?

- ***Like a smouldering oven (7 : 4-7) – there is lust in your hearts***

God says our hearts are like the baker's fire that smoulders all night and then flares up with lust for sex (v.4); alcohol (v.5); power (v.7).

God's heart is full of love; but as he reaches out to his people, all he sees is their rebellion and sin.

- ***Like an inedible cake (7 : 8) – you are compromised***

The image here is of a cake that is burnt on one side, uncooked on the other – and no good!

Ephraim – often used to refer to Israel – mixes with the nations who did not know God. It seems there is little difference between her and the nations that surround her.

The side of the cake that is facing towards God is underdone. The side facing to the nations is overdone, burnt. The cake is useless.

Israel was called to be distinct, as we are in a world that does not know Jesus. But very often they were undercooked towards God, with hearts not craving knowledge of God, not loving mercy, their faith underdone. In relation to the world, they were overdone, as are we so often, indistinguishable from unbelievers around us, compromised because we do not fit in in either the world or with believers.

- ***Like an ageing man (9-10) – you are complacent***

We do not realise it very often when our faith is growing weak. We do not recognise the tell-tale signs that all is not as strong as it should be. In our complacency, we fail to search for God.

- ***Like a dove (v.11) – you are fickle***

Are we like a dove, "easily deceived and senseless", turning this way and that, always hedging our bets, like the Israelites were, making an alliance here, an alliance there? Surrounded by powers growing ever more impressive, the temptation was to get them on their side.

God longs for his people to put their trust in him.

- ***Like a faulty bow (6) you are not true***

With a faulty bow, the arrow can go anywhere. In the same way, God says, his people have strayed from him.

CONCLUSION

What a description of a backsliding people: superficial, smouldering, compromised, complacent, fickle and not true!

And yet, you and I know, in our heart of hearts, we can be just as bad. We are saved by grace – but we're sinners. Our walk with God is not what it should be or what it could be.

At the foot of the cross, there is complete forgiveness and new life. The Lord longs for us to join him there and be strong so, with these words in Hosea, he urges us on to the joys of maturity in Christ.