

The Only Way Back

Learning to Love Again: A Study of Hosea

Hosea 6-7

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One Way

I know Josh had some things to say about smartphones last week, but one of the things I love about them is GPS. It's a great tool for getting where you need to go. And one of the best things about it is that if you miss a turn it can simply "reroute."

Maybe there's a "right way," or a fastest route. There are also probably plenty of alternate routes that'll get you to your destination just fine. But there are other situations where alternate routes aren't really an option, where you can't just reroute. Like when you're in an underground cave rather than on city streets.

You probably heard all about the Thai soccer team that got stuck in a cave this past summer. Twelve boys and their coach enter this cave and walk and crawl their way in about two miles. It's a cave they've explored before, but this time it's monsoon season. And as they march into the cave the rain is pouring down. By the time they decide to turn back and leave, the way they came in is filled with several feet of water. Some sections are fully submerged. The problem is that's the only way out. It would be nice if they could just take a detour around the submerged areas. It would be great if there was an alternate route that might take a few minutes longer but would get them to the surface just fine. But in this particular cave, there's only one way out.

Sometimes there's only one way to get from where you are to where you need to go. And as we'll see in our passage today, there's only one way back to God.

The book of Hosea is all about God's relationship with his people. And if you've been studying Hosea and Amos with us, you know that at this point in Israel's history, the relationship is strained, to say the least. In fact, the relationship has been broken by Israel's idolatry. They're cheating on God with other gods. So the Lord has some choice words for them, which he sends through the prophet Hosea. He says, "The problem is that you don't *know* me. In fact, you don't seem to *want* to know me. Well if that's the case, I'll give you exactly what you wish for. If you don't want to be my people, then I won't treat you like my people. If you want to walk around in the dark, then stay there. Let the monsoon rain fall. Let the waters rise. If you want to walk away from me, then I'll cut you off completely."

The Israelites are going to find themselves cut off from God. From his land, from his blessings, from all the privileges of being his people. Cut off from God like the Thai soccer team trapped in a cave. But there *is* a way back. There is *a* way back. One, singular way back. It's not an easy way, but there are no alternate routes. It's not a pleasant way, but it's the only way. That's what our passage today is all about. The only way to restoration is repentance. God's relationship with his people can still be restored, but it's God's way or the highway. There are lots of paths his people can take, but only one leads back to him. The only way to restoration is repentance.

So here's where we're headed today. As we open up this passage, we're going to look at what God has to say about restoration and repentance. Then we'll see some alternate routes that people try to

take to avoid repentance, and why none of them lead to restoration. Our text today is Hosea 6 and 7. This is a long text, so we'll read it section by section as we go along.

GOD DESIRES RESTORATION (6:1-3)

The first section of this passage reminds us of something about God. It's that God desires restoration. And that sounds kind of obvious, but in a book that's full of God's righteous wrath against sin, it's something we need to be reminded of. God is all about restoration. That's his mission. The first thing this passage does is remind us and assure us of God's intentions. And let's just be honest—we could use some reassurance after last week's message.

One of the highlights, or rather low-lights, of chapter 5 is when God says he's going to tear them like a lion. Or as Josh put it, God is gonna have them for lunch. But chapter 6 shows us God's purpose for "tearing" his people. He's disciplining them so that they return to him and he can heal them. Let's read verses 1-6.

Hosea 6:1-6¹

^{6:1} *"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."*

He tore his people so that he could heal them. He had to discipline them in order to bless them. He was like a lion to them, but he desires to be like a trauma surgeon. He was like a drought, but he'll be like rain. In 2:3 God said that because of Israel's spiritual adultery he would "make her like a wilderness, and make her like a parched land, and kill her with thirst." But now he wants to revive her like rain on parched ground.

God desires restoration. The first few verses of this passage make God's intentions clear. But they also make something else clear: there's a requirement for God's people. In order for God to change death to life, discipline to restoration, the discipline has to have its intended effect. Restoration is contingent upon something. It has a requirement.

RESTORATION REQUIRES REPENTANCE. (6:1-5)

This is the second thing the passage tells us right at the outset. Restoration requires repentance. The very first verse says, "Come, let us return to the Lord." God wants to restore his people and heal them and revive them, but first they have to return to him. Restoration requires repentance; they go hand in hand. God desires restoration, but he requires repentance. You can't separate what he desires from what he requires.

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

The image of returning—of turning around and going back—is a good picture of repentance. Repentance is a decisive change of direction. But it also has ongoing effects. It's not just a tearful apology, even a sincere one. If there's no ongoing change, then something has short-circuited. Repentance is a 180°, not a 360°. But that's the sort of half-hearted return to the Lord that Israel has given him. Look at what he says in verse 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."

Love that evaporates like a puddle on a hot summer day is no love at all. In fact, the very word for love here is often translated "steadfast love" as it is in verse 6. There's a commitment, a permanence to it. But God says "Your steadfast love is not steadfast." It's an oxymoron. Israel's love is a sham. But the Lord's love is steadfast. *He* has taken his covenant commitment seriously. He's committed to them, but they're not committed to him. Based on the evidence that God sees, they haven't truly repented. They haven't done a 180°; they're doing 360°s.

This is one of several times in Hosea where we get a glimpse of the inner turmoil God has about his people. He's caught between his own commitment to his covenant people and their constant trampling on the covenant. There's a tension between his own faithfulness and their faithlessness. So we see a side of God that seems strange. He's conflicted. He's vexed. He's frustrated. We see his desire for restoration, despite everything his people have done and continue to do to wrong him. This is not the picture of an angry, vengeful God but an unfathomably patient God. But he's frustrated because he won't separate what he desires from what he requires. He wants to restore but he can't—not without repentance. He persistently pursues the restoration of his people, but they persistently make it impossible. That's what the rest of our passage today is about.

GOD'S PEOPLE WANT RESTORATION WITHOUT REPENTANCE. (6:6-7:13a)

The rest of chapter 6 all the way through chapter 7 is a montage of unrepentance. God has made himself clear: he desires restoration, but it requires repentance. Yet his people continually and creatively avoid repentance. They want restoration without repentance. God's people want what God desires but not what he requires. They want what God offers, but they want an alternate route to get there. This passage shows us three "alternate routes" that God's people try to take to avoid repentance.

Alternate Route 1: Manipulation (6:6-11)

The first alternate route is manipulation. It's a mindset that treats God like a vending machine. What do I mean by that? Well, vending machines are predictable. You put in a certain amount of money, you press the right buttons, and you get exactly what you want. A vending machine is also relationally undemanding. It requires even less relating to people than the McDonald's drive-thru. You don't have to love a vending machine for it to give you your Coke Zero. And it's not going to run a background check on you. The vending machine does not care what you do outside of the money-for-Coke-Zero exchange. Well in verses 6-11, Israel seems to be treating God like a vending machine. And unsurprisingly, God doesn't take too kindly to it. He says,

Hosea 6:6-11a

*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*

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.*

Manipulation is all about using the things that someone else wants in order to get what you want. You appear to have their interests in mind, but really it's all about your interests. Israel is trying to use religious sacrifices to manipulate God. The sacrifices that God commanded were meant to be an expression of the people's love for God. So of course God desires their sacrifices. He wants a loving relationship with them. But if sacrifices are separated from true love and devotion for the Lord, then he despises them; they're worthless. Clearly that's the case here, because even the people set apart to carry out the sacrifices are covenant-breakers. The priests themselves are robbers and murderers. They don't love God or their neighbors. The people aren't using the sacrificial system as a way to love God but a way to use him, to manipulate him into giving them what they want.

And what is it they want? Well, each of the three alternate routes that people use to avoid repentance are revisited in a summary statement at the very end of our passage today (7:13b-16). God concludes his lament over his people's unrepentance by rehashing each aspect of it in quick succession. It's there, in chapter 7 verse 14, that we see what God's people are trying to get out of him through manipulation: "They do not cry to me from the heart, but they wail upon their beds; for grain and wine they gash themselves; they rebel against me."

They want grain and wine. They want their land to be fruitful, to provide everything they need and more. So they treat the Lord like just another pagan fertility god. As if by self-mutilation and sacrifice and wailing they can force his hand, force him to give up the material blessings that he's withholding. As if it's a simple sacrifice-for-blessing vending machine exchange. The irony is that he's withholding the blessings to discipline them, to get them to repent and turn back to him. But they haven't gotten the message. They want restoration without repentance. They want all the blessings that God can give, but they don't want to return to God with their whole self.

Well unfortunately for their plan, God isn't a vending machine or a pagan fertility god. He declares their sacrifices worthless and their nation impure. They want to be blessed with a rich harvest. Well, verse 6:11 says there's going to be a harvest alright, but it won't be the kind they want. There's going to be a day of reckoning, for Israel and for Judah. God makes it clear that the only way to restoration is through repentance, not manipulation.

Alternate Route 2: Deception (6:11b-7:7)

The second alternate route that God's people use to try to avoid repentance is deception. It's an attitude that treats God as if he's blind. As if he will bless and restore and prosper his people, and it

need not have any bearing on what they do in secret. But there's no such thing as secret sin with God. We see this alternate route from the end of chapter 6 through 7:7.

Hosea 6:11b-7:7

*When I restore the fortunes of my people,
^{7:1}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.
²But they do not consider
 that I remember all their evil.
 Now their deeds surround them;
 they are before my face.
³By their evil they make the king glad,
 and the princes by their treachery.
⁴They are all adulterers;
 they are like a heated oven
 whose baker ceases to stir the fire,
 from the kneading of the dough
 until it is leavened.
⁵On the day of our king, the princes
 became sick with the heat of wine;
 he stretched out his hand with mockers.
⁶For with hearts like an oven they approach their intrigue;
 all night their anger smolders;
 in the morning it blazes like a flaming fire.
⁷All of them are hot as an oven,
 and they devour their rulers.
 All their kings have fallen,
 and none of them calls upon me.*

Rather than repentance, here there's only deception. We can see this deception first in the way that the Lord describes them as sneaky, plotting, deceitful people. In verse 1 he says they deal falsely, they're thieves and bandits. Verse 3 says they're treacherous. Verse 6 says they approach their intrigue, and they move by night. And the summary statement in 7:15 says "Although I trained and strengthened their arms, yet they devise evil against me." They think that God is blindfolded, that he doesn't see what they're up to.

But this passage lets us see them with God's eyes. Verse 1 says their iniquity is "revealed." Yet, in verse 2, "they do not consider that I remember all their evil." It's not even a possibility in their minds that God might take notice and hold them accountable for their actions. But God says "now their deeds surround them; they are before my face." He can't *help* but see what they've done. When he looks at them, that's what he sees. Three times in the first three verses we see the word "evil." "The evil deeds of Samaria"; "I remember all their evil"; "by their evil they make the king glad." This is what God sees: evil, evil, evil. They think they don't need to repent because God doesn't see, but their evil deeds are staring God in the face.

And he doesn't just see their *deeds*. He also sees their hearts, burning with desire for all the wrong things. Verses 4-7 let us see with God's eyes one level deeper. The people think God is wearing a blindfold, but he's really wearing infrared goggles. He doesn't just see their deeds. He sees the heat burning inside them, lusting after every pleasure that their twisted heart's desire. We're given an image of an oven left overnight to burn hotter and hotter. There's a crescendo, a building intensity, in the imagery of this section. Nothing can sate their desire for more. Like a fire burning out of control, their wickedness becomes all-encompassing. In verse 6 "*all* night their anger smolders; *all* of them are hot as an oven; *all* their kings have fallen." All, all, all, "and *none* of them calls upon me." And as a fire devours everything it touches, "they devour their rulers." When you're ruled by a desire to consume, you end up consuming yourself. But when your sin starts to have its ill effects, when it starts to consume you, it's an opportunity to realize that God sees. It's an opportunity to call upon him.

If God doesn't see and won't hold us accountable, then there's no reason to repent. But God sees. If we think we're getting away with something, we're not deceiving God, we're deceiving ourselves. If we want what God offers, if we want the fulfillment of all our longings, if we want restoration, then the only route to get there is repentance.

Alternate Route 3: Damage Control (7:8-13a)

The third alternate route used to avoid repentance is damage control. This is like saying "I don't need God." It's an attempt to remain in sin while minimizing the fallout that results from sin. For Israel this meant that when things start to fall apart they go to the surrounding nations for help. But as we saw last week, that's the epitome of foolishness, because they're looking for help from the very people who will soon destroy them. In fact, the surrounding nations are already destroying Israel, because the idolatrous practices they've imported are rotting them from within. Let's see what God says starting in verse 8.

Hosea 7:8-13a

⁸*Ephraim mixes himself with the peoples;*

Ephraim is a cake not turned.

⁹*Strangers devour his strength,*

and he knows it not;

gray hairs are sprinkled upon him,

and he knows it not.

¹⁰*The pride of Israel testifies to his face;*

yet they do not return to the LORD their God,

nor seek him, for all this.

¹¹*Ephraim is like a dove,*

silly and without sense,

calling to Egypt, going to Assyria.

¹²*As they go, I will spread over them my net;*

I will bring them down like birds of the heavens;

I will discipline them according to the report made to their congregation.

¹³*Woe to them, for they have strayed from me!*

Destruction to them, for they have rebelled against me!

God's people think that foreign gods and foreign aid are their salvation, but they'll be Israel's downfall. Damage control only leads to further damage in their relationship with God.

Notice the character trait that lies behind damage control: it's pride. They think they're strong, but they're not. They're so prideful that they don't even realize their strength is being sapped by these other nations and their gods. The evidence of their weakness and need for God is all around them. But they don't bring their need to the Lord; they bring their pride and self-sufficiency. They fly to and fro like a foolish bird, looking for help anywhere else but the Lord. Well he's going to bring them down to the ground. He's going to bring them low. Because relying on other things rather than relying on the Lord isn't giving God a hand. It's not taking something off God's to-do list. It's rebellion.

But somehow, even groveling before these other nations seems better to Israel than humbling themselves before the Lord. As the summary statement in verse 16 says, "they return, but not upward." They know something has gone wrong. Sin is having its effect on Israel. Things are falling apart. They know that a change of direction is required; things can't continue like this. But they don't turn to the Lord; they turn to the left and to the right. They don't turn upward.

When your sin starts to catch up with you, does it cause you to turn to God, or to just flee even more? When you wrong someone and they're upset at you, do you just do something to try to make the problem go away, to just make peace without actually repenting? Or can you humble yourself and admit that you've sinned against them and against God? There's a way to restoration, but it's not damage control, it's repentance.

There are at least three alternate routes that you can take to avoid repentance. But repentance is the only way to restoration. If you're avoiding repentance, then you're avoiding restoration as well.

At the beginning of this final summary statement, in verse 13, God says that avoiding repentance is like lying. He says "I would redeem them, but they speak lies against me." He wants to restore his people, but they make it impossible because they lie. He says "I want to make things right. I want to lavish gifts upon you. I want to revive you like rain on a parched land. But you won't let me because you will not tell the truth.

They speak lies. They lie with their manipulative sacrifices. They lie with their secret sins. They lie with their arrogant self-sufficiency. In all of these things, they're lying to themselves as much as they're lying to God. And if you've listened to this whole sermon and shook your head at all the foolish ways of Israel and haven't seen *yourself* in any of it, you might be lying, to yourself and to God. You're in luck though, because there's a simple solution: tell the truth.

First John 1:8-9 says "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." There's only one way to stop lying. It's to tell the truth. It's to admit to God and to yourself who you really are. To admit that not only are you sinful but you have specifically chosen sin. If you're still lying, you can choose now to speak the truth and return to God. Because repentance is the only way to restoration.

FULL RESTORATION IS RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

But why? Why is repentance the only way to restoration? Why won't God separate what he desires from what he requires? Well the answer is obvious when we have a full picture of restoration. Full restoration is right relationship with God. We might be willing to settle for something less, but he is not. Full restoration is right relationship.

If we're honest, sometimes we want a God who gives us everything we want and makes sure nothing bad ever happens. Who also stays out of our business and doesn't care how we live our lives. But God doesn't just want to dole out material blessings. Ultimately, he wants to bless us in the context of a loving relationship. That's what true, full restoration is—the restoration of our relationship with God. If restoration was just about material blessings then God could tolerate some deception, and he wouldn't care if people relied on things other than him. He'd be satisfied just to dole out prosperity. But God's not like that. He wants us to know and be known by him.

This isn't that outlandish of a desire. Just as an example: those of you who are parents, what feels good—giving in to your child's manipulative tactics and buying them what they want, or buying that perfect gift out of joy because they love you and you love them? The latter, right? And this, my friends, is why parents avoid the toy aisle at Walmart like the plague. When you bring your kid there they typically have a meltdown because they want some particular toy. And nothing makes you want to buy that toy *less* than your child having a tantrum to get you to buy it. It doesn't feel good to be manipulated. Now you know what God feels like. Parents hate the toy aisle because it turns their kids into little pagans. And they don't want manipulative pagans, they want to give good gifts within a loving relationship. God wants the same thing with his children.

But having that sort of relationship requires the exact opposite of what's going on in Israel at this point. It means steadfast love that puts the other person's interests first, not manipulation that puts my interests first. It means intimate knowledge of one another, not deception. It means thankful dependence upon God, not prideful, self-reliant damage control.

The people want partial restoration in exchange for partial repentance. They want the blessings without the relationship. But God doesn't settle for partial restoration. He wants relationship. And that means there are no alternate routes. He will not be manipulated. He will not be deceived. He will not be replaced.

This passage shows us how to return to God by showing us how *not* to return. It also shows us that God is worth returning to. All of us have at some time and in some way rejected God's love, but he is the God who does not give up. We can "press on to know the Lord" because he pressed on first. He was persistent. The stubbornness of our rebellion could not overcome the stubbornness of his love. He would not let his people go, so he pursued us. He pursued us all the way to Calvary. For his faithless wife he remained faithful. For his disobedient children he was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

This is why learning to love again—learning to love God—starts with learning about God's love. If you know God (intellectually and experientially), if you get a taste of relating to the God who is love, then these other paths don't look so appealing. When you know the Lord, you actually *want* to "press on to know the Lord." And that means when you find yourself in sin, breaking fellowship with God, there's only one way back. There's only one path that will get you to where you want to be, and it's the path of return, of repentance. It can be painful. But when there's something you want more than anything else in the world, you don't mind so much that there's only one, difficult, way to get it.

You know, I bet that Thai soccer team would have loved an alternate route to the surface. But there was only one way back. They could have gone down other branches of the cave if they wanted, but these wouldn't have changed their situation. They'd still be in a cave. If you take an alternate route

to get around repentance, you haven't actually gotten anywhere. It might feel like you've made progress, but you're still in the dark.

Those boys were in a cave with only one route to the surface. It was not an easy route. The boys did all make it out alive, but it required going underwater in a tunnel, and none of the boys knew how to swim. Like repentance, it was not easy or comfortable, but it was the only way.

It took an international team of hundreds of people to make that way out possible. Our way out of sin and darkness was made possible by one person: Jesus Christ. He's made a way for us; we just have to take it. The only way to restoration with God is repentance.