

## Hosea'S Prophecy (Part Six)

Hosea 12-13

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I am going to continue my analysis of Hosea's prophecy relating to the current condition and situation of the descendants of the Israelites today. Today, we as a people are making the same mistakes and sins: Sabbath-breaking, idolatry, unbelief, sexual immorality, greed, hypocrisy, apostasy, and more. They did these same evils during the days of Hosea, and that is why he touches on things that are so similar to what we are dealing with today in this nation.

In analyzing Hosea's prophecy in my last five sermons, we have seen Hosea depict Israel's unfaithfulness with a number of images from family and nature. Israel is like a promiscuous wife, an indifferent mother, an illegitimate child, an ungrateful son, a stubborn heifer, a silly dove, a luxuriant vine, and wild grapes. Yet Israel's unfaithfulness and obstinacy are not enough to exhaust God's redeeming love that outstrips the human capacity to comprehend.

Historically, the purpose and background of Hosea pertained to the latter half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., and certain aspects of Baalism. But more importantly, Hosea stresses divine sovereignty with God speaking in the first person. He says "I" almost 100 times in Hosea's prophecy. The latter days of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. witnessed the rise of the Neo-Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III, who ruled from 745 to 727 B.C. He was followed by several capable kings who extended Assyrian dominance over the entire ancient Near East, eventually including Egypt, for more than a century. These were powerful, worldly men. Particularly relevant to Hosea were at least six incursions into Palestine and its neighbors by an unstoppable Assyrian army during Hosea's lifetime. Conquest and exile were the most dreaded fate in Biblical times.

This perennial threat hanging over Israel, specifically the Northern Kingdom, came with a time of unparalleled political upheaval and instability, quite similar to what we are experiencing today. Following the rule of Jeroboam II of Israel, the nation had six kings within 30 years, a period filled with conspiracy and violence. I counted up very quickly, and we have had eight presidents in the last 30 years, and it has been unstable as well. These presidents have not had the power that the kings had, and now we are seeing a president who does have quite a bit of power that kings had in the past, and the havoc that he is wreaking upon us all.

Zachariah, who ruled circa 753 B.C., was murdered after only six months in power. The

usurper Shallum was assassinated one month later. The next king, Menahem, ruled 752 to 742 B.C., surviving for a decade only by paying a burdensome tribute to Tiglath-Pileser. Menahem's son, Pekahiah, who ruled from 742 to 740 B.C., just two years, was assassinated by an army officer, Pekah, who ruled from 740 to 732 B.C. After only two years of reign, subsequently Pekah was deposed of by Hoshea who rebelled against the Assyrians, which led to the end of the Northern Kingdom. Hoshea ruled from 732 to 722 B.C. These specific dates do not matter that much to us, but I am showing you that these were very short reigns, and the instability that went on during the time Hosea wrote.

Within this chaotic 30 year period, external conflicts and failures of international diplomacy repeatedly proved disastrous for the Northern Kingdom. These times are reflected in Hosea, whose primary audience was Ephraim, which represented the Northern Kingdom of Israel, mentioned 35 times in the book. Ephraim had provided Israel's King Jeroboam II during the time that Hosea wrote this prophecy.

Hosea's major concern was the worship of Baal, an apostasy that he understood to be the reason for Israel's dilemma, and the sins that were associated with that idolatry. Baal was the weather god, worshipped in Assyria Palestine, who was said to have control over agriculture, fertility, rainfall, and productivity. Since ancient Israel was always an agricultural society, Baal worship was of unrivaled importance in Israel.

Baal was localized at different shrines, identified by such names as Baal-Peor and Baal-Gad, and thus was sometimes referred to as "the Baals," meaning there was more than one. While a full description of this religion is not possible here, one major aspect of Baalism touches on Hosea's message, which is the religion's appeal to human sexuality. Americans can certainly relate to that. Israel expresses this great sin a great way at this time of its deterioration.

Here is how Isaiah is inspired to describe the Israelites at about the same time that Hosea wrote:

**Isaiah 57:3-8** "But come here, you sons of the sorceress, you offspring of the adulterer and the harlot! Whom do you ridicule? Against whom do you make a wide mouth and stick out the tongue? Are you not children of transgression, offspring of falsehood, inflaming yourselves with gods under every green tree, slaying the children in the valleys, under the clefts of the rocks? Among the smooth stones of the stream is your portion; they, they, are your lot! Even to them you have poured a drink offering, [this is partially associated to the worship of the environment, or environmentalism as we

know it today], you have offered a grain offering. Should I receive comfort in these?”

“On a lofty and high mountain you have set your bed; even there you went up to offer sacrifice. Also behind the doors and their posts you have set up your remembrance; for you have uncovered yourself to those other than Me [speaking of spiritual lewdness, nakedness, and the religions that were so lewdly carried out], and have gone up to them; you have enlarged your bed and made a covenant with them; you have loved their bed, where you saw their nudity.”

Other aspects, such as drunkenness, bestiality, human sacrifice, mutilations, and incest may be discerned in Hosea's prophecy, but Hosea understands the strength of Baalism's appeal to the sex drive by the way of ritual prostitution.

This amount of sexual intimacy at one of the pagan shrines should be understood as an act of imitative magic. That is, sexual behavior at these shrines was expected to cause the Baals to respond in like manner: to follow the worshippers by producing for them fertile seed and rain for a good crop. This wicked intimacy took place with cult prostitutes. Later, in New Testament times, the city of Corinth was known for similar temple prostitution (Richard mentioned that in his recent sermon).

In Hosea 4:14, Hosea quotes God as saying:

**Hosea 4:14** “I will not punish your daughters when they commit harlotry, nor your brides when they commit adultery; for the men themselves go apart with harlots, and offer sacrifices with a ritual harlot. Therefore people who do not understand will be trampled.”

God is saying that He is going to allow these things to take their course. The sins that these people commit in the way of immorality, both physical and spiritual (which is idolatry as well) —God was going to let the natural course of things take them, trample them, destroy them. He did not have to always punish them for the sins, because there were certain things that were designed into life. For example, sexual sins—I do not know how many there are, but I know that there are more than 63 sexually transmitted diseases—take their course, and eventually, kill, destroy, and make people suffer. Most of those diseases are incurable.

When a worshipper selected a prostitute, he prayed, "I beseech you, the goddess of Ashtare, to favor you and Baal to favor me." There was also glutinous eating and heavy drinking at the shrines as an act of worship.

Hosea's approach is dominated by his knowledge that God's people have been joined to the Lord. Hosea makes a number of references to Israel's past to remind them of that. Israel is the Lord's bride, and Israel has instead become joined to the Baals, and that is where the spiritual adultery has come in.

Worship of Baal is not just a violation of the first of the Ten Commandments; it is a betrayal of the intimate and endearing union that God made with His people through covenant. Therefore, idolatry is depicted as spiritual adultery, transgression against the marriage between the Lord and Israel.

Hosea justifies the Lord's coming judgments with a litany of offenses that amount to the radical ingratitude of an unfaithful wife. But punishment is not ultimately what God wants for His people. He desires that they leave their sexual immorality and return to the one who first loved them, and can certainly provide the best for them.

In Hosea 11, God speaks of His sovereignty in choosing Israel in the first place. He appeals to this same attribute in chapter 12. They have not chosen Him, but He has chosen them, and so set is His choice that He will not allow them to be totally destroyed. He will call them from the lands to which they have been driven. God's mercies in the past certainly proved His love. But Hosea offered a second evidence that God loved His people. That second evidence is God's disciplines in the present.

In Hosea 12, God, through His prophet Hosea, makes a parallel charge against Judah. Up until now, the charges have been against Ephraim and Israel, Ephraim representing the northern tribes of Israel. But now, He makes a parallel charge against Judah. During the 50 or so years of Hosea's ministry, as prophet to Israel, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah went their separate ways.

They had been one nation once, under David and his successor Solomon, but after Solomon's death, the unwise policies of the young King Rehoboam quickly pushed the northern tribes to rebellion. Solomon had taxed the people heavily. The northerners asked Rehoboam to grant relief from the burdensome taxation, and he replied that rather than lighten their load, he would increase it. He said that his father Solomon "had lashed them with whips, but that he would lash them with scorpions," meaning he would tax them until it stung, and made them sick—which is exactly what we are facing today; it is about to happen to the United States.

This spark ignited the rebellion, and from that time on, the northern ten tribes were known as Israel, and the two southern tribes as Judah, from the name of the larger tribe. At their own pace, and according to their own individual sins, each went on its own course to destruction.

By the time of the writing of Hosea's prophecy, shortly before the fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria in 721 B.C., the two nations had been separate for nearly 200 years. In spite of their separate history over this long period of time, Israel and Judah were still one people whose destinies were inseparably connected. It is similar to the relationship between the United States and Britain, or even the United States and Canada, and how we are still one people, thinking the same and speaking the same language, but we have been separate for over 200 years.

True, Israel and Judah declined at different rates, and fell to their enemies at different times. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 587 B.C., but the pattern was similar and the cause identical. Each forgot God.

Because of this intertwined history and common destiny, the prophecy of Hosea, which up to this point has been directed almost exclusively against Israel, now includes a brief word regarding Judah also. The word begins with Hosea 12:2, and is present in one form or another throughout this chapter. The verses dealing with Judah begin in verse 2.

**Hosea 12:2-6** "The Lord also brings a charge against Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways; according to his deeds He will recompense him. He took his brother by the heel in the womb, and in his strength he struggled with God. Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed; he wept, and sought favor from Him. He found Him in Bethel, and there He spoke to us—that is, the Lord God of hosts. The Lord is His memorable name. So you, by the help of your God, return [speaking to Judah]; observe mercy and justice, and wait on your God continually."

So these words in verse 2, "The Lord has a charge to bring against Judah," make us think of the beginning of chapter 4, which reads, "Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land." Here in Hosea, God has brought a charge against both Israel and Judah. In this case, Hosea 12:2-6 is the charge against Judah.

In the earlier passage, there is a statement of God's formal case against Israel, a case

presented from Hosea 4:1 to the end of the prophecy, exclusive of Hosea 12:2-6. This passage is a deliberate reference to that. It is briefer, only five verses, plus some indirect references later on, but the idea is the same. Although Judah is not as far along the slippery path of decline as Israel, she is nevertheless on that path as well, and is therefore likewise endangered. She must repent —apart from repentance, her doom will be as certain as the doom of Israel. So Judah has the opportunity to watch Israel decline, make the sinful mistakes that she did, and learn from it. But we know through history that she lasted another 100 years or so before she came to the same demise. Even though she had that vivid example, and was able to watch that, still it did not convince her.

It appears that the fate of Judah is not fixed yet, here in Hosea. In contrast, Israel's fate is fixed. Although it will not mean the final annihilation of the people, and will be followed by a future calling of them out of their places of captivity, judgment is coming to Israel at this point in Hosea. Not so with Judah. In her case, there is still time to repent of sin and avoid that destruction.

What would it take for her to do this? Hosea answers by review of the life and spiritual experiences of Israel's and Judah's common ancestor, Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. Apparently, Hosea identifies Jacob with Judah primarily here. He says, "The Lord has a charge to bring against Judah and will punish Jacob according to his ways." But Jacob was a common ancestor, and his association with the northern site in Bethel makes him a basis on which to appeal to Israel also. So although this is directed at Judah in these five verses (Hosea 12:2-6), it still applies to Israel as well. It is a double warning to Israel.

Hosea alludes to three episodes in Jacob's life. The first episode concerns Jacob's birth, with which his original name is associated. Jacob was a twin born to Isaac and Rebecca. His brother was Esau. Genesis tells us that the two babies were struggling with each other in Rebecca's womb before the birth, and that when they were born, although Jacob was born second, and was therefore technically the younger brother, he emerged grasping Esau's heel, hanging on for dear life—which was an example of what he would do for most of his life.

Genesis 25:26 indicates that his name came from this incident. In Hebrew, *Jacob* means "heel grasper" or "supplanter." "Grasp the heel" also meant to go behind one's back in order to deceive or trick him, and this became the dominant characteristic of the man Jacob. Jacob was always second: second in his birth and strength, and in the favor of his father. He was always trying to use his wits to trick and thus get ahead of anyone that got in his way.

Although Hosea does not mention it specifically, most Jewish readers would be aware of Jacob's cheating his brother Esau of his birthright, and of the all-important death bed blessing of their father. What Hosea does say is that Jacob struggled with God. He thought he could handle God the same way he was always trying to handle other people. He thought he would trick God, or at least manipulate Him to do what he wanted, and what he wanted at that time was a blessing.

This is the point at which the story comes home, because what better describes the religion of Israel and Judah, and at times, unfortunately, even ourselves, than the attempt to use God, or to force God, or to try to obligate God to do something that we want Him to do? Israel and Judah thought that if they went through the prescribed religious rituals—prayer, fasting, sacrifice, feast days, the worship of Him—that this would inevitably bind God to them and oblige Him to prosper and protect them, regardless of what their true spiritual or moral state should be.

Human nature has always thought like that, and it does also today. People think that if they go through the forms of religion, God will be obligated to prosper them. Although they do not really love or faithfully obey Him, they are always shocked when disciplines of any sort come on them. We will talk more about God's disciplines later in the sermon.

The second episode in Jacob's life that Hosea alludes to is the crucial one: Jacob at the Jabbok, which was a brook or stream. His struggle with the angel at Jabbok was the turning point in his otherwise undistinguished career. The story requires a bit of background. Having cheated his brother of his birthright and blessing, Jacob had been forced to run for his life. At this point, with nowhere else to go, he went back toward Haran, the country from which his ancestors came. Here he met his uncle Laban. You are very familiar with the story. He married two of Laban's daughters and worked for Laban as a shepherd for more than 20 years. In time, the Lord spoke to Jacob and said, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you." That is recorded in Genesis 31:3. That was good news to Jacob, because it coincided with a period of particularly bad relations between himself and Laban.

He immediately started off, and he probably did so with a spring in his step, because he had more or less forgotten what he had done in cheating his brother. Back then, Esau had said he would kill him, but that was 20 years before, and 20 years is a long time. Maybe, Jacob thought, Esau would have forgotten by now.

But then Jacob probably continued to think, suppose he had not? Suppose he remembered? Jacob began to have doubts, and the closer he got to the land from which he had come, and in which he saw Esau was still living, the more doubtful he became.

He became anxious, and then frightened. Each step became more difficult as he drew closer to Esau.

Finally, Jacob came to the brook of Jabbok, which marked the border of Esau's territory. He was petrified. If he could have gone back, he probably would have, but things had become so difficult with Laban that retreat was cut off. He had nowhere to go but forward. As he stood on the east bank of the Jabbok, Jacob asked himself what he was going to do. He reasoned that the wise thing would be to find out what the situation was, so he sent some of his servants over the Jabbok ahead of him, to find out about Esau.

If they found him, they were to identify Jacob as his servant, tell briefly about the past 20 years, and ask Esau for a favorable reception. The servants went, met Esau, and came back with this news recorded in Genesis 32:6-8.

**Genesis 32:6** (NIV) When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, "We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."

The first thought Jacob probably had was "he is bringing an army with him," because 400 men is certainly a substantial army against a family, even a large family.

**Genesis 32:7-8** So Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels into two companies. And he said, "If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the other company which is left will escape."

So he began to pray, asking God to protect him, and I am sure he was praying fairly fervently at that time. But even while he was praying, his mind was working on plans that might overcome his brother's antagonism. His faith and trust in God were very weak. He decided to begin to give up his possessions.

First, he took a flock of 200 female goats and sent them ahead of him toward Esau. He put a servant in charge, and instructed the servant in this way:

**Genesis 32:17-18** And he commanded the first one, saying "When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, saying, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going? Whose are these in front of you?' then you shall say, 'They are your servant Jacob's. It is a present sent to my lord Esau; and

behold, he also is behind us.”

Jacob thought that he might soften Esau's heart in this way, and escape with his life. But then he got to thinking (I do not know how long it took him to think this way, probably immediately), “Suppose the flock of 200 female goats was not enough? Suppose Esau was not satisfied?” He decided to send 20 male goats after them, so the number of animals is accumulating. After the male goats, Jacob sent 200 ewes. After the ewes, there were 20 rams. After the rams, he sent 30 female camels and their young. Then came 40 cows, ten bulls, 20 female donkeys, ten male donkeys—was he terrified of Esau, his brother? He must have been, because he was trying to pay him off.

**Genesis 32:20-21** “...and also say [Jacob's instructions to his servants], ‘Behold, your servant Jacob is behind us.’” For he said, “I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.” So the present went on over before him, but he himself lodged that night in the camp.

When morning came, Jacob carried out more of the same strategy, this time with his family. Since the flocks were gone, he sent his two wives, their children, and the closest family servants ahead of him over the Jabbok. Apparently, as Genesis 33 indicates, he sent the servants first, since he valued them least, then he sent Leah, who was his least favorite wife with her children, and finally he sent Rachel, his favorite. You can just see the man's human reasoning working full time here. He may have had some faith in God, but he had more faith in his own methods at this point. I do not know, only God can judge the heart.

Everything was stretched out in bands across the desert toward Esau. Last of all, at the very back of the procession, was Jacob. All alone and trembling. He had given up his possessions, even his family, but he was still the same old Jacob, and he had not given up his self quite yet.

**Genesis 32:24-29** Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. And He said, “Let Me go, for the day breaks.” But he said, “I will not let You go unless You bless me!” So he said to him, “What is your name?” He said, “Jacob.” And He said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with

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God and with men, and have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked, saying, “Tell me Your name, I pray.” And He said, “Why is it that you ask about My name?” And He blessed him there.

Jacob now, at the point of true personal commitment, cried out for a blessing and was blessed. He was now continuing to change his life. As a symbol of that commitment and resulting blessing, the Eternal changed his name. Before, it had been Jacob, the heel-grasper, the cheat, the supplanter; and now it became Israel, which meant “one who had struggled with God and been overcome.”

The third and final episode from Jacob's life referred to by Hosea is the patriarch's meeting with God at Bethel, recorded in Genesis 35. Jacob had been at Bethel once before; in fact, he had named it. Bethel means “house of God,” and Jacob had named it that because he had received a vision there of a staircase reaching to heaven. On that earlier occasion, Jacob had been his old self, and he had bargained with God, promising to tithe to Him, to give Him a tenth of his possessions if God would prosper him.

**Genesis 28:20-22** Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God. [Here he is, bargaining with God, or trying to.] And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.”

He knew that tithing was the right thing to do. His father Abraham certainly tithed. All Christians certainly should be tithing, if they are not, then how could they be Christians?

Here Jacob was, trying to bargain with God, with something that was God's already, because God owns that tithe, and we are just giving it back to Him. However, on his return, he was a different man. This time, he did not bargain with God. On the way, he had instructed his household and servants to get rid of whatever idols they may still have had, to purify themselves and change their clothes, and that is all he is reported as saying.

Jacob, that is Israel, stands before God humbly to hear what God will say, and to receive whatever instructions He has for him. This is the point to which Judah must come, according to Hosea. She is not there yet; on the contrary, she was far from it, but

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she can go in that direction if she chooses. That is what Hosea 12:2-6 are all about.

**Hosea 12:6** So you, by the help of your God, return; observe mercy and justice, and wait on your God continually.

In her current state, Judah is like Jacob at the Jabbok: still bargaining with God, but able to surrender to Him, if she will only learn from her present needs and setbacks.

So much for Judah, what about Israel, Ephraim, as Hosea likes to call her? The indictment of Ephraim is not good, as we have seen. She is dishonest, rich, and arrogantly confident that no one will ever be able to prove her guilty of any sin, and she will be driven from God's land.

**Hosea 12:7-8** "A cunning Canaanite! [This is the description of Ephraim, one of the main tribes of Israel, but it also includes Israel.] Deceitful scales are in his hand; he loves to oppress. And Ephraim said, 'Surely I have become rich, I have found wealth for myself; in all my labors they shall find in me no iniquity that is sin.'"

There is a word in the Hebrew in verse 7 that is obscured in most of the English translations; it is the word *Canaan* or *Canaanite*, here in the New King James Version, but translated *merchant* in most translations. This word stands first and isolated in verse 7. *Canaanite* also means merchant, with an emphasis in being dishonest in trade. But by translating it *merchant*, Hosea's deliberate reference to the people of the land is obscured. So he just says merchant here, but the original Hebrew also carries with it the meaning of dishonest in trade. Basically, it is a cheating merchant.

Cultic prostitution was common. People worshipped symbols of the sex organs, like obelisks. In our nation today and the "Christian" nations today, many churches, if not most, have obelisks, the steeple over the top of them. So even to this day, the ones who are calling themselves "Christian" in the mainstream Christian religions are putting these phallic symbols on top of their buildings and still worshipping as the Israelites and Judah did, way back then. They were worshipping the Baals with these obelisks, and today this nation does the same thing. There is the Washington Monument, standing prominent right down from the Capitol building. There is another huge obelisk in Baltimore in the center of town. There are obelisks all over this nation, not just related to religion, but related to that ancient Baalism.

The point is this: before Israel settled in the land promised to them by God, the land was called Canaan. It was an abominable place. Not only was it a center for all types of commercial dishonesty, it was also notorious for its sexual and religious immorality. So when Israel was sent into Canaan under Joshua, she was given the task of rooting out this corruption and establishing a culture marked by holiness instead. Israel's task was to make Canaan Israel.

What happened, though? Because of rebellion, Israel allowed Canaan to make Israel Canaan. Israel became idolatrous, immoral. Instead of Israel going into the land, taking it over, and making it Israel, she absorbed the Canaanite rituals and Baalism religion and became Canaan. That is why Hosea uses the term in verse 7, "a cunning Canaanite." That is the term he is using for Israel and Ephraim. Israel took on the character of the native dwellers in the land and lost his identity as Israel.

The character of the old Jacob, of greed and trickery, lives on in the people and makes them a better Canaanite than Israelite. The code of the covenant has given way to the philosophy of the unscrupulous trader, or the unjust merchant. This happens in spite of God's gracious dealings with His people, as Hosea goes on to show.

**Hosea 12:9-12** "But I am the Lord your God, ever since the land of Egypt; I will again make you dwell in tents, as in the days of the appointed feast. I have also spoken by the prophets, and have multiplied visions; I have given symbols through the witness of the prophets." Though Gilead has idols—surely they are vanity—though they sacrifice bulls in Gilgal, indeed their altars shall be heaps in the furrows of the field. [Today we can see the archeologists' pictures of the areas that used to be these towns in the northern tribes, and all they are, are heaps in the furrows of the field, barely seen, hardly anything left.] Jacob fled to the country of Syria; Israel served for a spouse, and for a wife he tended sheep.

God had revealed Himself to them, and there are two references to prophets in verse 10 and verse 13, which we will get to. Verses 9 and 13 mention that He had delivered them from Egypt. He cared for them, but they rebelled, and Hosea puts it together at the end.

**Hosea 12:13-14** By a prophet the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt, and by a prophet he was preserved. Ephraim provoked Him to anger most bitterly; therefore his Lord will leave the guilt of his bloodshed upon him, and return his reproach upon him.

So Israel had provoked the Eternal to anger with her sin, and Hosea was probably alluding here to idolatry because the Hebrew word rendered “provoked to anger” is frequently used in reference to idols. In response to this, the Eternal would not extend forgiveness; He would leave upon the nation its guilt, and He would repay her for her evil. As I mentioned in the last sermon, God would do this by allowing and also helping the enemies of Israel to attack her. That is exactly what happened to both Israel and Judah—they were taken into captivity.

Thus far, in our study of Hosea 12, we have had two pictures: a picture of a southern nation, Judah, standing on the brink of decision at her own personal Jabbok; and a picture of the northern kingdom, Israel, represented by Ephraim, as having passed beyond the point of recovery. But there is also a third picture to be considered, and though it is not presented in this chapter, it is the proper picture, the one to which these pictures point by comparison. What is that picture?

It is of faithful, reasonable service to the God of salvation. We find it in the Apostle Paul’s epistle to the Romans.

**Romans 12:1** I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

Why was such service reasonable? Let me give you four explanations. First, it is reasonable service because of what God has done for us. This is the significance of the word “therefore” that begins this chapter. “Therefore” refers back to everything that Paul has already said in his epistle. He had begun in the earlier chapters to write about our sin and need, our spiritual immorality before God, and he reminds us of our inability to please Him—the fact that none of us is righteousness, that none understands spiritual things, that none seeks after God. He is talking about how we had been, before our conversion.

Yet when we were in that state, God sent His son Jesus Christ to die in our place, to provide a magnificent salvation that answers our need on all levels. We were not righteousness, but we were all made righteousness in Christ. We did not understand spiritual things, but He gives us spiritual understanding. We did not seek after Him, but He sought us. Paul unfolds this great plan of salvation, and when he gets to Romans 12, he says “it is reasonable for us to serve God.”

Second, it is reasonable service because of what God is presently doing in us. Salvation

is not just a past thing; salvation is also a present experience, as well as a future reality. It is not only under the penalty of sin that we suffer. There is also the power of sin, and we know how difficult it is to make changes in life, break habits, and to live a life pleasing to God, because we work at it every single day of our lives.

God, through the Holy Spirit, provides us with the mind of God, which helps us grow through the process of conversion and salvation. As we come to God, praying to Him and studying His word, we grow spiritually. So Paul says, for that reason too, it is reasonable to serve God.

The third reason it is reasonable service is because such service is God's will for us. This is what Romans 12 goes on to express.

**Romans 12:2** And do not be conformed to this world [the Phillips translation says "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold," and we look around us and see that is exactly what the world is doing to so many people, and even in the church, we are constantly fighting to keep our children from being squeezed into the mold of the world.], but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

So what is God's will for you? We ask that question to ourselves on a regular basis. What is God's will for me? God's will expresses itself in many ways. They differ in every case. But fundamentally, God's will is for us to become like the Father and His Son, and to be in their family.

Furthermore, lest we think that this will is something hard, difficult, abstract, or irrational, Paul gives three adjectives to tell us what the will of God is. First, it is good, he says. God is the master of the understatement. If God says His will is good, it is good with a capital "G." It is good, in that it is good beyond anything else. Second, it is acceptable, that is, pleasing to God, or which He will approve of. Do not say that God's will is hard; you do not understand what God is doing if you think in those terms. God's will is the most acceptable and reasonable thing there is. Third, it is perfect. When Paul says "perfect," what he really says is that it cannot be improved upon. It is complete and it is consistently right.

It is significant that this is where Paul's statements about being transformed by the renewing of our minds, rather than being conformed to the patterns of this world, end. They end with proving the way of God to be the best way, and the will of God to be

perfect. This means that action is needed, and God is not producing “yellow pencil” Christians. He is forming people who will prove the value of God’s way by conscious, right choices, and deliberate obedience.

The present evil age still threatens those who belong to Christ, so we must resist its pressures. Our lives are changed as our minds are made new, so that we are able to discern God’s will. “Transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove” means that we are to find out the worth of God’s truth and way of life by putting it to use and testing it in actual practice. Today, when Christians talk about discovering the will of God, what they usually have in mind is praying until God somehow discloses a specific direction for their lives: who they should marry, what job they should take, what house they should buy, and so forth. This is not exactly what proving the will of God means, nor is it what Romans 12:2 is teaching. The will of God is far more important than that.

Let us distinguish between three meanings of the word “will.” First, God’s sovereign will, which is hidden and is not revealed to us except as it unfolds in history. Second, God’s moral will, which is revealed in scripture. Third, God’s specific will for individuals, which is what people are usually thinking about when they speak of searching or finding out God’s will.

God does indeed have a specific, but usually hidden, will for us, in addition to the overall will that I mentioned earlier, of becoming like God the Father and Jesus Christ and entering into His family. God does indeed have a specific will for us, and God does sometimes reveal that will in special situations. We may not know what that specific will is, and we do not need to be under pressure to discover it, fearing that if we miss it somehow, we will be doomed to a life outside the center of God’s will. We are free to make decisions with that light and wisdom we have been given and have developed. Remember, wisdom is the right use of knowledge. God gives us leeway to make decisions, and sometimes those decisions are bad. But what we are working toward is perfection, as Hebrews 6:1 says.

Nevertheless, we can know that God has a perfect will for us, that Jesus Christ is interceding for us in accordance with that will, and that this will of God for us will be done because God has decreed it, and because God through His spirit is empowering us in this area. It is not always clear to us what our personal will is, as far as what we are supposed to do in the service of God specifically. Sometimes, it is revealed, but quite often it is not. So we are to go ahead in faith, knowing that God’s will be completed and done in us, and not worry about the specifics of what it is.

In this verse (Romans 12:2), “will” should be interpreted in its context, and the context

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indicates that the will of God that we are encouraged to follow is the general will of offering our bodies to God as a living sacrifice, refusing to be conformed to the world's ways, and instead, being transformed from within by the renewing of our minds. That we know is God's will for us, personally. It is quite general, although ultimately exceedingly important.

It is this that we are to pursue, and thus find to be good, pleasing, and perfect, though of course, if we do it, we will also find ourselves working out the details of God's specific will for our own lives.

Fourth, it is reasonable service because God is worthy of our efforts

**Revelation 4:11** "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created."

Or in Revelation 5:12-13, where we read about the four living creatures and the 24 elders who fall down before God's throne. It says,

**Revelation 5:12-13** ...saying with a loud voice: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!" And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying: "Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!"

We read these words, we sing them, we even talk about them, but we do not always really, truly believe them. Do we believe that God the Father and Jesus Christ are really worthy of all praise, honor, and service? If we do, then it makes sense to serve God. It is quite reasonable, to say the least. We indicate whether we really think God is worthy of our service, by what we do.

Notice a girl who is just engaged. She has a ring, and she wants to show that ring to everyone. Even though she may not be the most attractive girl, perhaps a bit homely, we notice that she still has enjoyment in the engagement. We also notice that she seems to glow with this attraction and love. If she is a little overweight, we notice that she is making an effort to slim down, so that she is more attractive to the man she is going to marry. We might think the engagement is certainly doing wonders for her,

improving her. We notice the value, the measure of the worth, she places in her husband-to-be, by the way she acts and the things she does. That is the way we should be with Jesus Christ. It gets down to the way we act and what we do, but it starts with what we think.

It is the same spiritually with our engagement to Christ. We can come to church and say “God is worthy of honor.” But if we go out and do not live any differently, our actions deny our assertion. One question that is relevant is overdrinking alcohol at the Feast of Tabernacles honoring God, or is it worshipping Baal? That is exactly that way Baal was worshipped—overdrinking and overeating, gluttony and alcoholism.

On the other hand, if our life has changed—if it has changed in such a way that we have given our self to God first of all, have given our body and all aspects of our activity to Him, to use as He sees fit, and then have given sacrificially—we are testifying that our God is worthy to be praised.

I want to talk about God’s disciplining and chastening of His people in the present.

**Hebrews 12:6** “For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.”

Chastening is not a judge inflicting punishment on a criminal in order to uphold the law. Rather, chastening is a loving parent disciplining his or her child in order to perfect his character and build his patient endurance. Punishment has to do with law, which is important, but chastening has to do with love, which is also important. Discipline has its important place in training up a child in the way he should go. That is the way God views Israel.

Back in Hosea 11:1, the prophet quoted the Eternal as saying, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.”

**Hosea 12:1** “Ephraim feeds on the wind, and pursues the east wind; he daily increases lies and desolation. Also they make a covenant with the Assyrians, and oil is carried to Egypt.”

As a child, Ephraim depends upon what is elusive and unprofitable. The Israelites were living for vanity, that is, the wind, and receiving no nourishment. The word translated “feed” means “to graze”—but who ever saw hungry sheep ignoring the green grass, and

grazing on the wind? It is absolutely absurd and ridiculous, but that is the way God's people were living. They were not partaking in the real spiritual food that God had for them. The east wind in Palestine, coming from Arabia and the Far East, over large tracts of sandy wasteland, is parching, scorching, and destructive to the vegetation and oppressive to man. It has the force of a whirlwind. Symbolically, wind graphically describes the destructive duplicity of both Israel and Judah's covenant making.

In Hosea 12:1, Israel was primarily committed to two great sins. First, they were worshipping idols, which are nothing, even less than nothing, and turning from the true God to live on empty substitutes. They were feeding on the wind. Second, they were depending upon the protection of treaties with Egypt and Assyria, instead of trusting their great God. Our nation today has been signing and approving more treaties than it ever has in its history. Obama is doing that without the approval of the Congress, which makes it an illegal act by our Constitution.

This also is emptiness, in chasing after the wind, and God had to discipline Israel to bring him back to Himself and His word. God changed Jacob's name to Israel, to whom he built the 12 tribes of Israel. Hosea used the name Jacob for the nation in Hosea 12, because Jacob, being a father of the nation, is a good illustration of God's loving discipline, as we see in Jacob's own life.

During most of his life, Jacob struggled with himself, with others, and with the Eternal. Until he surrendered to God at Jabbok, he never really walked by faith. God had to discipline him to bring him to surrender and submission. Jacob's experience of getting a wife and raising a family are examples of God's loving discipline. In order to get the family blessing, Jacob had schemed and lied to his father Isaac. Since what goes around, comes around, Laban schemed and lied to Jacob in order to marry off two daughters in one week.

Trying to please two wives, only one of whom he really loved, and trying to raise a large family brought many burdens on Jacob. But he persisted, and God blessed him and made him a wealthy man. However, during those difficult years, Jacob suffered a great deal, yet the Eternal was working out His purposes, and showing how He disciplines His children. So even though we may sometimes feel very down because we may feel that we are being disciplined, God never lets go of us, if we are members of His church.

We find in Hosea 12:7 through Hosea 13:6 the reasons for discipline. Hosea names some of the sins his people had committed. Some of these he had dealt with before, so there is no need to discuss them in detail. He begins with dishonesty in business, defrauding people so as to make more money, as one of the reasons for discipline.

**Hosea 12:7-8** “A cunning Canaanite! Deceitful scales are in his hand...‘Surely I have become rich, I have found wealth for myself; in all my labors, they shall find in me no iniquity that is sin.’”

Ephraim and Israel as a whole were totally absorbed in themselves and what they had done, and what does our nation say today? What did they say after 9/11? What are they saying after Hurricane Sandy? “We will build, we will rebuild,” and so on.

But God warned that He would humble them. Instead of enjoying their houses, they would live in tents as they did during their wilderness journey. When the Assyrians were through with Israel, Israel would be grateful even for the booths they had for the week during the Feast of Tabernacles. The prophets God sent had warned the people, but the people would not listen.

In Hosea 12:10-14, one of the things spoken about is that they turned from the word of the great God and practiced idolatry, another reason for discipline. This provoked God to anger, and the way they shed innocent blood provoked Him even more.

Moving into Hosea 13, the reasons for discipline are continued. In Hosea 13:1-3, Hosea singled out the arrogant attitude of the tribe of Ephraim as another reason for discipline. The name “Ephraim” is found 37 times in Hosea’s prophecy. Remember that sometimes Ephraim is a synonym for the whole northern kingdom of Israel. But here the prophet was addressing the tribe of Ephraim in particular. In Hosea 13:1-3, we begin the section about the relentless judgment on Israel.

**Hosea 13:1-3** When Ephraim spoke, trembling, he exalted himself in Israel; but when he offended through Baal worship, he died. Now they sin more and more and have made for themselves molded images, idols of their silver, according to their skill; all of it is the work of craftsmen. They say to them, “Let the men who sacrifice kiss the calves!” Therefore they shall be like the morning cloud and like the early dew that passes away, like chaff blown from a threshing floor and like smoke from a chimney.

At one time, Ephraim’s word commanded respect in all of Israel. The people of Ephraim felt that they were an important tribe that deserved to be listened to and obeyed. After all, Joshua came from Ephraim, and so did the first king of the northern kingdom, Jeroboam I. The tabernacle of testimony was pitched in Shiloh, which was in Ephraim. In their arrogance, the tribe of Ephraim created problems for both Gideon and Jephthah.

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After the death of King Saul, the Ephraimites refused to submit to David's rule. In fact, they had a strong prejudice against the ruling tribe of Judah. When the northern kingdom was established, the Ephraimites were so powerful that the kingdom was even called by their name.

But Ephraim abandoned the Eternal for Baal, and that brought spiritual death. They gladly participated in Jeroboam's man-made religion by sacrificing to the golden calves, even offering human sacrifices and kissing the calves in worship. The idols are nothing, and those who worship them become like them: nothing.

Hosea compared the people to the "nothings," which is how he referred to the Baals, to the nothings with which they were familiar: morning dew that the sun burns away; chaff that the wind blows away; smoke that disappears out the window and is seen no more. The similes of mist, dew, chaff, and smoke liken Israel's end to vapors that quickly dissipate. She just basically faded away as she was taken into captivity.

One more sin that Hosea condemned was the nation's ingratitude.

**Hosea 13:4-5** "Yet I am the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt, and you shall know no God but Me; for there is no savior besides Me. I knew you in the wilderness, in the land of great drought."

In contrast to fleeting vapors, this is a solemn statement that rehearses Exodus 20:2. The passing work of the craftsmen who makes idols stands in vivid disparity to the God who sustained Israel in the land of drought by His devoted care.

**Hosea 13:6** "When they had pasture, they were filled; they were filled and their heart was exalted; therefore they forgot Me."

It was the same old story. The Israelites were glad for what God had done for their forefathers: the exodus and God's provision and guidance in the wilderness; the abundant wealth of the Promised Land. But they did not really show Him sincere appreciation. In their trials, they turned to God for help, but in their prosperity they became proud and turned away from God to idols. Moses had warned them about this sin, but they forgot and committed it anyway.

The name "Ephraim" means "fruitful" and this was a very fruitful tribe. Through Jacob, God had promised abundant blessings to Joseph and his sons, and that promise was

fulfilled by God as he guaranteed them.

It is too bad the people did not use what God gave them for God's glory. The apostle Paul told the prosperous Corinthian church, "Therefore whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." That is what Hosea was trying to express to Israel and Judah.

In Hosea 13:7-16, the prophet uses a number of illustrations to show different kinds of discipline, which I will discuss in my next sermon.

Did Ephraim sense his wrong? On the contrary! The more he prospered, in his Godless ways, the more he assumed that all was well between God and him. Does not his nation do the very same thing today? Ephraim reasoned that his very success was proof that nothing was amiss, and that the prophets who denounced sin were in error. What happens to anyone who warns about the sins of this nation? They are denounced, put down, and even taken off the air if they are mentioning the warnings on the radio.

Ephraim, by his stubborn refusal to return to the Eternal, rejected the only hope that God offered. God revealed His love to Israel in His past mercies, and in His present disciplines, and still Israel did not return to God. Nevertheless, her hope was in the Eternal's promises for the future. God was still the same God who would shelter them with His providence. Ever since He had delivered them from Egypt, He had the same power and will to help them.

Therefore, their duty was the same as well. Their destruction arose, not from any change in Him, but from themselves. Whether they like it or not, God is the God of the ungodly by creation and general providence. God is the same merciful God, yesterday, today, and forever.