

AMOS and HOSEA

A Lesson Series by Arden C. Autry, PhD
Lesson 1: Introduction and Historical Setting

Preface to the teachers, especially regarding Lesson 1:

The following discussion of the historical and religious situation of the eighth century BC is intended to help in understanding the times in which Amos and Hosea prophesied. It's far more information than you could possibly use in just one lesson. But it's helpful for the teacher to have a better grasp of the history than the class will be able to absorb. Some teachers like to delve into the historical setting more than others do. I would suggest, however, that some attention to historical circumstances will prove important in discussing many of the passages in Amos and Hosea.

Rather than try to use this entire lesson on the first day, you might use it as a resource to help in understanding subsequent lessons. For your first lesson I would suggest outlining enough of the historical background for the class to have some appreciation of the relevance of the prophets' messages in their time and ours. For example, in teaching this first lesson, you might highlight Israel's prosperity and smugness over against Amos's message of judgment for the nation's pervasive injustice and lack of concern for the helpless. Likewise, for Hosea, the disintegration and turmoil of the nation shed light on his heart-rending appeal for the nation to abandon its idols and turn back to God. How many of the historical details to include ("this king succeeded that king . . .") would be a matter of your discretion, based on your preferences and what you think would be helpful to the specific class you are teaching.

I would suggest introducing the key spiritual emphases in Amos and Hosea in this first lesson by giving brief attention to a characteristic passage in each prophet's book. For Amos, 2:6-8; 3:15; and/or 5:21-24 would be good. For Hosea, 4:1-2; 6:4-6; and/or 8:7 would provide some flavor without going into details.

One other possible approach: You might want to introduce Amos and leave the historical background for Hosea until ready to begin that book. I chose not to do that in writing the series, in order to avoid repetition.

One other comment with regard to the entire series: Because of the way the prophetic books were written (as compared with the NT epistles, for example), there is a good deal of repetition of certain ideas. This reflects the repetition that was necessary in the oral presentation of the prophet's message. That means in our teaching we don't have to talk about every verse (we couldn't). All the same, we should repeat as often as necessary the central themes. People do need to hear some things more than once.

Note: The New International Version is quoted unless stated otherwise.

Amos and Hosea in their historical setting

Northern Israel in the Eighth Century BC—Historical Developments

The eighth century BC (i.e., during the 700s BC) was a tumultuous time in the history of both Judah and northern Israel (which had broken away from the Davidic kingdom of Judah after the death of Solomon in 931 BC). Both Amos and Hosea directed their words primarily toward the northern kingdom of Israel, even though Amos himself was a native of Judah in the south. For this reason the history of the eighth century especially as it affected Israel (as distinct from Judah) is important for an adequate appreciation of their books. For ease of reference, the following chart for the pertinent period has been excerpted and modified from *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, p. 1277. Similar chronologies can be found in any Bible dictionary or handbook.

Prophet	Approximate date of ministry	Contemporary ruler of (northern) Israel	Historical setting
Amos	760 B.C.	Jeroboam II 793-753	2 Kings 14:23-29
Hosea	760-722 B.C.	Jeroboam II 793-753 Zechariah* 753-752 Shallum* 752 Menahem 752-742 Pekahiah* 742-740 Pekah* 740-32 Hoshea 732-722 [end of N. Israel]	2 Kings 14:23-17:41

* Assassinated by his successor.

Immediately you notice the contrast between the long reign of Jeroboam II during the first half of the century and the rapid turnover of rulers during the next thirty years, culminating in the destruction of the nation. Notice that the ministry of Amos occurred during the stable period. This was a time of prosperity and great national power for northern Israel. Amos' warning probably did not sound very credible in the midst of the peace, power, and prosperity of the time. Conditions quickly changed after the death of Jeroboam II, however, and many passages in Hosea reflect the turmoil of the thirty-years slide of Israel into annihilation. A brief

survey of the developments and events of this time will illustrate the downward spiral and its causes—both spiritual (within Israel) and military (involving surrounding nations).

Early in the eighth century, Syria was relatively weak compared to previous times, and Assyria, to the north and east of Syria, was temporarily pre-occupied with internal affairs to the extent that they posed no apparent threat to Palestine. Given these factors, Israel's king, Jehoash, was able to recover territory previously taken by Syria (2 Kings 13). His successor, Jeroboam II (793-753 BC) further expanded Israel to its greatest geographical area since Solomon. The population of Israel increased. Growing prosperity made it possible to spend vast sums on public buildings, elaborate homes for the rich, and expensive furnishings for those homes. International trade flourished. Great sums were also spent on religion—for animal sacrifices and other expenses. So, in a sense, *religion* prospered. True adherence to the *covenant* with Yahweh, however, is not the same thing as the prosperity of religion.

All the prosperity of Israel began to unravel after the death of Jeroboam II. His son, Zechariah, reigned for only six months before he was assassinated and replaced by Shallum, thus ending the dynasty of Jehu's house (2 Kings 15:8-12). Shallum lasted only one month before Menahem assassinated and replaced him (2 Kings 15:13-14). Menahem managed to last ten years, although he had to pay heavy tribute to Assyria to do it.

The expanding Assyrian Empire had become an enormous threat, and the resulting pressure on Israel brought internal turmoil and confusion over which diplomatic and military strategies to pursue. Some in Israel thought submission to the Assyrians was the prudent course. Others felt the smarter choice was to align with Assyria's great enemy, Egypt. Since Israel and Judah were situated between the two rival empires (see map), to be an ally of either meant risking the wrath of the other. Which empire could Israel trust to defend it against the other empire? Israel vacillated, as first the "pro-Assyrian party" and then the "pro-Egyptian party" would gain control of the palace in Samaria. The succession of assassinations and palace coups in Samaria prompted Hosea's lament that the land was consuming its rulers (7:7).

In return for acknowledging Assyrian supremacy, Menahem received their support for his throne against the threat of Pekah, who led a breakaway of part of the kingdom in an anti-Assyrian movement. Despite the schism within his kingdom, Menahem escaped assassination and managed to pass his throne on to his son, Pekahiah (2 Kings 15:17-22).

Pekahiah reigned for two years but was assassinated by Pekah, Menahem's old rival, who then became king (2 Kings 15:23-25). Pekah ruled for eight years (2 Kings 15:27 refers to a twenty-year reign, but this seems to include the time when he ruled the breakaway area in rebellion against Menahem). Pekah's long-standing anti-Assyrian policy led him to join Syria's king, Rezin, in an alliance against Assyria.

Rezin and Pekah tried to force Judah to join their alliance. King Ahaz of Judah, however, was unwilling to go along with the scheme. Pekah and Rezin tried to force Ahaz to cooperate by invading Judah with the combined forces of Syria and Israel (this war is referred to as the Syro-Ephraimite War; see 2 Kings 16:5-9). Facing unfavorable odds, Ahaz made a fateful decision to ask Assyria for help against Israel and Syria. This went against Isaiah's advice (Isa. 7:1-8:18) to trust in God rather than the military might of Assyria. Asking for Assyria's aid effectively made Judah a vassal state dependent on Assyria. It was regarded also (at least in Assyria) as an implicit acknowledgement of the superiority of Assyria's gods.

The Assyrians were pleased to accept Judah's invitation. Led by Tiglath-Pileser (also known as Pul), the Assyrians invaded Syria and destroyed Damascus, capital of Syria, and

executed Rezin (732 BC). They deported the people of Syria just as they would later do to Israel. Meanwhile, the anti-Assyrian king of Israel, Pekah, was assassinated before the Assyrians could arrive at Samaria.

This murder bought Israel a few more years, since Pekah's successor, Hoshea, was willing to pay tribute to Assyria, thereby acknowledging Tiglath-Pileser's power over him (2 Kings 15:29-30; 16:5-9; see also Isaiah 7:1-8:18). Later, when Tiglath-Pileser died (727 BC), Hoshea grew bold and stopped paying the tribute to Assyria. He hoped (in vain, as it turned out) that Egypt would help him in this revolt from Assyria.

The Assyrian army came back, this time under Shalmaneser V and Sargon II (after Shalmaneser's death). This time there would be no escape for Israel as there had been in 732. After a siege of more than two years, Samaria, the capital city of Israel, fell to the Assyrians. Much of the population was deported, and captives from other areas were brought in to what had been Israel. (This was Assyria's rather effective policy for dealing with vassal states which kept trying to break away. Incidentally, this forced mixing of the population in Israel is part of the background for the Jewish disdain toward "Samaritans," about which we read in the NT.) The northern kingdom of Israel thus ended in 722 (or 721) BC (2 Kings 17:1-6). (See 2 Kings 17:7-23 for a summary of why Israel went into exile.)

Notice that four of the last six kings of Israel died by the hand of an assassin, who then took the throne. Bad enough that the nation should lose a ruler by assassination, but that the nation was ruled by assassins is an indication of how far the nation had declined. Amos' stern words from a few years before would perhaps now be more believable!

Religious Setting for Amos and Hosea

The peoples living in Palestine when Israel arrived under Joshua were not all eradicated by the Israelite invasion. As Israel lived among these other peoples there was an inevitable temptation to adopt some of their ways of doing things, including ways of worshiping. Throughout the history of the northern kingdom of Israel (931-721 BC), the temptation was made greater by the fact that secession from Davidic rule in Jerusalem (Judah) also meant separation from the legitimate temple worship and priesthood in Jerusalem.

Ever since Jeroboam I, the northern kingdom had provided alternative sites for the worship of Yahweh, so that people would not have to travel to Jerusalem in Judah. These alternative sites in Dan and Bethel were not sanctioned by the Law nor by any prophetic word from God. The worship at Dan and Bethel was ostensibly worship of Yahweh, but it was inherently "out of line" because of the rebellious motive for keeping the people away from Jerusalem and because it was tainted by pagan practices from the beginning.

The people of Israel regarded themselves as still worshipping and serving Yahweh, the God who had brought them out of Egyptian bondage, who had entered into covenant to be their God, and who had brought them into the land in which they now lived. The people as a whole, however, seem to have seen no problem with adding on to their worship of their *nation's* God, Yahweh, the worship of the gods of the *land*. Some of northern Israel's more wicked kings led the way in this appalling compromise by encouraging worship of the pagan gods (see 1 Kings 16:30-33). The god Baal was the most popular and attractive to the Israelites. Baal, so his worshippers believed, was the god responsible for rain and the fertility of fields and herds.

Since the Baals (more than one, as this cult took on various features in different locations) were believed to provide the crucial rain and the fertility of fields and animals, the

motivation to offer sacrifices and engage in Baal worship is understandable. The reasoning might have gone something like this: “Wouldn’t it make good sense to worship Baal so that the rain will come and the fields will produce? After all, how can my family and I survive if the rains don’t come? Yahweh may be powerful in battle, and I’m grateful he delivered us from Egypt and so on, but he’s not the expert in agriculture that Baal is. The religion of Yahweh is wonderful in its place, a great tradition, but out here in the workplace ‘a man has to do what a man has to do.’ Baal is the god of my workplace, the god who makes my work pay off, who puts food on the table. Yahweh will understand.”

Whether or not eighth-century Israelites engaged in such rationalization, there were certainly other attractions besides economic ones for going to the Baal shrine for the ceremonies. Activities there included sexual intercourse with women assigned to the shrine as “sacred prostitutes.” The sexual activity was said to be part of assuring the fertility of the land. Worship of Baal involved acknowledgement of Baal as “husband of the land.” Such an acknowledgement was, of course, an act of infidelity or spiritual adultery in violation of Israel’s exclusive covenant with Yahweh. That, together with the physical adultery integral to Baal worship, makes it clear why Hosea spoke of Israel as an adulterous nation.

The people of Israel had difficulty seeing anything wrong with worshipping both Baal and Yahweh. Especially during the prosperous and expansive first half of the eighth century, the evidence seemed to confirm that they were doing the right things in religion. After all, no one could remember when the economy had been quite so good! Yahweh and Baal must both be happy! (As humans often do, they thought the blessing of God was a sure sign of his pleasure.)

Elisha (2 Kings 13:17-19) and Jonah (2 Kings 14:25) had earlier prophesied the prosperous period enjoyed by Israel in the first half of the eighth century. This should have reinforced Israel’s gratitude for the blessings they enjoyed, and perhaps it did for some in the nation. On the other hand, some may have seen the fulfillment of the prophecies as more proof of what they wanted to believe anyway: they were Yahweh’s favorite nation, regardless of those details in his law which they were overlooking. God’s will was to bless them—that was clear. Who was this guy Amos, from Judah, who came with his message of ‘doom and gloom’? Probably just envious of our prosperity!

The problem was not that some people were doing well in business, nor merely that they were spending large sums on religious observances. Rather, as both Amos and Hosea see it, the religious observances were impure and worthless, for at least three reasons: (1) the people were engaged in the worship of Yahweh but also in the worship of Baal; (2) the religious observances (even when directed toward Yahweh) were not backed up by righteous observance of the commandments of God, especially in the way they treated one another; and (3) their *motive* in worshipping Yahweh was the same as their motive for worshipping Baal—all they really wanted were the material blessings which God could give them. They did not have a heart for God’s way and God’s will, as was evident by their idolatrous practices and unholy lifestyles. From the prophets’ point of view, the religious scene was not prosperous but corrupt and corrupting. From the prophets’ point of view, this religious corruption would be the real cause of the nation’s downfall, not an accident of historical forces.

The Message of Amos: Love Your Neighbor

The ministry of Amos, set in a time of material prosperity and spiritual corruption under the reign of Jeroboam II, was not the ministry of a “professional.” As he describes himself, Amos was “neither a prophet, nor the son of a prophet” (7:14), by which he meant he was not brought up nor trained to do prophecy for a living (as some were in those days). Rather his prophetic ministry was in response to the moving of God in his life, giving him words to take to northern Israel from his home in Tekoa, in Judah.

The overwhelming emphasis of Amos is on the social injustices he saw in the prosperous northern kingdom and its capital city, Samaria. While some were living luxurious life-styles, others were being ground down in brutal poverty. Amos does not argue for some kind of socialistic equality; rather, he condemns the fact that some are prospering *because* of their economic and “legal” exploitation of others. It is the heartless unconcern for the poor that Amos finds so appalling and so out of keeping with the commands of God. Amos 2:6-8; 3:15; and 5:21-24 are thematic for the whole book—what Amos sees as wrong and what Amos sees as the coming judgment.

The Message of Hosea: Love God

The tone in Hosea is quite different from Amos, partly because the times were so radically changed. But Hosea’s focus is also different. Amos focused on the injustice in society; Hosea focused on the spiritual infidelity in Israel’s heart—God’s love for Israel was not appreciated or reciprocated. God wants his people to know him. This “knowledge” is not theoretical or merely intellectual; it is intimacy, affection and attachment, such as a husband and wife are meant to have in “knowing” one another. Israel thinks they know Yahweh; Hosea says they do not (4:1; 6:6). This lack of “knowledge” or “acknowledgment” of God will destroy Israel (4:6), because refusal of this relationship with God is refusal of the one who would save them (13:9).

Beyond the time of judgment which was beginning even during Hosea’s lifetime, God’s purpose to have a people will endure. God will have a people “married” to him in covenant relationship, a people who will show forth God’s character, a people who “know” and “acknowledge” the LORD (2:19-20).

Relevance of Amos and Hosea for Today

Long before the times of Amos and Hosea, God had given *instructions* (basic meaning of “Torah,” or “the Law”) for how his people should respond to him from the heart and to one another in every area of life. The prophets did not bring new instructions so much as they brought the people back to the instructions their ancestors received. Those instructions of the OT Law and the exhortations of the prophets can be summarized as “love God” and “love one another” (Matt. 22:37-40, citing Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18). As pointed out in the subtitles above, Amos reminds us of the commandment to “love one another,” and Hosea reminds us of the commandment to “love God.”

In themselves, the commands to love God and love one another are positive commands, positively stated with positive connotations. In themselves, these commands are not hard to hear. In the attempt to bring Israel back to God’s ways, however, the prophets had to point out the ways which were not God’s ways. If faithfulness is to be increased, faithlessness will have to be identified and rooted out. This inevitably involves bringing negative words, words which are hard to hear.

So much of what the prophets have to say sounds so critical, so “judgmental” in tone, that we modern folks, who like our religion to be comforting rather than confrontational, tend to avoid the prophets. (Part of the reason for avoiding the prophets is a more neutral factor—ignorance of the historical setting which makes their messages hard to follow.) This, perhaps, could be seen as a test of our own sincerity in wanting to please God with our lives: Are we willing to listen attentively and examine ourselves and our lifestyles in the light of the prophets’ words?

Some specifics of Amos and Hosea will certainly not be applicable today. After all, nobody we know worships Baal! (I wonder what might be the modern equivalent in our society?) By listening carefully and prayerfully, however, we might see some ways in which the words of Amos and Hosea need to be heeded in our own day. Our first impulse—to think the prophets are speaking about someone else—is exactly the same as the natural impulse of the people to whom Amos and Hosea spoke. Nothing is more common among people of all times than the tendency to see how the fault being described is that of someone else!

If nothing else, at least Amos’ emphasis on doing right in public matters and Hosea’s emphasis on responding to God’s loyal love with loyal love are principles which need to be applied in every age. We should pray also that any spiritual blindness or deafness which we might share with the Israelites of the eighth century BC will be healed by our study of Amos and Hosea. The process does not have to be pleasant to be therapeutic.

In any study of OT prophets (especially when they emphasize judgment as much as these two), it is helpful to remember that the New Testament provides us with some helpful perspectives—not in order to ignore the OT but to be able to apply it to ourselves. Most importantly, we need to remember what Amos and Hosea demand/ask is realized in Christ (see Rom. 8:1-4). Where the complaints of Amos and Hosea accurately describe our lives (individually or as a nation), we need to take it to heart and then take it to the cross. If these prophets diagnose an illness that we have, let us be grateful for their perception and then go to Jesus, the Great Physician, for his prescription. God wants to make us well, but we have to believe him when he points out (through his word) just how much we need his healing.

AMOS and HOSEA

Lesson 2: Amos 1-3

Introductory words, Amos 1:1-2

The first verse identifies Amos and the time of his prophetic word. Amos was from Judah, from the village of Tekoa, about twelve miles south of Jerusalem, but his preaching was done in Samaria, capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos was a shepherd but also a dresser of sycamore-fig trees (7:14). Probably his work varied according to the season of the year. His background and perspective were decidedly rural, but God sent him to preach in a city. There he saw many things which he knew were contrary to God's ways but which the people of the city had become so accustomed to seeing that they were desensitized to them. Being from Judah and from a rural setting would doubly make Amos seem out of place in the capital city of Israel.

Verse two sets the tone: the voice of the LORD has sounded, and its awesome power changes the landscape. Perhaps not the physical topography, but the political "landscape" was about to change according to the prophecies brought by Amos. The picture of God's anger is filled out in some detail in the course of the book.

God's Judgment on Other Nations, Amos 1:3—2:3

The series of oracles at the beginning of the book show that God was concerned for the behavior and welfare of nations other than Israel. Judgment is announced for wicked behavior of these nations which did not have a covenant relationship with God and did not have the Ten Commandments or the rest of the law. They did, however, have the kind of natural knowledge of right and wrong of which Paul speaks in Romans 2. Consequently every nation is held responsible for its behavior. The converse side of this responsibility is the recognition that God cares about each of the nations that was mistreated by its neighbor.

Repeatedly Amos says "for three sins . . . and for four," which means "for transgression after transgression." Notice that he mentions only one specific transgression for each nation. In each instance the crime is one of cruelty or treachery. Not showing pity or violating a trust are virtually universally regarded as evil. Cruelty and treachery have to do with how people treat one another (or, in one case, the memory of a person, 2:2). God's judgment in each case is the same: "I will send fire." Presumably this refers to the warfare so prevalent in the last half of the eighth century, which involves all the nations mentioned here as well as Egypt and Assyria.

Judgment on Judah, Amos 2:4-5

Although most of Amos is aimed at Israel, Judah is intended to hear God's word as well. Judah's indictment differs significantly from the preceding ones against other peoples, who could not be held responsible for the specific laws of God's covenant with Israel. God's wrath against Judah is "because they have rejected the law of the LORD . . . and have been led astray by false gods" (2:4). Despite this significant difference in the indictment, the penalty is the same: "fire."

Judgment on Israel, Amos 2:6-16

If you were an Israelite of the eighth century listening to Amos, you might have enjoyed his sermon up to this point. Even when he announced God's displeasure with Judah, the sister kingdom of your own nation, you would probably have more easily seen the sins of Judah than

your own nation's evils. Just as we more easily see the sins of other individuals than we see our own, our identification with our nation (especially when we are in some kind of competition or at war with other nations) can blind us to things that are displeasing to God in our own land, or in our nation's policy. (Being patriotic is good, but not to the point that it blinds us to evil in ourselves.)

The indictment against Israel starts out just like the previous prophecies to other nations: "For three sins . . ." Unlike the previous indictments, Amos does not stop with mentioning just one crime, nor does he speak as generally as he did with Judah. He gets down to specific offenses right away and he mentions a variety of sins. Notice, however, that the emphasis remains on how people are mistreating one another. Although not the only point Amos wants to make, this is the main point of the entire book: God's concern for social justice. Notice the last half of vs. 6:

They sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals.

The impact of these words is made clearer by noting a very common feature of Hebrew poetry known as synonymous parallelism. In synonymous parallelism the second line uses slightly different words to make the same point as the first line. In this verse 'selling the righteous for silver' is put in synonymous parallelism with 'selling the needy for a pair of sandals.' Even the terms 'righteous' and 'needy' can be seen as synonymous in this passage (not always), as are the terms 'silver' and 'sandals.' What kind of evil is the prophet referring to?

'Selling a person for silver' could refer to any method of cheating or defrauding another person, perhaps through a crooked deal or refusing to pay for labor or goods. It could refer to bribery of officials or judges to decide a dispute in a way that is unjust. It could even refer to selling a debtor into slavery (cf. Lev. 25:39-43). The word 'righteous' refers to the innocent or defenseless person whose only protector is God. 'Righteous' is often used in synonymous parallelism with 'poor' or 'needy,' as it is in this verse. It does not mean that the person referred to is perfect in all his or her behavior, but it does mean that in this particular circumstance this is the innocent party, the one against whom evil has been done, in contrast to the person who has done evil. [*See note at the end of this lesson.]

'Selling the needy for a pair of sandals' may seem like exaggeration, but this is likely a reference to the acquisition of a piece of land. As a token or symbol of changing the ownership of a parcel of land, the seller in those days would hand over a sandal to the buyer, in the presence of witnesses who could vouch for the significance of this act. (This was part of the transaction involving property and the responsibility to take Ruth as a wife in Ruth 4:7.)

In verse seven and the verses that follow, Amos mentions a variety of corrupt practices:

(vs. 7) The oppressed have justice denied, which means they are at the non-existent mercy of the powerful and aggressive. It will probably always be advantageous in legal proceedings to be wealthy and influential. We cannot wish away such realities, but we can be personally committed to helping our society be more just. And certainly we can make it our goal to treat others the way we should. If everyone had that goal and really tried to live it out, our society might not be perfect since certain inequities will prove intractable, but our society can be better. Not being able to make it perfect is no excuse for not making it better.

(vs. 7) Sexual immorality and idolatry often occurred together in the ancient world, as sexual activities were carried on in connection with idol worship and within the temple precincts. That ‘father and son’ are having relations with the same woman could be a reference to such idolatrous activities, or it could refer to how the rich were mistreating their servants by using them for their sexual indulgences.

(vs. 8) ‘Lying down on garments taken in pledge’ refers to a practice of taking a poor man’s cloak as security for a loan. According to Exodus 22:26-27, any garment taken in pledge had to be returned by evening so that the poor person would have protection against the cold. To keep the garment, to stretch oneself out on it for sleep (careless of how the poor person would be keeping warm), and to do this beside the altar of one’s idol god—all of this adds up to blatant disregard for God and his revealed will and reveals the selfishness and disregard for others which so agitated the spirit of Amos.

Amos is indicating that the Israelite society is as corrupt and unjust as the neighboring pagan nations about which he spoke in ch. 1. What makes matters even worse, of course, is that Israel has been so favored by the LORD. Greater privilege brings with it greater responsibility. God had driven out the previous inhabitants of the land so that Israel could possess it (2:9). Israel had accepted the gift of the land from the hand of God, but what about God’s other gifts? What about his gift of the prophets (vs. 11)? What about the specially designated individuals whose Nazirite vows were scorned by the population at large (vss. 11-12)? Israel was guilty, as we can be as well, of accepting the blessing of the LORD but refusing to receive his correction and guidance (from the prophets) or to honor those who try to be models of piety and godliness (the Nazirites). This shows irreverence for God and lack of gratitude.

As a consequence, Israel’s judgment is certain, and no amount of military power can save them (vss. 13-16). Remember that at the time of Amos’ preaching, Israel was experiencing a period of strength and expansion greater than anything they had known since the days of Solomon.

Israel’s Great Privilege and Israel’s Great Fall, Amos 3:1-15

Notice in verse 2 the emphasis on Israel’s unique privilege. God was watching over the other nations (ch. 1), but “only” Israel was his “chosen” (NIV). Other translations use the word “known” instead of “chosen,” which of course does not mean God was ignorant concerning the others but only that he had a special relationship with Israel. This unique relationship goes back all the way to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) and has always had the blessing of other nations through Israel as part of its motivation. But the emphasis here is on the fact that this unique privilege puts Israel in special responsibility to answer to God for their sins. Note the “therefore” in vs. 2. This one verse captures the essence of God’s complaint against Israel and the burden of Amos’s message to them.

The illustrative questions in vss. 3-6 seem to make the point that everything that happens has a cause. The disaster that is coming to Samaria will be from the hand of the LORD, even though he will use another nation as his instrument.

Verses 7-8 are Amos’s explanation of why he is saying these things (compare 7:14-15). As God’s servant, he feels he has no real choice but to obey, unpleasant though the message is.

Certainly this would have been an unwelcome message even if it had not come from an ‘outsider.’

Verse 12 indicates that Israel (represented by its capital Samaria) and Syria (and its capital Damascus) would be almost totally destroyed in the war that was coming. The illustration of saving “two leg bones or a piece of an ear” would speak of saving just enough to show there had been something there before the disaster. The salvaged part is good for evidence but not for much else. (Compare Exodus 22:13.)

Recall that Bethel (vs. 14) was one of the places Jeroboam established a worship site in competition with God’s choice of Jerusalem. Bethel had been a stumbling block for northern Israel for close to two centuries by the time of Amos, but God’s patience was not to be interpreted as unconcern. Judgment was certain. The abominable corruption of worship would come to an end, along with the end of the luxurious lifestyles of the wealthy Israelites (vs. 15).

For further biblical background on the importance of how we treat those regarded as “poor and needy,” you might want to look at the following passages:

Deuteronomy 10:16-19
Psalm 69:32-33
Psalm 86:1-2
Psalm 109:16, 21-22, 31
Ezekiel 16:49
Matthew 5:3
Matthew 6:24
Matthew 11:4-5
Luke 4:18
Luke 6:20-21, 24-25
Luke 12:13-21
Luke 14:33
Luke 16:19-31
Luke 18:18-30
James 2:1-7; 5:1-6

From these texts and others (many others in the OT), one can see that it is common to refer to someone who knows his need for God as “poor and needy.” On the other hand, the term “rich” can be used to refer to the proud and oppressive people who are causing the suffering of the weak and defenseless. What makes one “rich” in this sense is not the amount of money he or she has; rather it has to do with one's attitude toward God, toward other people, and toward one's own resources in the face of life's challenges. The issue is not mere possession of money or other forms of wealth; the issue is humility. Remember Abraham and David were both very rich, but both humbly depended on God.

AMOS and HOSEA

Lesson 3: Amos 4-6

Woe to the Women, Amos 4:1-3

As Isaiah will do later and in more detail (Isa. 3:16—4:1), Amos speaks scornfully of the selfish indulgence of certain women of Israel. Bashan was an area of Israel, across the Jordan, known for its cattle and for its pride in its cattle. Amos derisively compares the wealthy women of Samaria to those cows. Their mindless concern only for their appetites is perhaps the picture we are meant to get by this comparison. Selfish desires are being satisfied at the expense of social injustice to the poor and needy.

Amos is not singling the women out; he is simply observing how their lifestyles of unconcern for others is contributing to the national corruption. They will likewise participate in the judgment. Just like stock animals, they will be led away on the end of a rope, when the city falls and the citizens are taken away into captivity (vss. 2-3). The “hooks” in vs. 2 refers to one of the brutal practices of the Assyrian army: they would literally put hooks into some of their captives’ mouths to lead them around (see what they did to a king in 2 Chron. 33:11). The pain and humiliation of such an experience is deliberately put in contrast to their lack of sensitivity to the suffering their selfishness is currently causing to others.

Vain Worship, Amos 4:4-5

Israel’s prosperity at this time was reflected in the outward displays of worship. These two verses refer rather sarcastically to how careful the people are about religious observances and sacrifices. It is as though God is saying, “Go ahead and worship, since you enjoy it so much! But what you are really doing is adding to your sin and guilt, since the way you are living contradicts what you pretend to be doing in offering sacrifices to me.” Gilgal was another traditional site for worship of Yahweh since the days of Joshua (Josh. 4:20; 5:9-12).

Previous Attempts to Get Their Attention, Amos 4:6-11

This section is a litany of previous and partial judgments which God had sent to the Israelites but to which they had not responded with repentance. Notice the refrain: “yet you have not returned to me” (vss. 6, 8, 9, 10, 11). These various judgments had happened over a long period of time and had been episodic. These are the kind of things that people today would regard as “natural occurrences” or “inevitable” from time to time. Indeed it is serious business for anyone to say that a specific natural occurrence in the weather, a crop failure, or a disease is a judgment of God on the people affected. Jesus instructed us not to think that people who suffered disasters or accidents had necessarily done anything to deserve it, but he also taught us to let such events be reminders to us of our need to repent (see Luke 13:1-5). The problem with Israel was that (much like Pharaoh centuries before) they had hardened their hearts in response to these events. They had gone right on with their lives without stopping to consider and evaluate their faithfulness to their covenant with God.

In light of all these events referred to, it makes you wonder: What would it take to get people to repent? We should apply this to our day. What would it take to bring widespread repentance in our society? It really takes only one thing, and it’s not any specific event. What it takes is a willingness to change our ways. And it’s always easier to be willing for someone else to change their ways than to be willing to change our own. As the psalmist noted in Psalm 36:2, it is easy to flatter ourselves too much to detect our own sin. Israel was quite willing to

go to worship (at Bethel, Gilgal, and other places), but they were unwilling to change or be changed. The trap is one into which religious observers are particularly prone to fall: since we ‘tip the hat’ in acknowledgment of God and perhaps even make monetary sacrifices to maintain the external trappings which are dedicated to his honor, we subconsciously assume that we have ‘given God his due’ and thus have the freedom to proceed with our lives undisturbed. We can even expect God to bless our agendas. Amos unmasks this deception—for Israel and perhaps for us, who live in a land which sometimes acknowledges God in public ways (public leaders say, “God bless America”; everyone sings “Amazing Grace” at public memorials for fallen policemen or troops). Unfortunately our society as a whole is not a good example of concern for God’s will. And lest we too easily lament the state of our country (as distinct from ourselves), remember that the call to repentance always begins at the house of God (see 2 Chron. 7:14; 1 Peter 4:17-18). Complaining that *others* are complacent does not excuse my complacency and is not a substitute for my repentance.

Another important point to observe here is God’s purpose in allowing these judgments to happen: God wanted Israel to return to him. He was not venting capricious wrath, like a spoiled child who erupts over not getting his way.

Inevitable Showdown with the Almighty, Amos 4:12-13

Notice “therefore” at the beginning of vs. 12. Since the purpose of the previous judgments had been thwarted by the people’s refusal to repent, God was bringing a more horrible judgment. Nothing less than the existence of Israel as a nation was at stake, but they were too blind to see. They had refused repeatedly to “turn to” God on their own, but they could not avoid meeting him face to face in the judgment. Sooner or later, everyone will face God. Better to face him now so as to be ready to face him later (see 1 John 4:16-17).

Verse thirteen serves as a reminder that the God who says these things is more than capable of carrying out his threats of judgment.

A Funeral Dirge for Fallen Israel, Amos 5:1-3

These words are in the form of a dirge or lament. Thus the very form and cadences of these verses would have carried a message of God’s sorrow over the fall of Israel. God knew the destruction was coming, although it would have seemed quite unlikely to the people at that time. Amos gave this message around 760 B.C., when Israel was strong and prosperous. By 722 or 721 B.C. the ten tribes which constituted Israel as a nation had in fact fallen, “never to rise again.”

An Appeal to Avoid the Coming Disaster, Amos 5:4-15

Instead of basing their confidence on their formal religious observances at Bethel and Gilgal (compare 4:4), the people need to seek God. If they will really seek the LORD, they can live (vss. 4, 6, 14-15). Since Israel was so religious outwardly at this time, they probably would have argued that they *were* seeking God—regularly, every time it was appointed to offer sacrifices or some other ritual came around on the calendar. Especially since it was a time of relative prosperity, they no doubt assumed God was with them already. Notice, however, that to seek the LORD is also to seek good (vss. 14-15). To seek the LORD and to seek good must mean the abandonment of evil practices. To say yes to God, you must say no to selfishness, cruelty, extortion, bribery, and destructive exploitation of others for your own benefit. This is not a matter of ‘works righteousness’—the notion that we can somehow behave well enough

for God to owe us salvation and blessing. Rather it is the recognition of what it really must mean to *seek* God. How can we say we are seeking God while being continually careless about what he desires?

Verses 8-9 contain another reminder (like 4:13) of the power of God. The threats of judgment are not empty talk, but neither is the offer of salvation! God is more than able to give life to those who seek him, just as he is able, should it be necessary, to destroy those who reject his gift and his ways.

The words “stone mansions” in vs. 11 is yet another reference to the prosperity of some of the people of Israel. The standard house of the time was made of mud brick. Archaeology has established that many were able to build far better houses in this era than in previous times. Although Amos may have been personally offended by the luxurious houses he saw in Samaria, the real problem was not how nice the houses were but how they had been obtained—by unjust exploitation of the laborers and corruption of the legal system (vss. 11-12). When “justice” is for sale to the highest bidder, there is no justice, and the poor are crushed.

The Day of the LORD, Amos 5:16-27

To a people complacently confident that Yahweh would be true to his covenant promises to bless and protect them, any talk about the LORD having a special “Day” might have sounded like something to look forward to, a day when God would destroy all the enemies of his people and complete the blessing enjoyed by his people. Amos turns such an expectation on its head: the Day of the LORD “will be darkness, not light” (vs. 18). Those who are said to be his people will find that the Day of the LORD will be a time when all the sins with which they have compromised and become comfortable will be judged. And the judgment will be inescapable. (Compare Hebrews 4:12-13, written to God’s people too!) The illustration in vs. 19 would be quite humorous were it not for the terror it describes—fleeing from one disaster, almost getting away, only to encounter another; having barely escaped to a place of safety, only to find an ambush there, where it was least expected.

In vss. 21-27, God returns to the topic of their religious observances and why they are offensive rather than pleasing to him. God’s disrespect for their worship is difficult to exaggerate; he wants nothing to do with it; he wishes they would just stop the whole silly game. Why? God hates and despises their worship because they hate and despise his ways (by the way they live and treat one another).

No more feasts! No more assemblies! No more sacrifices! No more offerings! No more songs! No more music! Why? Because these things are themselves pointless or offensive? Of course not. The Books of Moses contain plenty of instruction and the Book of Psalms plenty of examples indicating these things could be legitimate parts of worship. But these activities were never intended to be substitutes for lives of obedience, lives that were right with God and with one’s neighbor. Israel’s elaborate worship stinks to high heaven not because it is elaborate but because the hearts of the people are not right, and their lives contradict the covenant relationship supposedly celebrated in the worship services. (On putting true meaning into religious observances, see especially Isaiah 58; also Jer. 7:21-26.)

Let Justice Roll, Amos 5:24

Verse 24 is probably the most memorable verse in the entire book of Amos. This verse tells us what God really wanted from Israel and what he still wants from his people today. God wants justice; God wants righteousness. Remember the synonymous parallelism discussed

earlier in Lesson 2. Righteousness and justice are in synonymous parallelism here. They have slightly different connotations in many contexts, but in this context they cannot really be separated from one another. So much do they overlap, in fact, that “justice” can be fairly defined as “God’s righteous order.” [Repeatedly in the OT, justice and righteousness are put in the closest possible relationship with one another but also with terms such as truth (or faithfulness) and mercy (or steadfast love, lovingkindness). See, for some examples, Pss. 33:4-5; 89:14; and 85:10-11; also Jer. 9:24.] The common understanding of “justice” in our society is much more narrow than the biblical sense. It might be helpful at this point to discuss some of the differences so that we can more adequately understand exactly what Amos (and other OT passages) mean by the term.

In our society, the word justice commonly refers either to the notion that people should get what they deserve (reward or punishment) or to the notion that people should be treated fairly (everyone gets equal opportunity). The first of these can be referred to as ‘retributive justice,’ the second as ‘distributive justice.’ God’s justice, however, is not essentially distributive or retributive but transformational (Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, p. 188; also pp. 83-113). This is because God’s justice does not aim for a static state of “everyone having his/her ‘fair’ share,” nor does it strive for a condition in which everyone has received reward or punishment commensurate with their deeds. Rather, justice is the call and responsibility for each one to do what is right toward others. The fulfillment of that responsibility requires letting God change our hearts so that we do what is right, and we do it for the right reasons.

To do what is right, not in the world’s self-centered way in which each person demands his/her “rights,” but in God’s generous way of responsiveness to the other for his/her wellbeing—to *do what is right* is to *love*. Justice, from a scriptural perspective, cannot be separated from lovingkindness [mercy, covenant loyalty], from righteousness, or from compassion. When we think of justice as distributive or retributive (as we tend to do in our society) we end up opposing justice to mercy. We tend to think of justice as getting what is deserved, and we tend to think of mercy as getting better than we deserve (or maybe not getting something negative we deserve). God does not look on justice this way. Perhaps the notion of “judgment” could be set over against mercy, but even that is somewhat misleading. Whenever we speak of God’s judgment or mercy, we should remember that God’s motivation or goal is the same: *He wants to establish justice*, his righteous order in which all relationships are what they should be, in which everyone treats everyone else the way they should. He does not show us mercy in order to relieve us of the responsibility of doing what is right but in order to enable us to do what is right. Thus, God’s mercy does not deny justice; rather, God’s mercy is to establish justice.

Viewed this way, it is obvious that justice is not something that can be truly achieved by force. You have to *want* to do what is right in order to be a just person. The fact that human society has to use the compulsion of laws and even physical force to redress wrong and compel people to do what is right is a measure of how inherently unjust humans are when not guided by God’s will. What is ultimately needed, however, is not forced change in behavior, for that would not succeed in establishing justice. The “want-to” has to be changed. In other words, justice has to be a matter of the transformation of people and the transformation of the way people treat one another. This certainly will involve the change of institutions and social structures as needed, but if not based also on the transformation of persons, the transformation

of structures is too superficial to achieve justice. This is what is meant by saying that justice in the Bible is transformational: people are changed so that just ways of living result.

A “just way of life” (according to the Bible) is a life marked by good deeds, what we might call “charity.” This is where you can see quite easily the difference between the way we tend to think of justice and the way the Bible views it. If I share part of my income to help feed, clothe, and shelter the poor, I think of it as “charity” (if I do it voluntarily) or as “taxes” (if I do it because the government requires it!). On the other hand, if I keep it all to myself and assume our usual way of thinking about these things, I can still “justify” it by the fact that I earned the money, and I don’t owe those poor people anything. You might think of me as stingy, selfish, or insensitive, but you probably would not think of me as “unjust” to spend all my income on myself. Amos would. He would condemn my selfishness and unconcern as unjust. He would tell me to “let justice roll on” through my life, so that I could be free to do what is right, what is righteous. God is just; he does what is right. To the extent we are righteous, we will do what is right, which includes helping those whom God wants to help. The help of godly people is part of God’s help for people who need help. Not to help when you can is ungodly because it is unlike God (1 John 3:17).

“Righteousness” also includes the responsibility and desire to do good deeds, to help others even if we don’t “owe” them anything. This is true both in the OT and in the NT. See Matt. 6:1, where “acts of righteousness,” in context, refers to charitable giving. Also see 2 Cor. 9:9, which refers back to Psa. 112:9. See also Isa. 58:6-8 and James 1:27. This is not “works-righteousness” by which we hope to earn salvation; this, rather, is works of righteousness by which we respond to God’s goodness to us by seeking to do what is right. What is right must include doing what we can to help the helpless. It is not a question of whether they have the “right” to ask us for help; it is rather a question of what is the right thing for us to do with our resources. I may have, legally, a “right” to use my resources as I choose, even selfishly, but does that make it right?

To avoid misunderstanding on this politically sensitive issue, let me emphasize again the points made above. Justice is not obligatory *distribution* according to what each one deserves; rather it is the *disposition* of each to do what is right. Neither is justice the *re-distribution* of goods so that everyone has the same goods and opportunities (part of the fallacy of “liberation theologies,” although they draw attention to genuine injustices in many cases). Even if such an arrangement of equality could actually be achieved (and maintained), we would still not have justice. Justice does not depend on the equal distribution of goods and opportunities; justice depends on everyone’s commitment to be responsible for the wellbeing of others as well as for his/her own. We would do better to think of justice as what God wants rather than as what people deserve. And what God wants is right relationship—us with him and us with one another. When we treat other people as God wants us to treat them—then we have justice. Thus, justice is a dynamic way of life, rather than a static achievement of social engineering. (All I have really said here is that enforcement of the best of laws will not produce the justice God wants and we need. What God wants and we need are transformed persons who can really be free through the Gospel to treat one another with justice.)

One further comment on this important verse (5:24): Describing justice/righteousness as a river/never-failing stream is probably meant to be a comparison with the common but unreliable *wadi* (gully or gulch) in which a Palestinian might find water rushing during or after a rainstorm but not at other times of the year. A constant, year-round stream, by contrast, would bring nourishment to the life found all along its course.

Contemplating Amos's picture, we can see how, in like manner, justice/righteousness will bring life; the absence of justice/righteousness will produce barrenness like that of the desert.

Prediction of Exile, Amos 5:25-27

Verses 25-26 are somewhat obscure and translated in various ways in the different versions. The point seems to be that Israel has been involved in idolatry to some degree ever since the journey to Canaan centuries before. Verse 27 is clearly a prediction that Israel will be carried away into exile, as they were in 722 B.C. Amos does not name Assyria as the conqueror, but from Samaria "beyond Damascus" would be in the direction of Assyria.

Condemnation of Selfish Indulgence and Complacency, Amos 6:1-7

Notice how this portion is addressed to both Samaria (N. Israel) and Zion (Judah). Amos continues his focus on the selfishness and unconcern especially of the wealthy. The places mentioned in vs. 2 *perhaps* were locations which had already fallen under the Assyrian domination which Amos alludes to as the future judgment of Israel. Israel and Judah both are ignoring the warning signs of decay within their lands. They should be grieving in repentance (vs. 6; compare Matt. 5:4), but instead they are absorbed in eating, drinking, and entertaining themselves. Those who are presently the most comfortable and at ease "will be among the first to go into exile" (vs. 7). Surely there is a warning here for our day: just because I'm comfortable and have everything well provided for my needs and even wants—that does not mean there is nothing to grieve over. At least occasionally I should mourn the evils and suffering of my society as well as give thanks for the good things in my own life. Otherwise I may fall into the same blindness which Amos is here condemning.

Condemnation of Israel's Pride, Amos 6:8-14

At the height of their economic and military power, northern Israel was naturally proud of their "fortresses" (vs. 8) and of recent military successes (vs. 13). Amos sarcastically refers to Lo Debar, a real place which Israel had apparently conquered, but the name means "Nothing" or "No Place." God warns them this pride will be destroyed by the coming disaster, in which their great city will be captured, their population decimated, and their land ravaged from one end to the other (vs. 8, 9, 14). He does not name Assyria, but that empire did fulfill this prophecy.

Along with their pride, Amos once again condemns the perversion of justice in the land, which is so contrary to the ordained order of God that Amos compares it to racing horses over rocky crags or trying to plow such an impossible place (vs. 12). Some things you just don't do and expect to get away with.

Verse 10 is somewhat obscure. The reference to burning bodies probably indicates that great numbers of people would be dead, too many to bury. The caution against mentioning the name of the LORD is less clear. Perhaps it refers to the fear that would be inspired by the coming disaster—the survivors would be afraid to speak lest they too be struck down.

AMOS and HOSEA

Lesson 4: Amos 7-9

The Limits of Intercession, Amos 7:1-9

These verses contain three visions shown to Amos, each of which speaks of God's judgment on Israel. The first two prompt Amos to intercede for the nation, not because they do not deserve God's wrath but because Israel is "so small" (vss. 2, 5). In other words, Amos asks God to have pity on Israel. God answers those two prayers by promising not to send those particular judgments. The third vision, however, does not turn out this way. The vision of the plumb line seems to speak of a judgment which is certain and which cannot be altered, perhaps the reason why Amos does not intercede in this case (compare 1 John 5:16). Alternatively, we could take the three visions together as a picture of how God had deferred the time of judgment repeatedly in response to intercessory prayers by the remnant (not just Amos) who had remained faithful despite national apostasy. Now the time was imminent when judgment would be deferred no longer.

The ravages of locusts (vss. 1-2) were common enough for this to be a widely used symbol of divine judgment (see the book of Joel). The reference to "the king's share" (vs. 1) could be simply a way of setting the time of year, or it could mean "everything after taxes," your "take-home pay" is going to be consumed.

The plumb line vision (vss. 7-9) makes an implicit comparison between the "wall that had been built true to plumb" and Israel. Without actually saying it in explicit terms, the words powerfully communicate the fundamental problem with Israel: the nation is not 'upright.' When evaluated by a sure standard—since a plumb line cannot lie—Israel is found irretrievably out of line. The nation cannot be reformed or 'fixed'; judgment must be complete. The nation must be destroyed down to the foundations themselves (the same imagery is used later with regard to Judah's destruction, in 2 Kings 21:13 and Lam. 2:8; see also Isa. 34:11). God's verdict allows for no appeal to a higher court: "I will spare them no longer" (vs. 8).

This verdict does not, however, mean God is intent only on destruction. In fact, the imagery of a plumb line inevitably makes us think of *building* rather than tearing down. If God has determined that northern Israel must be torn down, it is because the building as presently constituted cannot be repaired and salvaged. But God's intention to build a "house" to the glory of his name persists. The reason for the tearing down is in order to build up—to build what is right, what will last. A text from another eighth-century prophet is helpful on this point.

Isaiah 28:16-17 was addressed to Zion (in Judah), but it shows clearly that God's purpose in tearing down is always to build up. God promises there to lay "a sure foundation," in which we can confidently trust (the NT identifies this foundation as Jesus; see 1 Peter 2:6). Isaiah 28:17 says justice is "the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line" for the building to be placed on that sure foundation. But notice that the ground has to be cleared in order for the building process to take place. God promises to build something that will last and that can be trusted, but he also promises to "sweep away your refuge, the lie" (Isa. 28:17). As long as we trust in a lie, in an illusion, we are not free to put our trust in the sure foundation which will never disappoint us or make us ashamed (Isa. 28:16).

Returning now to Amos 7:7-9, we can make the application, even though this particular passage contains no note of hope for the future. The verdict for the destruction of the kingdom of northern Israel, harsh as it was, was ultimately for the purpose of building up God's eternal

kingdom. This was a painful but necessary part of the long story of how God brought a Savior into the world—not just for Israel and Judah, but for the whole world. [Amos does finally include a note of hope—that God “will restore David’s fallen tent”—but only in the last chapter (9:11).]

Now let us venture to make one further application, this time on a more personal level. On occasion it happens that God makes known his verdict on some area of our personal lives. It becomes clear to us (through the convicting work of the Holy Spirit and the light of God’s word) that something has to be changed or done away with in our lives. Depending on how much we like that particular habit or attitude, we may feel God is intent on taking away or tearing down. In fact he is always in the business of giving and of building up. But his giving and his building up require, at times, some taking away and some tearing down. God is the God of true hope, not false hope. Therefore, false hopes must be disappointed in order that true hopes may be ours. (Compare the pruning in John 15, which illustrates the idea of taking away in order that there might be more. Also, remember Hebrews 12:26-29: what *can* be shaken *will* be shaken so that what *cannot* be shaken may be all that there is.)

Recall that at the time Amos was giving his prophecies, Israel felt secure and powerful. The reign of Jeroboam II was a period of great growth. But Amos is bold enough to predict the wrath of God against that illustrious royal house (vs. 9).

Personal Opposition to Amos, Amos 7:10-17

The specific mention of the reigning king as a target for judgment (vss. 9, 11) may have been the last straw. Amaziah, priest of Bethel (the northern Israelite counterpart to and competitor with the temple at Jerusalem), accused Amos of conspiracy against the king. No doubt he feared any would-be usurper of the throne might be encouraged by the public preaching of the king’s condemnation. (Prophets had, in fact, been involved previously in rebellions and coups. See, for example, 1 Kings 11:29-39; 12:15; 2 Kings 9:1-13.) More personally, he probably felt Amos was on his “turf.” Amos was not even from Israel but from Judah! (vs. 12) He had no business here. If he wants to go home and prophesy, then let him.

Amaziah was evidently operating on a different set of assumptions than was Amos. Amaziah apparently thought of the ministry of a prophet the way he viewed his own ministry as a priest. Amaziah was a professional, in the ministry for a career. As a “career priest” he knew better than to predict bad things for the king or to preach against his policies—not good “career moves.” On the other hand, to take the lead in defending the king’s good name against this character Amos—now that *would* be a good career move! After all, what good is a religious leader if he can’t be counted on to prop up the civil government?

Based on his understanding of the professional nature of religious ministry, Amaziah advises Amos to go back to Judah and ply his prophetic trade. (The offerings would probably be better there anyway, especially if Amos stopped bringing these “negative words.”)

Amos’s reply shows that his assumptions about speaking and acting in the name of the LORD are very different from those of Amaziah. Amos does not condemn “professional ministry” as such, but he says a clear word about his own motivation and what should be the motivation of anyone who is in the ministry as a career. Amos’s ministry is based not on a career-choice as such, but on a call. By upbringing and training Amos was a shepherd and a tender of sycamore-fig trees. But by divine appointment he had been sent as a prophet. It had not been Amos’s choice to be a prophet; it was not his choice *where* to be a prophet (as Amaziah assumed). God had said (1) “Prophesy,” which meant leaving the sheep and the fig

trees for now. God had said (2) “to Israel,” not just anywhere, not even in Judah (vs. 15). Amaziah’s advice is out of the question.

Amaziah's opposition to Amos indicates not just a faulty understanding of ministry but an opposition in his heart to the word of God. When he heard the word of the LORD as preached by a genuine prophet, Amaziah rejected it. As a result, Amaziah gets his own personal prophecy of the wrath of God, along with a reiteration of the promised exile of the nation (vs. 17).

Ripe for Judgment, Amos 8:1-14

Amos may see the basket of ripe fruit in a vision, or he may simply have had his attention drawn to a real basket of fruit sitting near him. In that case, Amos sees a significance in the basket which others would not have, only because he is *hearing* God's word as well as *seeing* the basket. People in general see the same events and realities in our world, but those who are listening to God see a significance that is hidden to those who ignore God's word. [The message to Amos comes in the form of a pun which is impossible to duplicate in English. The word used for “fruit” or “summer fruit” sounds like the word for “end.”] The harvest is coming in from the orchard; the “harvest” is also coming in for Israel (compare Hosea 8:7). Israel is “ripe” for judgment; their time is at hand. In 8:2, God repeats the solemn verdict from 7:8—“I will spare them no longer.”

In vss. 4-6, Amos returns to his central theme of social injustice as being the cause for the coming judgment. Verses 5-6 add a new dimension of irony in the people's attitude toward religious observances. Outwardly they are religious people, it seems, because they stop business for the New Moon and Sabbath worship. But are they truly observing the religious festivals and sabbaths, if they resent the intrusion into their money-making? Does their carefulness not to break the Sabbath compensate for the sharp business practices which break the backs of the poor?

Again, the problem is not that certain businesses were doing well and showing a good profit. The problem is in the way they go about making their money—by cheating their customers, making them pay as much as possible for as little as possible. Even the “sweepings” left on the threshing floor are being tossed back into the containers of grain to increase the apparent weight and the margin of profit (vs. 6). No trick is missed. Yes, these people worship—they worship profit, money, and the pleasures which money can buy. Their “worship” of God is phony, but their worship of material gain is real. In the coming judgment God will turn their phony religious festivals into times of genuine mourning (vss. 7-10).

The people had endured famines before, but had hardened their hearts and not responded to the word of God (4:6). Now, God declares, he will send another kind of famine. The word of God which they had rejected will become a coveted item, but it will not be found (8:12). This doesn't mean they won't be able to find a Bible (for one thing, they did not have Bibles like we do today; there were probably very few copies even of the Torah). Rather this prediction indicates that the time will come when the people will long to hear a fresh word from God to save them from their troubles. The problem is you just can't put in a call to heaven on your schedule saying, “Okay, let me hear a word from God now”—not when you have been turning a deaf ear to all God was saying before.

The time to pay attention is while God is speaking (see Isa. 55:6; Heb. 3:7-4:13; 2 Cor. 6:2). The word of God is not like some impersonal tool, to pick up and use when *we* get ready, when we have a use for it. The word of God is God speaking, a personal God to his people or

to an individual. To refuse to listen to his *word* is to refuse to listen to *him*. Will we treat him rudely and then expect him to be standing by (like an ever-ready, ever-present cosmic bellhop) to do our bidding when we finally decide to call upon him? It does happen, of course, that sometimes we do exactly that—we ignore God or scoff at his instruction until we encounter hard times. Then we call out to him in desperation. In his mercy he has answered us. But we must not forget this: he did not have to answer. Having endured our stubborn resistance to his word, he by no means owes it to us to respond to our cries for help. That he does respond is out of sheer grace. This particular passage, like others in the Bible, warns us not to take that grace for granted, because a time will come when a word from God will not be forthcoming for those who have continually rebuffed his overtures. (Hosea 5:6 has a similar message.)

Verses 13-14 contain references to the illegitimate worship at Dan (far north in Israel) and Beersheba (far south in Judah). The “shame of Samaria” (NIV) is also translated as “the Ashima of Samaria” (RSV). This is obscure but apparently refers to an idol god, perhaps a Syrian goddess which some imagined to be Yahweh’s consort. Those who have put their hope in the false gods will fall and “never rise” (vs. 14).

No Escape, Amos 9:1-10

The atmosphere of judgment and doom comes to its climax in this final chapter of Amos. Note that the judgment begins at the altar, at the place of worship. The perverted worship of Bethel and Dan, the widespread idolatry, and the superficiality of Israel’s adherence to the covenant with the LORD—all these things having to do with worship are at the heart of Israel’s judgment. This is where judgment should begin, since this is where the evil began. From the altar, the judgment will reach the entire nation, and “No one will get away, none will escape” (vs. 1). The one who threatens this full and thorough judgment has shown by his sovereignty over nature itself (vss. 5-6) that he has power to carry out this awful sentence.

Israel is right in one way to think they are a privileged people (see 3:2), but from another perspective they should remember that God has power over all nations. He can punish them (as in chs. 1-2), or he can settle them in new places, as he has already done with the Philistines and the Arameans, as well as with Israel (9:7). The God who brought each of these peoples into their present territory can remove them just as easily. Israel can rejoice over the fact that God brought them out of Egypt into Palestine, but they must take seriously also his determination to remove them from Palestine into exile.

In their arrogance and apparent security, the people at the time of Amos were saying, “Disaster will not overtake or meet us” (vs. 10), but just as God predicted northern Israel as a nation was destroyed “from the face of the earth” in 722 or 721 B.C. Then only Judah was left from “the house of Jacob” (vs. 8). Later Judah herself would be carried into captivity and only a small remnant would survive. Even with a small remnant, however, God is still intent on the purpose for which he chose Israel to start with. Isaiah and other prophets would later speak a great deal about this refined remnant.

Eventual Restoration, Amos 9:11-15

The restoration of “David’s fallen tent” would not have been a welcome message in northern Israel in Amos’s day, for they had rejected the Davidic king long before. Later, after Amos’s predictions of disaster proved true, a reassuring word about David’s throne would mean that God was committed to sparing at least a remnant of Judah.

It is interesting to see how this passage was understood in the early church as being ultimately fulfilled through bringing Gentiles into the church (see Acts 15:16-17). The important word that makes the connection is the word “nations” or “Gentiles” in Amos 9:12. The re-establishing of David’s “tent” through the resurrection and enthronement of David’s Son, Jesus, is part of extending salvation to peoples other than Israel, so that they too can bear the name of the Lord (vs. 12).

Verses 13-15 vividly picture a restored Israel enjoying immense prosperity, with harvests so great that the time between harvest and plowing for the new crop will be insufficient. Some believe these verses, which speak of Israel being physically present once again on their ancient homeland, are being fulfilled in our day. If that is so, we should remember it is true for the remnant of what in Amos’s day was Judah, rather than Israel (the term Israel, of course, reverted to Judah after the demise of northern Israel). The nation that was “Israel” in Amos’s day has never existed since its destruction in 721 B.C. Others would say this passage has nothing directly to do with the modern state of Israel, but is rather a symbolic prophecy about the blessing of God on the latter-day people of God, the “spiritual Israel” which is the church, including Gentile believers. The use of the previous verses (11-12) in Acts 15 is said to support the symbolic interpretation of vs. 13-15. I’ll not try to settle that argument, since it is quite complex. Either way—applying it to the church or to the latter-day blessings of Israel (some say in the millennium)—these beautiful verses provide a fitting ending for a book which by necessity had to focus most of the attention on judgment and destruction.

Amos has been so relentlessly negative that some scholars find it hard to believe this last section of the book, which prophesies restoration and great blessing, came from Amos himself. Whether Amos or another added these words is impossible to prove, but this positive word is by no means out of character with the negative message of Amos up to this point. As observed earlier in this lesson (with regard to 7:7-8), the tearing down is necessary for the true building up. God was working on something bigger than one generation of Israelites, larger in scope than the fate of one political nation. God was going about the intention announced long before in his call of Abraham to bless all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:3). Ultimately the one single “seed” of Abraham (Gal. 3:16) would become the Savior of the world. God’s purpose would be accomplished, no matter how small the remnant with which he had to work.

At the time of Amos, Israel was guilty of many sins, not the least of which was presuming on their covenant relationship with God. One message that comes through clearly in Amos is that a covenant relationship is not one of inalienable privilege for any particular individual, generation, or political entity. God would be faithful to his promises to Abraham and to David (9:11; refer back to 2 Sam. 7:16; Psa. 89:3-4), but that was no protection for the disobedient among Israel. The same applies today to the church: the persistence and patience of God in working through the church to achieve his purpose of taking the word of reconciliation to the whole world is no protection against having to give an account to God for how we have lived, especially how we who claim to know the Lord have treated those most in need (Matt. 25:31-46, a warning and exhortation to *us*, to which Amos says “amen”).

AMOS and HOSEA

Lesson 5: Hosea 1-3

For the historical and religious setting of Hosea's ministry, refer back to Lesson 1. Like Amos, Hosea spoke principally to northern Israel, with some references and applications to Judah also. Hosea, unlike Amos, was a native of northern Israel. The events of the time of his ministry are covered in 2 Kings 14:23—17:41.

Be aware that the Hebrew text of Hosea is in several places quite obscure. This is the main reason for the noticeably divergent translations of some verses. For example, compare on 11:12: “Judah is unruly against God” (NIV); “Judah is still known by God” (RSV); “Judah yet ruleth with God” (KJV). This should not concern you too much as you study the book, but I mention it in case you encounter a question as you teach. If someone is using another translation than the one or ones you have looked at, the reading could be very different in some places. The message of the book as a whole is not affected by these isolated obscurities.

The Message of Hosea: Love God [overview of Hosea from Lesson 1]

The tone in Hosea is quite different from Amos, partly because the times were so radically changed. But Hosea's focus is also different. Amos focused on the injustice in society; Hosea focused on the spiritual infidelity in Israel's heart—God's love for Israel was not appreciated or reciprocated. God wants his people to know him. This “knowledge” is not theoretical or merely intellectual; it is intimacy, affection and attachment, such as a husband and wife are meant to have in “knowing” one another. Israel thinks they know Yahweh; Hosea says they do not (4:1; 6:6). This lack of “knowledge” or “acknowledgment” of God will destroy Israel (4:6), because refusal of this relationship with God is refusal of the one who would save them (13:9).

Beyond the time of judgment which was beginning even during Hosea's lifetime, God's purpose to have a people will endure. God will have a people “married” to him in covenant relationship, a people who will show forth God's character, a people who “know” and “acknowledge” the LORD (2:19-20).

Go Marry an Adulterous Wife, Hosea 1:2—2:1

Some have questioned whether God would have commanded his prophet to marry a woman who was already sexually promiscuous. As a result, some say God commanded Hosea to marry Gomer, but that she became promiscuous only afterward (a development God would have foreseen, but not Hosea). I personally don't see how that is any easier to accept than the notion that both God and Hosea knew what kind of woman Gomer was at the time of the marriage. This would not be the strangest thing God ever asked an OT prophet to do, nor even the most emotionally difficult (Gen. 22:2; Isa. 20:2-3; Ezek. 24:15-18). I think it is fair to assume Hosea, if he knew Gomer had been promiscuous, would marry her with the hope that she would reform. It is possible that Gomer's promiscuity had been involvement in “cult prostitution,” the sexual component in the depraved rituals of idol worship, including the worship of Baal.

Even if that is not the case, and regardless of whether he knew her character before their marriage, Hosea's relationship with Gomer provides a perspective for understanding the tone of the entire message of the prophet. Even though the biographical material on Hosea and Gomer is featured only in the first three chapters of this book, Hosea's unique perspective on Israel's

infidelity to the LORD is made possible by his own wife's infidelity to him. Who else could so truly feel what God felt for wayward Israel? According to Hosea's own report of God's command to marry this particular woman, God's purpose was to teach his people (through Hosea's learning it firsthand) how "the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD" (vs. 2). The purpose of God, apparently, was to have at least one man in Israel, Hosea, who could *feel with God* what God was feeling and thus be able to reveal the heart of God to his people.

As God's prophet, Hosea was instructed to give his children names which carried prophetic significance for the nation (as Isaiah also did). Hosea's first child was called "Jezreel" (vs. 4), referring back to the bloody massacre of Ahab's house at the instigation of Jehu (2 Kings 9:30-10:17). Jehu had established the dynasty which was still in power at the time of Amos and the beginning of Hosea's ministry—the powerful King Jeroboam II. The birth and naming of this first son of Hosea's was to remind the people that God had not forgotten that bloody incident and was going to judge the royal house. Jehu's dynasty ended with the assassination of Jeroboam's son, Zechariah, in 752 B.C.; the kingdom of Israel lasted only thirty more years after that.

Gomer's second child was a daughter, named "Lo-Ruhamah," which means "not loved" (vs. 6). With our modern sensibilities, we respond, "What a horrible wound to inflict on this child!" No doubt, but let's not miss Hosea's and God's point: this child was a message to Israel that the nation was being disowned, that God's love had been so spurned that God was withdrawing it. (We might consider the possibility that this was not what the child was called at home, but only in the context of Hosea's ministry. That might be merely a capitulation to modern feelings, however. In Hosea's day they would not have given much thought to how the child would be affected by the name.)

Notice the distinction between Israel and Judah. From Israel God's protective love is being withdrawn (vs. 6), but God pledges to continue to love and preserve Judah (vs. 7). By the end of the eighth century, Israel was no more, swallowed up by Assyria. Judah came very close to perishing but was saved by divine intervention, as this verse predicts (see 2 Kings 19:32-36).

Hosea and Gomer had a third child, this one named "Lo-Ammi," or "Not my people" (vss. 8-9). This is a clear renunciation of Israel's covenant relationship (see Exod. 19:5-6). Their disobedience has led to their being disowned.

In verse 10 we encounter the first of several abrupt "about-faces" in the book of Hosea. Immediately after what seems to be a definitive disowning of Israel (vs. 9), God renews his promise to make Israel as numerous as the sand on the seashore, and he promises he will announce his ownership of them in the very place where he disowned them (vs. 10). He goes on to predict a reunion of Judah and Israel under one leader (vs. 11), but this would obviously be only after the previously prophesied judgment of Jezreel.

Northern Israel as a nation perished permanently in 721 B.C. Judah became *de facto* all of Israel at that point. It is interesting to see that in the New Testament, these prophecies about "Not my people" gaining an identity as the people of God are applied to the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church (see Rom. 9:24-26; 1 Peter 2:10). Hosea himself says nothing specific about Gentiles in his passage, although it might well be asked how else Israel could both perish

and be as numerous as the grains of sand except by some kind of re-defining of Israel—not a re-defining that does away with the importance of “Israel after the flesh” but a re-defining of boundaries that includes all believers under the name “My people.” At any rate, this inclusive understanding of “Not my people—now my people” is how the NT presents the ultimate fulfillment of this passage and of other promises such as Gen. 22:16-18 and Jer. 31:31-34 (see Heb. 8). From the NT perspective we would also be able to identify the “one leader” of vs. 11 as being Christ.

2:1 seems to be addressed to “Jezreel” (just referred to in 1:11) as an exhortation to rename (and thus reclaim) his siblings. This is by way of metaphor to be applied to Israel, however, and thus is an exhortation to the people of Israel to reclaim their identity as the beloved people of God. Since this is then a positive word of exhortation, it should be connected with 1:10-11 rather than with 2:2 ff.

If, as you read 1:2—2:1, you feel a strong tension between the stark disavowal of love for Israel and the tender words of 2:1, then you are reading perceptively. The book of Hosea is filled with this tension. One moment God seems to be the betrayed lover of Israel—filled with undying wrath or disgust toward the people; the next moment God pleads and promises tender reconciliation. The conflicting feelings were no doubt those of Hosea toward his wayward wife, but they reflect also the terrible conflict between God’s intense love for his people and the necessary consequences of their rejection of his love. To explore this tension or conflict to its fullest, we would have to turn our eyes toward the cross of Jesus—where God’s holy love and holy wrath against sin are displayed at one and the same time, in one and the same experience of unfathomable suffering.

The Adulterous Wife Chastised, Hosea 2:2-13

In this passage God speaks to Israel with the kind of passionate feeling that Hosea must have felt toward his wayward wife. All of the following strong feelings are found here: the pain of one betrayed; a willingness to chastise; hope for her return; hurt over her lack of gratitude; an intention to win back her love; expectations of reconciliation and “living happily ever after.”

The main thing to get out of this chapter is the strength of these feelings of God for his people, wayward as they were and we often are. If the mix of emotions seems confusing, it is because we have a tendency to reduce God down to some simple principle which can be rationally articulated (and “applied” as needed), when in fact God is a person. As a person he is at least as complex as you are! Can you imagine a human feeling hurt, anger, love, longing, tenderness, and disgust all at the same time (or at least in rapid succession)? At the same time God is angry at our disobedience, can God feel intense longing for our repentance, reform, and perfection in love? Of course he can. God’s feelings are not exactly like a human being’s, but if anything his feelings are more intense. His anger toward our disobedience is purer than our anger at a disobedient child, but it is not less intense. Just as we know that a parent’s anger or spouse’s hurt does not necessarily exclude constant love, so it is with God. It is not a denial of God’s love to speak of his anger, nor is it a denial of his anger at deliberate sin to maintain that he still loves us.

Verse two is written as though addressed to the children of God's "marriage" with Israel. The children are, of course, the people of Israel themselves. Israel is, metaphorically, both the wife and the children of Yahweh. This verse in effect divorces Israel from the marriage, or at least threatens to do so. There is a way for Israel to save the "marriage," by quitting her adulterous ways. "Otherwise" (vs. 3) God will expose Israel to the public shame inflicted on adulterers in the ancient near east (compare Ezekiel 16:35-42).

Israel's spiritual adultery against Yahweh becomes clearer in vss. 5-8. Israel's "lovers" (vs. 5) are the Baal idols scattered throughout the land (vs. 8). The worship of Baal both competed with the worship of Yahweh and corrupted such worship of Yahweh as was still going on at Bethel and Dan. In the comfort of her present abundance, Israel was under the illusion that Baal had brought her prosperity, and she was using the blessings of prosperity to worship Baal. The wrong god was being honored *for* the blessings and *by* the Israelites' use of the blessings. The gifts from God should be offered to God, to glorify him and give him thanks. To take gifts *from* God and offer them *to* another god is idolatrous and insulting. It is not just wrong theology; it is personal ingratitude, personally felt by the LORD. God, having showered his love on Israel, is grieved and disappointed over Israel's failure to appreciate and respond to his love. We who would never think of bowing to a carved image may become idolaters in these same ways: by *crediting* some source other than God for our blessings and/or by *using* our blessings to glorify someone other than God.

Verse eight introduces a theme found throughout Hosea: God's desire for Israel to "acknowledge" or "know" him. All of Israel's faults can be summarized in this one failing, since this failing is the source of all other faults—the failure or refusal to acknowledge God. Indeed, this is later pointed to by the Apostle Paul as the root cause of all the sordid evils in the world (see Rom. 1:18-32). Humans who refuse to acknowledge the one true God always find a substitute god—whether of wood, stone, gold, pleasure, power, or something else. That something else, once installed as god with our worship and our sacrifices, becomes god over us and, in one way or another, controls and consumes us. God, knowing this, is angry at idolatry not just because he himself is being ignored but also because his creation, which he loves, is corrupted and ultimately destroyed by idolatry. Apart from right relationship with its creator, creation will self-destruct. God's anger at idolatry is not petty jealousy but the jealous love of a God who does not want his creation, especially his redeemed and chosen people, to be destroyed.

Because Israel has been wrongly crediting Baal with having given her the prosperity of field, flock, vineyard, and orchard (vss. 5, 8, 12), God will take those blessings away (vss. 9, 12). His purpose is not vindictive but redemptive, in the hope that Israel may return to God, her true "husband" (vs. 7). This hope is further elaborated in the next section.

A Fresh Start, Hosea 2:14-23

God speaks longingly of his desire to win again the love of his "adulterous wife," Israel. Removed from the prosperity which has become her snare, taken back into the desert (metaphorically, not literally) as in the time of the journey to the Promised Land centuries before, perhaps there Israel will have her love rekindled. Once purified from her idolatry, Israel can be trusted again to receive bountiful blessings from God (vss. 15, 22).

Worth noting is the distinction in vs. 16 between "my husband" and "my master." The word for "master" is *baal*, which could also be translated as "lord" or "husband," as well as

being the name of the notorious idol. In the generic sense, it could be applied to Yahweh, but this ambiguity in the word could have contributed to the confused religious situation in Israel at the time. (There were probably some theologians of the day who theorized that, after all, Baal and Yahweh were just two different names for the same transcendent reality.) God intends to clear up this confusion for all time. No longer will the people call him *baal*, even in the generic sense, nor will they call upon Baal (vs. 17). What Yahweh wants is to be Israel's one and only "husband" (*ishi*).

The reconciliation or "re-marriage" between Israel and Yahweh is further described in vss. 19-20. God's will is to be married to his people forever and for it to be a marriage characterized by the wonderful terms used in these two verses. Righteousness and justice you will recall as important terms in Amos. "Love" or "lovingkindness" [Hebrew: *chesed*] is God's covenant loyalty—the affection with which he made and maintains his commitment; this word can also be translated as "mercy." The word translated as "compassion" (NIV) or "mercy" (RSV) is the same word that was negated earlier in the name "Lo-Ruhamah" or "Not loved" (1:6). "Faithfulness" (2:20) can also be translated as "truth." All of these words are filled with significance and are worth studying throughout Hosea and the entire OT. The most important concept in these verses for Hosea, however, is in the last line of vs. 20: "you will acknowledge [or know] the LORD." This would mean nothing less than the complete overcoming of the fundamental failure identified in 2:8. The failure to acknowledge would be remedied by full and free acknowledgement of God as the only God, and as the God of Israel. Yet that is only one aspect of the word "know/acknowledge" in this context.

In the context of the "re-marriage" of Israel with Yahweh, "to know" the LORD would have the connotation of the re-establishment of love and intimacy. To "know" is a widely used expression in the OT for marital relations. We should not think that Hosea's terminology is merely invoking the image of sexual intimacy. The real point is the re-establishment of the exclusive and loyal relationship (which marriage is supposed to be) between Israel and God, a relationship of trust, mutual love, and faithfulness. Only this could be a relationship of righteousness and justice.

In the pagan cults of the ancient near east the idea of having sexual relations with the god (through a surrogate, a temple prostitute) was common. By associating "knowing" God with the other terms used in vss. 19-20, Hosea makes it clear that he is speaking of a spiritual union rather than a supposedly sacramental sex act, such as the pagan religions offered. God wants intimacy and affection with his people, but not the kind of intimacy that Israel was wrongly seeking with Baal. Therefore, in offering intimacy and love to Israel, God also has to redefine that intimacy, in order to correct the confused religious thinking of the time. The Bible is clear that "to know" God must include knowing and adhering to his ways. In other words, knowing God must have an ethical component. See Exod. 33:13; 34:6, 7; Jer. 9:23-24; and 1 John 2:3-6. (This corrects one of the most persistent mistakes people make in religion—thinking that it offers powerful or enabling experiences of the divine realm without making demands on our behavior in the moral realm. The "New Age" movement promotes this mistaken and attractive notion, but so does any morally deficient version of Christianity.)

When Israel is at peace with God, there will be peace in her land (vs. 18). The reconciliation of the nation will bring reconciliation also in the realm of nature (vss. 18, 21-22). All the renunciations God has spoken through the symbolic names given to Hosea's children (in ch. 1) will be reversed (vss. 22-23). After the judgment symbolized by "Jezebel," God will

plant Israel in the land (Jezreel means “God plants”). “Not loved” will be loved, and “Not my people” will be God’s people. (Compare God’s later announcement of a new covenant in Jere. 31:31-34; Heb. 8. God’s persistent purpose has been to have a people who would acknowledge him as “our God.” See also Lev. 26:12; Ezek. 11:20; 36:28; Rev. 21:3).

All of this is conditional, it should be observed. God is reaching out, but Israel must respond. When and if she does, she will find God a responsive “husband,” and the land and the sky will also respond to produce a happy harmony (vs. 21-22).

The Adulterous Wife Redeemed, Hosea 3:1-5

Gomer had apparently abandoned Hosea in pursuit of her adulterous way of life (although he may have divorced her for her adulterous activity). Perhaps she had returned to her previous work as a cult prostitute at one of the Baal shrines. She may have incurred debts which she could not pay and now found herself enslaved. Certainly nothing worse than she deserved! Yet God tells Hosea to bring her back home with him and to love her as God loves the adulterous nation of Israel.

Hosea did as he was told, even though it meant he had to pay the price to redeem her from the slavery which she had gotten into by her own sinful ways. By doing as God told him to do, Hosea thus becomes a picture of how God pays the price for our salvation, despite what our behavior deserves. The silver and grain paid for Gomer's freedom (vs. 2) may have been the easy part of the price Hosea had to pay to show this kind of love.

Although Hosea doesn't spell out his own feelings about Gomer in this chapter, it is natural to wonder whether he would have *wanted* to take her back! Would it have been easy, knowing her unfaithfulness? Would it not have been painful? There is often pain involved in forgiving, especially if the offense is personal in nature. What could be more painful to endure and to forgive than treachery, disloyalty from the very one privileged with your commitment at the greatest level? But this is a revelation of the nature of love—God’s love for us and the love he can enable us to show one another: Love is willing to suffer in order to forgive, reconcile, and restore. We do not speak of loving to suffer (that is mental illness), but rather of suffering in order to love redemptively. I think only God could have asked Hosea to take Gomer back; otherwise Hosea had every right to try to forget she ever existed. But God does not ask Hosea to do what God is not willing to do. Neither does he ask us to show more patience with one another than he is willing to show with us. Does it hurt sometimes to show this kind of love? Without dispute. And it hurt God (certainly in the death of Jesus) to show this kind of love toward you and me. (See John 15:12-13.)

Hosea is also a picture of God’s love toward Israel in the way he imposes discipline on Gomer after he brings her home (vs. 3). As he states in vs. 4, Gomer’s deprivation of her previous indulgences is to be followed by Israel’s deprivation of her royalty and her religious activities, whether idolatrous or not. (The “sacrifices” and “ephod” could be legitimate parts of worshipping Yahweh; the “sacred stones” and “idols” were obviously pagan.) Again, the purpose is not to punish for punishment’s sake but for redemption’s sake (vs. 5). God will deprive in order to purify; he purifies in order to bless (compare John 15:2). Notice again in vs. 5 (as in 1:11, and the last chapter of Amos) that God intends to preserve the line of David and to bring chastened Israel back under that rule.

AMOS and HOSEA

Lesson 6: Hosea 4-6

From this point to the end of Hosea it is difficult to discern any kind of progression or necessary order. We have here (as often in the OT prophets) a collection of “oracles” which were delivered orally in Hosea’s preaching and probably written down only later. The oracles are primarily about the reasons for the judgment of God on the land, although God’s love and determination to redeem his people are expressed in positive ways as well.

God’s Charge against Israel, Hosea 4:1-14

Verse one of this chapter is interesting to compare with Amos’s complaint against Israel. Amos emphasized that Israel needed to demonstrate God’s justice and righteousness (5:24); Hosea’s complaint is that Israel does not demonstrate “faithfulness,” “love” (“kindness” or “loyal, covenant love”; *chesed*), or “acknowledgment/knowledge” of God. In a way, you could say that Amos accused Israel of not showing *outwardly* the marks of God’s covenant people, while Hosea points out the lack of *inward* responsiveness to God. It’s only a matter of emphasis, of course, since the outward lack manifests the inward lack. Had Israel’s heart really been right with God, Israel’s public life would have been right.

The knowledge/acknowledgment of God is a central theme in Hosea, as already pointed out in 2:8, 20. By their worship of Baal, the people are *acknowledging* the wrong god. By their behavior in general, they show that they do not *know* God—they do not have an affectionate attachment to him and to his ways. More than anything else, Hosea sees that Israel needs this knowledge/acknowledgment of God. Lack of this knowledge/acknowledgment will bring the nation’s destruction (4:6). See further in this lesson, 6:3 and 6:6.

Instead of faithfulness, love, and knowledge/acknowledgment of God, Hosea sees cursing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery, and the general lawlessness described in vs. 2. Being disloyal to the covenant with the LORD makes the people inevitably treacherous and faithless in dealing with one another. Disorder in the relationship with God brings disorder in society. Lawlessness begets lawlessness. Even without the threat of conquest by the Assyrians, these things can destroy a nation from within. And they certainly make the nation weaker in the face of any external threat.

Hosea focuses on the religious leaders for their responsibility for the nation’s corruption. The prophets (who should be able to give guidance) stumble along with the rest of the people (vs. 5). The very ones who claim to have knowledge of the things of God—the prophets and the priests—have “rejected knowledge” (vs. 6). Those who should teach others God’s law have “ignored” it (NIV; compare RSV, “forgotten” in the sense of deliberate forgetting). “Ignoring” or “forgetting” the law is the exact opposite of acknowledging God. Since they have forgotten/ignored God’s way, God will forget/ignore them and their children. (Jesus taught the same truth in Matt. 7:22-23: Those who don’t acknowledge God by following his ways will not be acknowledged or “known” by him.) By forgetting they forfeit the right to speak for God, and they will perish along with the people they have ill served (vs. 9).

Although in one sense all of Israel was supposed to be a nation of priests (Exod. 19:5-6), Hosea is specifically condemning the priesthood which northern Israel had set up in competition with the temple in Jerusalem. He does not condemn them for being in competition, however, only for being unfaithful to God and being accomplices in the people’s sins (vss. 7-8).

Verses 10-14 describe the nation's widespread idolatry and the sexual sins and indulgence in drink (vs. 11) that were part of the snare of idolatry.

Stop the Infection! Hosea 4:15-19

Hosea warns the southern kingdom, Judah, not to follow Israel on the road to destruction. Gilgal was a place of worship in Israel but near Judah—Judah should stay away. “Beth Aven” means “house of wickedness” or “house of trouble” and is a substitute name for Bethel, which means “house of God.” Bethel, one of the chief worship centers in Israel, was also near Judah and thus a possible temptation for people of Judah to go there for worship. Hosea says, “Don't go! The ‘house of God’ there is really a ‘house of wickedness.’ The place is under quarantine. Keep away, for your own good!” The warning is repeated in vs. 17, with a sense of hopelessness that Ephraim (Israel) can be saved. When we stubbornly cling to a rebellious course of action, we run the risk that God will let us alone to receive the consequences of our actions (vss. 16-19; compare Rom. 1:24, 26, 28—“he gave them over”).

Indictment of the Rulers, Hosea 5:1-15

Having already accused the prophets and priests of guilt in Israel's fall, Hosea now includes the king in his denunciation of the evils in the land. The background for these words is the violent overthrow of ruler after ruler in Israel and (especially for vss. 8-14) the Syro-Ephraimite War of 734-732 B.C. (refer back to Lesson 1).

Mizpah and Tabor (vs. 1) were sites of Baal worship. Hosea says the kings have been snares there because of royal support for and participation in the worship of Baal. Therefore the kings, just like the priests and prophets of Israel, have to bear responsibility for Israel's enthrallment in the “spirit of prostitution” which prevents their knowledge/acknowledgment of the LORD (vss. 3-4).

Even if they make sacrifices to Yahweh, until and unless they are willing to be set free from enslavement to immorality and to Baal worship, they will not find God (vss. 4, 6). Finding God (or accepting his kingdom) always requires us to renounce the claims of all other gods/kingdoms. Only by seeking him with all our heart can we be assured that he will allow himself to be found (Jer. 29:13). The LORD has never been and never will be willing to be *one* of our gods, both because he knows he is the only true God and because he knows all other gods destroy rather than give life.

The allusions to warfare in vss. 8-9 reflect the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite War. This war ultimately compromised the independence of Judah, nearly brought Israel to an end and cost the life of King Pekah, and brought the destruction of Damascus and the deportation of its citizens (refer back to Lesson 1). Ephraim (Israel) was “laid waste” in this war, and Judah exploited the situation by claiming territory which had belonged to Israel (vs. 10). According to Hosea, God is not pleased with either Israel's or Judah's behavior in this conflict. Both kingdoms are being judged by the LORD (vs. 12). The war between Israel and Judah is itself a judgment, as the negative effects of Assyria's intervention become clear in both nations (2 Kings 15:29-30; 16:5-19).

After the assassination of Pekah, northern Israel became a vassal kingdom, paying tribute to Assyria. Because of having asked for Assyrian help, Judah also became a vassal state. Both Israel and Judah are now looking to Assyria for their security and national “health”

(i.e., survival!). This is not the right doctor for what really ails Israel and Judah (vs. 13). The basic sickness is not political or military, but spiritual. A political or military solution engineered by the rulers of the nation is no solution at all. (Compare the tendency we still have to invest hopes for security in international treaties, alliances, or high-tech weapons. Necessary though these might be, they are no protection against what really destroys nations.) The destruction visited upon Judah and Israel by the Syro-Ephraimite War will not compare with the visitation of divine wrath that is coming (vs. 14; note also the escalation of wrath implied by a contrast between vs. 12 and vs. 14).

Notice again the redemptive purpose of God (vs. 15), despite the horrible judgments that are on the way. The one thing Israel and Judah have to do is to admit their guilt and repent.

The Repentance God Wants? Hosea 6:1-11

The first three verses of chapter 6 present a bit of a puzzle, despite their seeming simplicity and even beauty. Who is speaking these words? As punctuated by the RSV, 6:1-3 is connected with 5:15 and understood to be God's prescription for what Israel needs to say in repentance. The NIV does not connect it with 5:15, but there is still a question whether these are words by which Hosea is exhorting Israel to repent, or whether they are Hosea's mockery of Israel's insincere mouthing of pious-sounding words. The somewhat exasperated response of God in vss. 4-6 seems to argue against reading vss. 1-3 as a sincere repentance by Israel. The fact that vss. 1-3 contain no explicit admission of guilt for having done anything wrong, but only an expression of confidence (presumption?) that God will restore them "as surely as the sun rises," might also reflect a superficial willingness to "return to the LORD" but not really to repent. (Compare 14:2, where it is clear that God instructs Israel to ask for forgiveness for sins committed.) Considering all these factors, it seems best to regard vss. 1-3 as Hosea's mockery of Israel's too-easy willingness to go through the religious motions, although it must be conceded that these words contain some good theology. (Everything Israel believed and said about God was not wrong. It's just that the people as a whole were not facing up to the moral and religious implications of what they said they believed about Yahweh.)

"He has torn us to pieces" (vs. 1) echoes God's threat in 5:14. The recent catastrophe of the Syro-Ephraimite War is perhaps in mind. In that case, vs. 1 recognizes that the LORD had allowed the devastation of the war and that the LORD alone could heal the land (not Assyria, 5:13). Verse two expresses confidence that he will revive the nation in a very short time. The first part of verse three sounds as though Israel might have really heard God's pleas through Hosea and was ready to make knowledge/acknowledgment of God their priority. But the last part of the verse sounds altogether presumptuous: "As surely as the sun rises, he will appear . . . like the winter rains, like the spring rains . . ." Can God be taken for granted as though we have figured out his schedule? This sounds more like casual, going-through-the-motions ritual than true repentance. Israel may realize they are in trouble, but are they able to admit the truly desperate plight of the nation?

What really makes vss. 1-3 seem like insincere "repentance" is the response of God in vss. 4-6. Both Ephraim and Judah prompt God's exasperated question: "What can I do with you?" Nothing seems to be getting through to the people. Even the devastation of the recent war has not really moved their hearts. Their religious response is altogether superficial. Their display of "love" (*chesed*, mercy, steadfast love) toward God is like a morning mist or the dew on the ground. The day will not be very old when it has disappeared without a trace. This lack of depth is precisely the reason ("Therefore," vs. 5) God has sent his judgment as announced by

the prophets Amos and Hosea. What Israel is quite willing to offer (sacrifices, burnt offerings) cannot substitute for what God really wants but Israel does not know how to give: “mercy” (*chesed*, love, steadfast love) and “knowledge/acknowledgment” of God (vs. 6; for the emphasis on knowing God, recall 2:8, 20; 4:1, 6).

Israel and Judah know how to do the religious thing but they have forgotten how to do the right thing (4:4). This is essentially the same message about meaningless worship that Amos delivered earlier (5:21-24); Amos, however, focused on the lack of social justice which made a lie out of the sacrifices. Hosea concentrates on the people’s shallowness: they know how to act like they love God at the right time (i.e., while at worship), but for them it is only an act, only on the surface. Their true character emerges soon afterward (6:4). Hosea is not saying sacrifices should not be made. He says sacrifices don’t make up for failing to give God what he really wants. This is a theme which recurs a number of times in the Bible.

In 1 Samuel 15:22, 23, Samuel tells Saul obedience is greater than sacrifice. As noted earlier, Amos 5:22-24 says justice and righteousness are more important than sacrifices. Micah 6:6-8 says what God really wants is not sacrifices but justice, mercy, and walking humbly with God (i.e., obeying him). Hosea 6:6 agrees with these passages in showing God’s priorities to be personal character and how we treat one another, rather than religious displays. Jesus had the same priorities. In Matthew 9:13 and 12:7, Jesus twice quoted Hosea 6:6 in response to his critics—faulting them for placing higher priority on conformity to legal standards than on the genuine welfare of those whom God willed to save. A key theme of the Sermon on the Mount is that righteousness is something other than surface conformity to the traditional values; it is a transformation wrought by God in the hearts of those who fully submit to his kingdom.

The Bible has a lot of positive things to say about sacrifices as well. Think of Romans 12:1-2, for example. The sacrifice God wants is the giving of one’s self to God. There is no other sacrifice that can make that one unnecessary, no other sacrifice which can satisfy or “buy off” God so that he is willing to leave you alone to do as you please with the rest of your life or the rest of your resources. There is no sacrifice to substitute for a response of the whole person to God—in obedience and willingness to have one’s attitudes and behavior changed. To make response of the whole person possible, some sacrifices are necessary. Sacrifices of time, ambition, prestige, money, comfort, or other things can be very real sacrifices we have to make. But these sacrifices are not ends in themselves. Rather they are means by which we offer God what he really wants—ourselves. Even the sacrifice of Christ on the cross is the means by which God gave himself to us.

Chapter 6 ends with a litany of references to places in Israel where God said the people had been wicked, and then another warning to both Israel and Judah. Why these particular places were singled out is not clear. Perhaps these had been particularly hard hit in the recent Syro-Ephraimite War. Certainly that was the case with Gilead, which Assyria had captured.

AMOS and HOSEA

Lesson 7: Hosea 7-10

A Decadent and Confused Society, Hosea 7:1-16

God wants to heal Israel (vs. 1), and this chapter describes some of the maladies from which Israel needs to be healed. The decay of the society depicted here is both the cause and the result of God's judgment. The impending destruction of the nation will be the result of the evils described here, but the social evils described here are themselves the consequences for Israel's unfaithfulness to God. The breakdown in society is a judgment already happening.

Verse one mentions theft and robbery. We are so used to coping with these crimes in our own society that we may not be impressed with Hosea's mention of them. If so, that probably indicates how far we have developed insensitivity to something we ought to regard as decay in our own society. (A visit to another culture where there is much less crime—such as Japan or Britain—can sometimes awaken us to the deplorable level of violence in our country.) I do not mean we should make excuses for individual criminals by saying they are merely products of their society. Scripture gives no such excuse by which to evade personal responsibility for decisions made and courses chosen. Yet it is true that public pervasiveness of sin and the breakdown of social order are symptomatic of deeper disorders. (Remember how Paul shows in Rom. 1 that the most basic sin is rejection of the knowledge of God. From that basic sin all other sins take root, including those regarded as most disgusting.) The person who chooses a life of crime needs to repent. But don't all of us need to repent for our complicity (perhaps unwittingly) in social habits ("structures") which encourage evil or make it more likely? People may become inured or hardened to the level sin has risen around them, but God does not (vs. 2). He doesn't "get used to it."

Verses 3-7 go together as a description of the evil plotting and scheming which is rampant in the highest levels of Israelite society. Recall the string of kings who assassinated their way to the throne (see Lesson 1). Such lawlessness begets lawlessness, and the intrigues continue. The king who gained the throne by murder is likely to lose it by the same means. Even on the day when the king's reign is celebrated (vs. 5), flatterers who praise him (vs. 3) are plotting how to kill him (vss. 6-7). Like a smoldering fire fanned into a blaze by the wind, these men are only waiting for conditions to be right for their own move toward power. Notice how Hosea repeatedly uses the image of fire or burning to describe their passion for power.

Men intoxicated with power or with dreams of power are consuming one another. Each one thinks he is the answer to the country's needs, yet "none of them calls on" the LORD, the only one who can save them (vs. 7). A new government is a vain hope, for it cannot bring salvation. Indeed, the rapid turnover in kings, especially in the way they were changed, is only a symptom of the deep estrangement of the nation from God. (History gives us many examples of leaders or movements being hailed as "saviors" only to become that from which people needed to be saved: the French Revolution, Napoleon, Lenin, communism, Hitler. May God save us from such "saviors"!)

Israel is dying but, blinded by pride, doesn't know it (vss. 8-11). "A flat cake not turned over" is an interesting metaphor, depicting a people who will be ruined, completely useless, unless they get something they cannot do for themselves. Too long in this position of alienation

from God, with no change, spells the nation's doom. Alliances and involvements with other nations (alliance with Syria in the Syro-Ephraimite War, submission to Assyria, overtures to Egypt) are not strengthening Israel but rather are weakening the nation (vss. 9, 11). Every move on the field of diplomacy or in war seems to turn out wrong, but the worst of it is that they are putting vain hopes in such strategies rather than turning to God (vs. 10). Turning first to Egypt then to Assyria (vs. 11), besides being a sign of national confusion is also a sign of national disunity. (Review history in Lesson 1.)

Whether they line up with Egypt or Assyria, God's wrath will find them (vs. 12). God's desire is to redeem them, but it is possible for people's stubborn rebellion to frustrate the good purpose of God for them (vs. 13). Yes, Israel still names the name of the LORD and cries out to him, but not sincerely (vs. 14). It is not sincere repentance when the only thing mourned is the loss of material goods. Still lacking is any kind of mourning over the sin, the rebellion, the forgetting of God's laws.

Because neither the people nor the leaders "turn to the Most High" (vs. 16), "they are like a faulty bow," an unreliable weapon that cannot be trusted in the moment of crisis. These power-hungry and back-stabbing leaders will perish, and the land from which some of them hoped for assistance (Egypt) will laugh at them.

The breakdown in society was the judgment of God already; the destruction of the nation at the hand of the Assyrians simply brought that judgment to a climax. We need to ask whether we might see in our land any signs that God is already executing judgment on us as a nation. Are the thousands of homeless people on our streets an opportunity and responsibility for us to try to help them? Yes, but they may also be a sign of the wrath of God resting on our nation for our selfish materialism! Are the people dying with AIDS an opportunity for Christians to show real compassion and our belief in eternity? Yes, but they may be also a sign of God's judgment on our nation for our lax standards of morality. (If we say such things, we need to be clear that we are not smugly passing judgment on the individual who is suffering, regardless of how the person contracted the disease. If there was a specific fatal disease associated with every individual sin, who among us would be alive, let alone healthy?)

Reaping the Whirlwind, Hosea 8:1-14

This chapter continues the description of the reasons for the judgment that has already begun and is still on the way. The trumpet (vs. 1) is to sound the alarm, to alert everyone of the impending disaster. The "eagle" is understood by the NIV translators to be a reference back to the warning of Deut. 28:49-52. The RSV translates as "vulture," which would be a sign of death or dying on the ground below. Either way, "an eagle/vulture over the house of the LORD" is not good news.

The key difficulty in dealing with Israel's problem is that the people still think they are alright with God. "We know/acknowledge you!" they cry (vs. 2), but it is not true. (Refer back to Lessons 5 and 6, on Hosea 2:20; 4:1; 6:6.) It cannot be true that Israel knows/acknowledges the LORD while at the same time she rejects the ways of the LORD, "what is good" (vs. 3). The human capacity for self-deception is frightening to contemplate and is just one of the reasons we have to continue to expose ourselves to God's word and pray that in his mercy we may see our faults and repent of them (see Psa. 139:23-24 and Psa. 19:12). Seeing someone else who is

blind to their faults (such as the ancient Israelites or someone you know personally) should warn us to allow God to correct us, since we are all prone to such blindness.

The “calf-idol” of Samaria (vss. 5-6) refers to the worship sites established in Dan and Bethel by King Jeroboam right after northern Israel broke away from Judah (1 Kings 12:26-30). Throughout the separate history of Israel, the worship of Yahweh at these sites had been focused on golden calves which Jeroboam had made. This corruption of the worship of Yahweh (along with the illegitimacy of the northern priesthood, 1 Kings 13:33-34) was condemned by prophet after prophet; yet Israel persisted in the rebellion against God’s prohibition of such images. The use of the calf-idols also helped blur the distinction in the people’s minds between Yahweh and Baal, whose worship was centered on a bull image. These calf-idols, then, are at the heart of all that is wrong in Israel and must be destroyed. (Compare also Exodus 32.)

Sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind (vs. 7) is a metaphorical way of saying that the lawless, heedless ways of Israel are bringing chaos. Because they strayed, they will be destroyed. Disorder begets disorder, and ever-greater disorder. These colorful words aptly characterize the whole dilemma of Israel, and of any person or society who heedlessly throws off restraint and stubbornly pursues a selfish, ungodly course.

The rest of vs. 7 and the following verses speak of the futility of all that Israel is trying to do to assure her survival and prosperity. Israel’s diplomatic and military efforts among the nations have succeeded only in getting Israel “swallowed up” (vs. 8). Israel’s submission to Assyria (vs. 9) is a pathetic sight, “like a wild donkey wandering alone.”

Verses 11-14 make another reference to the vanity of Israel’s religious activity, even when they think they are worshiping Yahweh. The multiplication of altars has only made the sins more numerous, since the whole system was corrupted by the rebellion at its heart. Lots of sacrifices (vss. 11, 13) but little or no obedience to God’s commands (vs. 12). They liked to offer God things, but didn’t like what God offered them by way of instruction.

The “return to Egypt” (vs. 13) is probably a metaphorical way of saying Israel’s historic deliverance from Egyptian bondage and their occupation of the Promised Land has come to a dead end. They are heading back to slavery, not literally in Egypt but in Assyria. They are returning to the plight from which God had once saved them (see 9:3).

Notice how both Israel and Judah are included in the coming judgment (vs. 14). Israel was destroyed by Assyria in 722 or 721 B.C. Judah also lost every walled city except Jerusalem to the Assyrians in a later conflict (2 Kings 18:13).

Futility of the Fertility Cult, Hosea 9:1-17

One alleged benefit of Baal worship was that Baal, as the storm god, would assure the fertility of crops and flocks for those who worshiped him. In a land so dependent on timely rains (unlike Egypt’s predictable Nile), such an alleged benefit was attractive to the Israelites, who mixed their worship of Baal with their worship of Yahweh. Hosea refers to their motive for Baal worship when he says that they “love the wages of a prostitute at every threshing floor” (vs. 1). Harvest time was when worship of Baal was supposed to pay off. (This particular oracle might well have been delivered as a sermon during a harvest festival. It seems to presuppose a time of revelry.)

Of course people today don't worship Baal, but we have our own idols which promise a payoff in their own way. In a sense every idol is a "fertility god" which humans serve in hopes of assuring that life produces the things we want. If idols did not seem to offer us something, they would hold no attraction for us. If idols did not seem to deliver, people would soon abandon them. The illusion that "it works" keeps people enthralled by the idols, keeps them from seeing the futility of the fertility cult.

For example, the worship of power often seems to work for those who are willing to make the necessary sacrifices to get it (sacrificing character, honesty, friendship, loyalty, family, one's own soul, whatever it takes). Only when the idol begins to tighten its stranglehold, and it becomes clear that the idol controls us rather than serving our interests—when it becomes clear that the idol will destroy rather than fulfill—then perhaps we can see the error of the idolatry. Israel's story illustrates how persistent such illusions are, and how people often don't shake free of them in time to avoid destruction.

The survivors of Israel (vs. 3) are about to return to Egypt (metaphorically, back into slavery and non-nationhood) and be taken away to Assyria (literally). The futility of the fertility cult will be evident then, when the food they have will be little, unclean, and anything but a cause for rejoicing (vss. 2-4). The festival days, so important in the worship of Yahweh and of Baal and other gods, will be a thing of the past (vs. 5).

Israel is so far from God that these warnings seem like the ravings of a madman or a fool (vs. 7). The prophet of God encounters hostility and plots against him by those who call themselves the people of God (vs. 8; compare Amos 7:10-13 and the later experience of Jeremiah, chs. 36-38). This probably reflects opposition which Hosea was meeting, but he does not specify. Verse 9 compares the present corruption to the time of Gibeah, a reference back to the bloody anarchy of Judges 19-21.

The LORD nostalgically recalls the earlier relationship with Israel (vs. 10). The picture of finding grapes in the desert speaks of God's unique delight in "finding" Israel (note that they did not find him). But that early delight was soured when the people went after Baal Peor (Num. 25:1-5). The Baal problem is not a new one; it goes back to the time of the wilderness generation. Just as it did then, however, the attraction to Baal brings disaster in its wake.

The fertility cult is futile because Baal is a false god, and Yahweh, the only true God, is going to veto all the promises of the fertility cult (vss. 11, 14). God decrees: "no birth, no pregnancy, no conception" (note the reverse order, which heightens the effect). The curse of infertility would apply also to the flocks, herds, and fields, but Hosea puts the focus on the human families. Ironically, Israel's participation in the fertility cult is going to bring about infertility! This is ironic but predictable, since false gods, and indeed all temptations to sin, never deliver what they promise. They do not (in the long run) give us more of life or make us more than we were. Instead they take away what we did have and make us less than we were and less than we were meant to be. (The classic paradigm of this is, of course, the temptation in the Garden of Eden: promised more, humans ended up with less—less than promised, and less than before.)

Even the offspring that will be born will bring only futility and grief. Those allowed to be born are destined for death at the hands of the invaders (vss. 12-13, 16) or, perhaps worse in some ways, exile and the life of aliens in strange lands (vss. 15, 17). (The reference to Gilgal in vs. 15 probably recalls the rejection of Yahweh as king over Israel [1 Sam. 11:11-14]. Gilgal was also, in Hosea's time, one of many sites for Baal worship.)

Sowing and Reaping, Hosea 10:1-15

In vss. 1-2 Hosea repeats the observation that Israel has not handled its previous prosperity well. The abundant blessings of God have been used for the worship of idol gods (ideas prominent in 2:5-13). To rid them of this abomination, God will take away the Baal shrines but also the prosperity. He will also take away their king (vs. 3), which means, effectively, the end of the nation as such.

A land of abundant lawsuits (vs. 4; RSV has “judgment”) is bearing the fruit of faithlessness. Because they have not kept faith with God, they have developed habits of not keeping faith with one another. Sometimes people complain that our society is overly litigious because we have too many lawyers who have to drum up business for themselves. That may be a factor, but far fewer lawyers would be needed if honesty and faithfulness were more prevalent. Exploitation of people’s baser motives may be reprehensible, but the people with the baser motives bear the blame for having them.

Verses 5-8 depict the downfall of Samaria and the loss of the worship centers at Bethel (“Beth Aven”; recall 4:15 and 8:6). The horror of judgment will prompt desperate cries for a place to hide (vs. 8; compare Luke 23:30; Rev. 6:16).

On the reference to Gibeah (vss. 9-10), see 9:9. Hosea mentions that horrible incident and its bloody aftermath to emphasize the certainty of the coming judgment for Israel’s “double sin” (not a reference to two sins, but a way of saying “great” or “numerous” or “more than enough to deserve the punishment”; compare Isa. 40:2).

The book of Hosea uses a lot of metaphors and similes from various facets of life and nature. This chapter contains a number of examples of figurative language from agriculture: a vine (vs. 1); “poisonous weeds in a plowed field” (vs. 4); thorns and thistles (vs. 8); threshing of grain and plowing (vs. 11); planting and reaping evil (vs. 13). One of the best known verses of Hosea is 10:12, which employs this kind of imagery in a memorable way. For full effect it needs to be read in continuity with vs. 11.

Ephraim’s love for threshing is a satirical reference to Israel’s entanglement in the pagan rituals associated with Baal and the fertility cult (recall 9:1 as discussed earlier in this lesson). Since Ephraim is such a well-trained draft animal, God will put her (and Judah) to work—not threshing but plowing. “Threshing” speaks of having a harvest in hand, the satisfaction of seeing the fruits of one’s investment in time and labor. “Plowing” is a different kind of work, especially when it is to “break up the ground” (“harrow for himself,” RSV). Plowing is the beginning of the long process, but it has to be done before anything else can be. Harvest is a long way off, but plowing must be done if one is ever to see a harvest. (This imagery has obvious application to each of us. Who doesn’t like to “thresh,” in the sense of enjoying the payoff? How many of us like to “plow,” putting in the less enjoyable but necessary work that will eventually make threshing possible? This applies in physical fitness, financial planning, spiritual disciplines—in every area of life.)

Ephraim and Judah need to “break up the ground” by submitting to God’s correction. By thus turning to the LORD in true repentance, they can begin to “sow for yourselves righteousness” (vs. 12). Otherwise they cannot expect to see the fruit of “unfailing love” (“steadfast love,” RSV; also translated as “mercy”; Heb. word is *chesed*, the same key word found in 2:19; 4:1; 6:6).

To “sow” righteousness means to start doing what is right. Their efforts will produce a crop but only if God has mercy and “showers righteousness” (“rain salvation,” RSV) on them. Since their salvation/righteousness depends on both their effort (“sow”) and God’s free gift (“showers”), they need to “seek the LORD until” he does for them what they cannot do for themselves. Thus this verse teaches in a beautiful way the necessity of our efforts and the necessity of our dependence on God, why we need to work *and* pray.

Notice the end result here is “righteousness” and “unfailing love” (compare 6:4). They don’t need merely a harvest of being spared from the threatened judgment; they need a harvest of getting right with God. Nothing less will be true “salvation” (RSV; NIV’s “righteousness” is much better here). (Compare Matt. 5:6: the promise of lasting satisfaction is for those who want “righteousness,” not for those who merely want to “get off the hook” for what they have done wrong.)

Unfortunately, Israel has been plowing, planting, and is even now reaping a harvest (compare 8:7; also Gal. 6:7-9), but not as God would prefer. Israel has been farming wickedness (vs. 13). Instead of seeking God (vs. 12), Israel has been trusting in its armed forces and its fortresses (vss. 13-14). Soon they will learn that their trust has been in the wrong place.

[The reference to Shalman in vs. 14 is historically obscure, although it may be presumed that this event was well known to Hosea’s generation.]

AMOS and HOSEA

Lesson 8: Hosea 11-14

These final chapters of Hosea continue many of the themes of the book as a whole. There is especially emphasis on God's enduring love for Israel, as seen in past dealings with them and in his future plans for blessing them. He strongly desires to heal them. Healing, however, does *not* mean leaving them as they are and ignoring their sins.

The Pain of God's Love, Hosea 11:1-11

Earlier in the book, Israel was spoken of metaphorically as God's bride. Here Israel is pictured as God's "son" (vss. 1-4; see Exod. 4:22-23; later verse one will be fulfilled in another sense through Jesus, Matt. 2:15). God's love was demonstrated toward Israel in delivering this "son" from Egypt. God cared for him when he was just a toddler, learning to "walk" as a nation (vs. 3). Besides lifting the "yoke" of bondage, God had gently "bent down to feed them" (vs. 4). What has been Israel's response to such divine condescension and attention? The more God called, the further they strayed after the Baals. They were oblivious to the fact that it was God who sustained and "healed" them (vss. 2-3).

"Healing" in this context could mean God protected small Israel from danger or perhaps restored her whenever she suffered loss (as any small child learning to walk is bound to fall and "skin a knee"). Or perhaps we should take "healing" in a more general sense as "providing those things necessary for life and health."

After another one of many announcements of destruction and exile (vss. 5-7), God again declares his undying love for Israel. There is agony evident in the cry of vs. 8: "How can I give you up?" Even while intent on judgment, God feels compassion for the sinful nation. (Admah and Zeboiim were said to be allies of Sodom in Gen. 14:8. Apparently these small places were destroyed at the same time along with Sodom and Gomorrah. See Deut. 29:23.)

Abruptly, God says, "I will not carry out my fierce anger" (vs. 9). This seems abrupt because it contrasts so starkly with repeated announcements of complete destruction and exile. We could read this either as contradictory feelings that God has—wanting to destroy the people but not wanting to destroy them—or as a revelation of God's persistent will to do good for his people even at the darkest time of having to chastise them. In light of the larger story of salvation in the whole Bible, I think it is far more appropriate to take the second way of understanding it. God is not unsure of what he wants to do, not even for a moment. But the strength and persistence of his will to save cannot be separated from the strength of his will to judge and destroy sin. Indeed, his will to save includes his will to judge sin, because what he saves us from is sin—its consequences but also its hold over our lives.

God is for us (Rom. 8:31), but he is just as much against our sins. In fact his being for us cannot be separated from his being against sin, since he knows (as we try to ignore) that sin is against us, to our detriment. God is against our sins in being for us. Finally he will be against us only if we refuse to let him separate us from our sins, that is, if we decide to be against him and for our sins. Because he is by nature irrevocably against sin, he then must be against us (see Hosea 13:9). The refusal to separate from our sins costs us (and him) separation from God. In our blind attachment to our sins, we may not care about the separation from God, but God cares. We may not (yet) feel the pain of that separation, but God feels it. We may have lost sight of the reason for which we were created, but God has not forgotten.

As mentioned earlier in Lesson 5, we see in the cross the clearest revelation of God's wrath against sin, God's love for his creation, and the pain caused by the conflict of those realities. Hosea—in his own experience of having to pay the price to forgive and restore a wayward wife and in the heart-rending message he had to bring to Israel—reveals “the cross in the Old Testament.” The kind of God he turns out to be in the cross and resurrection, is the kind of God he has always been.

If all this goes beyond our capacity to fathom, we are in good company. The Apostle Paul—after wrestling for three chapters with the problem of Israel's unbelief in Jesus (Rom. 9-11)—concludes that even their hardened hearts serve God's saving purpose and that God still intends their blessing. Paul responds to this with awe and worship, for it goes beyond human ability to understand how God is working all of this out (Rom. 11:28-36). God tells us in Hosea 11:9 that he is “God, and not man,” which should alert us to the possibility that we may not understand his ways fully.

Verses 10-11 speak of an eventual re-gathering of his people out of the lands to which they have fled or been taken. Some see this being fulfilled in the modern return of Jews to Palestine. Others regard it as a prophecy about Gentile inclusion into the church. I'll stay away from that argument by suggesting that it may apply to both realities. (Remember the use of “Not my people” from Hosea 1 in Rom. 9 and 1 Pet. 2.)

Israel's Forgotten Heritage, Hosea 11:12—12:14

Chapter 12 is probably the most disjointed chapter in Hosea. Perhaps we have here a prophetic *potpourri*—some small, independent bits of Hosea's preaching, which (we need to recall) covered many years. The last verse of ch. 11 probably should be taken with ch. 12, although the verse is obscure enough for there to be diametrically opposed translations of it. RSV says, “Judah is still known by God”; NIV says, “Judah is unruly against God.”

Chapter 12 begins with a repetition of the complaint about Israel's vain attempts to gain security through either Egypt or Assyria. For this and other follies, God is going to punish Israel and Judah (vs. 2), both of which are included in the name “Jacob.” But suddenly in vs. 3, Hosea seems to be talking about the *man* Jacob rather than the *nation*.

Who is “Jacob”? In Hosea's day, it is all the people of Judah and Israel, but Hosea implies that they are not being true to their heritage as the children of the man Jacob. Despite his character flaws, Jacob was a man who encountered God personally and was changed by the experience (Gen 28:12-19; 32:24-30). That's what Israel needs to do—claim that part of their heritage from their ancestor Jacob and “return” to God, seek God's values of “love and justice,” and then wait for God's blessing and salvation (vs. 6, compare with vs. 4). A real tragedy was that Bethel, where God had revealed himself to Jacob (vs. 4) had become in Hosea's day such a corruption of Jacob's heritage, having become a site for the abominable calf-idols (recall 10:5, 15).

Jumping down to vs. 12, we find another reference to the story of the man Jacob. It is not easy to see why this reminder of Jacob's time in Syria (Aram) is put here. (RSV puts the verse in parentheses.) In context, however, there seems to be an implied contrast between Jacob's efforts and the LORD's provision. Jacob worked long and hard, but also deviously, at getting what he wanted and out-dealing his father-in-law (vs. 12; Gen. 29-31). In contrast to this, Hosea reminds us, “the LORD used a prophet to bring Israel up from Egypt” (vs. 13). The

devious and deal-cutting ways of Jacob stand in contrast to the ways of God as revealed in the Exodus. Hosea sees a contrast in his own day: “Jacob” as a nation is looking here and there trying to cut a deal—with Syria, Assyria, Egypt. What they need to do is listen to the prophet of the LORD, for only the LORD can lead them out of the mess they are in. Their “self-efforts” are only increasing their entanglement and bondage to others (like Jacob’s deals, which entangled him in servitude); if they listen to the LORD and do as he directs, they will be set free.

In fact this contrast between responding to the LORD and trying to save yourself by human cleverness may be the common theme brought out by this whole chapter. Compare vs. 1 with vs. 6.

Dishonesty in the market place (vs. 7) was a complaint voiced by Amos as well (Amos 8:5).

Israel’s pride in its prosperity made it even more difficult for the people to acknowledge their sins (vs. 8). While the resources appear bountiful the illusion of self-sufficiency is difficult to shatter, but the LORD who brought them out of slavery (vs. 9) is equally able to return them to a position in which they cannot deny their need. Verse 10 seems to lack a direct connection with vs. 9 or 11. Perhaps Hosea is referring to the warnings which God had given Israel as long ago as Deut. 29. The LORD had predicted to Moses (who led the people out of Egypt—possible connection with vs. 9) that Israel would do exactly what Hosea now saw them doing (see Deut. 31:16-21 and “The Song of Moses” in Deut. 32).

Israel had failed to heed God’s warnings not to forget the story of their deliverance; that was one reason they were supposed to observe the Festival of Booths (Tabernacles) each year—to recall the journey in the wilderness and their dependence on God (see Lev. 23:33-43; Lent can have a similar significance for Christians). Those who settle down and build a prosperous life for themselves always run the risk of forgetting their dependence on God, and even those who have had a “salvation experience” can start taking it for granted, forgetting what they were saved from and what they were saved for.

The sacrifices at Gilgal (vs. 11) are just part of the numerous efforts being made by the people to save themselves. Those efforts are doomed to failure, because they are not doing the one thing they need to do (vs. 6).

The Fury of God’s Wrath, Hosea 13:1-16

Even though Ephraim was only one of the ten tribes constituting Israel, Ephraim was such a large and important tribe that its name served as an alternative name for the entire nation. Ephraim had been impressive, even capable of intimidating others (vs. 1), but worship of Baal would bring Ephraim down. The idolatry was multiplying yet more and more (vs. 2), always adding to the idolatry of the calf-idols in Dan and Bethel.

The NIV of vs. 2 contains a reference to “human sacrifice”; the RSV and NAS understand it differently. Quite apart from the obscurity of this verse, it is clear that some in Israel did practice human sacrifice at this time, perhaps in connection with Baal worship (2 Kings 17:17; see also Jer. 32:35). Although (in a sense) you offer “human sacrifice” whenever you offer yourself to any god, including the true God (Rom. 12:1-2), offering yourself to God is completely different from offering some other person’s life as a literal sacrifice for your wellbeing or for your desires to be gratified. Do we do anything like this today? Perhaps not in

religious services, but all the time in the “dog-eat-dog” or “cut-throat” competition of the business or professional world where my success may seem to depend on your failure or destruction in some way. All of this without even mentioning the thousands upon thousands of unborn children sacrificed for the sake of someone’s convenience!

The reference to “morning mist” in vs. 3 reminds us of 6:4. Mist, dew, chaff, and smoke all convey the image of how soon and completely Israel is going to disappear.

Verses 4-6 speak of God’s generous care for Israel and Israel’s ungrateful response to that care. Verse 4 brings the historical reminder of why Israel was supposed to know or acknowledge no other God but the LORD (on this important concept of knowing/acknowledging God, recall 2:8, 20; 4:1, 6; 5:4; 6:3, 6; 8:2; 11:3). Israel was commanded to know/acknowledge God because he had known/acknowledged them (vs. 5; NIV translates as “cared for”). God has “known” Israel in the sense of electing them as his people, redeeming them, providing for them, indeed “caring about” them. But, just as God had predicted in Deut. 32:15-18, Israel had grown complacent and “satisfied” while enjoying God’s bountiful provision. Instead of growing in gratitude, they puffed up with pride and “forgot” God (vs. 6). To forget God is to do the opposite of acknowledging/knowing God (vs. 4). God cared for them, but they have not cared for him in return.

Israel’s response (or non-response) has angered God to the point that he will destroy them. God’s wrath is pictured vividly in terms of wild animals—fierce and furious, “like a bear robbed of her cubs” (vs. 7). The notion of God’s jealous love for his people (an important part of the Song of Moses in Deut. 32) lies back of these pictures (see Deut. 32:15-22, especially vs. 21; also refer to Exod. 20:5).

On vs. 9, refer back to the comments made above on 11:8 ff.

Verses 10-11 taunt Israel for having preferred a king over the direct rule of God. One of the themes of both Amos and Hosea was that God will restore the Davidic kingship over his whole people (Hosea 1:11; 3:5; Amos 9:11). Israel had rebelled against the Davidic rule after the death of Solomon, but in another sense all of Israel had rebelled against God when they first asked God for a king like the other nations around them (1 Sam. 8:7). God had given them a king and had even made a promise to David the king that his line would last forever (2 Sam. 7:12-16). That God turned the kingship into a good thing in that respect does not alter the fact that Israel’s motive in asking for a king was a bad one: they wanted to be like the other nations. That desire had gotten them into great trouble, for it was the same desire that led them to become entangled in idolatry.

When labor pains come upon a woman, it is not the time for “footdragging” and hesitancy. Israel is in such a critical time (vs. 13), desperately needing to repent and seek God’s deliverance. Given the critical nature of the time, Israel’s foolishness is going to make it impossible for life to come out of this situation. Thus the rapid switch in the text from a verse about birth (vs. 13) to one about death (vs. 14).

The NIV translates the first two lines of vs. 14 as a statement that God will save his people from death. The RSV translates those first two lines as a question (with an implied answer of “No, I will not!”). It is hard to know which is right, but probably the RSV translators have understood the context better (and the NIV translators have been too influenced by the

way Paul uses part of the verse in 1 Cor. 15:55). God is saying through Hosea that the nation is missing its critical opportunity to have new life (vs. 13) by its foolish refusal to repent. The only option when life is refused is death. Verse 14, then, contains God's deliberative question—"Shall I spare them the consequences of their foolishness?" Then God asks a summoning question—"Death, where are you? You have an assignment."

This reading of vs. 14 is very different from the way Paul uses part of the verse in 1 Cor. 15:55, but it is more in keeping with the context of Hosea 13. In the last line of vs. 14, notice that God says, "I will have no compassion," and continues in a pronouncement of unmitigated destruction. The "east wind" for Israel would be "from the desert," and it would mean scorching, shriveling heat. The fact that Assyria is to the north and east of Israel might also be alluded to. The fate of Israel described in vs. 16 is not pretty, to say the least, but this kind of cruelty was commonplace in warfare then and, unfortunately, not unknown today.

God Still Wants to Heal, Hosea 14:1-9

After the agony of the first thirteen chapters, this chapter feels like an oasis in the desert. The full impact of the invitation to return to God (vs. 1) cannot be fully appreciated, however, without the sobering judgments throughout the rest of the book.

God invites Israel to come back to him and holds out a promise of healing them (vs. 4; see also earlier verses—5:13; 6:1; 7:1; 11:3). But notice how this passage differs from 6:1-3, which also spoke of returning to the LORD and of healing. In 6:1-3 there was no specific admission of sin, only an apparently superficial acknowledgment of God and an expectation of a "quick fix," which God found exasperating (6:4). In 14:1-3, by contrast, God tells them to confess their sins and ask for forgiveness (not just deliverance from the enemy). He bids them specifically to renounce their vain hope for political salvation ("Assyria") or military salvation ("war-horses"). He specifically says they should renounce idolatry. He instructs them to admit their great need for his compassion (vs. 3).

To this kind of return to God—a return of true repentance and humility rather than a perfunctory ritual of making a few sacrifices and expecting God to be impressed or to feel obligated to be on their side in the international conflicts—to this kind of repentance prescribed by God rather than negotiated by humans, God promises an answer of healing (compare Psa. 51:16-17). True repentance has to come from the heart, but it also needs to be informed by what God says we need to repent of, rather than our assuming that if I don't feel bad about it I must not need to repent of it. God's prescription for our spiritual healing is not just to repent of things that bother us; what we need to repent of are the things that bother him. Some of those things may be things we like.

Verses 4-8 speak beautifully of how God will heal and how much he wants to heal. The healing of "waywardness" (NIV; RSV has "faithlessness"; NAS has "apostasy") must be an inward work. The land will need to be healed of the devastations of war, etc., but the healing that is really needed goes much deeper than the surface effects of God's judgments on the people or land. They need a new heart. Later Jeremiah (31:31-34) and Ezekiel (36:25-27) will spell out in more detail this inner renewal which God promises and which only God can perform. (See also Isaiah 57:18-19 on this kind of healing.) Ultimately, the new covenant through the death of Jesus will be required to make this available in the way we really need it.

It is important to note that the healing from God is an act of his love (vs. 4). The more we let him love us, the more we let him heal us. What his love heals most of all is waywardness. The more we let him love us the more we will love him, and the less we will be

inclined to stray. Our waywardness, our deficiency of energy for righteousness, is a symptom more than a cause. It is symptomatic of not allowing God to love us to the full extent he desires.

We resist his love often because we fear he might take something away from us that we want. Perhaps we say we will give it up eventually but not just yet. Such rationalizations enable us to hold on to our spiritual sicknesses, the ills from which God would heal us if we would let him, and from which we will be glad to be well once we have recovered from the “surgery” of God’ love. Perhaps we resist his love and avoid time spent quietly listening to him because of fear of what he might say, something he might ask us to do. Indeed, God may speak to you to give up something, take on something, attempt something, or bear with something. In everything and anything he might say to you, know that he will always be saying “I love you,” and that he wants to bless you in the way he wanted to bless a healed Israel in Hosea 14:4-8.

The bottom line for Israel’s choice and for ours is expressed in vs. 8. God wants us to have nothing more to do with substitutes for himself—false gods, whatever they may be. He wants us to know that our “fruitfulness” (the significance and productivity of our lives; compare Psa. 1) comes from him, and from no one and nothing else. He alone is God. That finally is all that needs to be acknowledged. Acknowledgment of and response to God will make our lives all they need to be to honor God and delight us.

Whoever is wise will know this (vs. 9). God’s ways for us are right, but we cannot walk in God’s ways if we are rebels.