

The Way Back Home

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Bible Text: Hosea 14
Preached on: Sunday, December 29, 2019

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Our Scripture reading is taken from the prophecy of Hosea, one of the minor prophets near the end of the Old Testament, and we're going to read from the last chapter, chapter 14. Just after the book of Daniel and in between Daniel and Joel.

Hosea 14. This is the word of the Lord.

1 Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. 2 Take with you words and return to the LORD; say to him, "Take away all iniquity; accept what is good, and we will pay with bulls the vows of our lips. 3 Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride on horses; and we will say no more, 'Our God,' to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy." 4 I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. 5 I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon; 6 his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. 7 They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow; they shall flourish like the grain; they shall blossom like the vine; their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon. 8 O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you. I am like an evergreen cypress; from me comes your fruit. 9 Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the LORD are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them.

Thus far this reading of God's holy and inerrant word.

Our text this evening is taken from the first four verses of that chapter that we read. By way of introduction, I want to give you something of the contextual background to these verses so that we can set them in their proper context and better understand the message that Hosea is conveying to us here this evening. You may be aware of the adage that a text taken out of context is a pretext for a proof-text. I think we're all to some measure guilty of that, especially if we're engaging in debate. One of the things that I've discovered as an older man going through seminary, is that everyone likes a good fight in seminary, everybody likes to argue, and what happens quite a lot of the time is that

people are throwing around Scripture texts, they're wielding the sword against each other, and quite often what happens in these arguments is the texts are taken out of context as a proof-text for a pretext, a text taken out of context to support a particular view. And so it's important for us this evening, I think, to set this text within the context. We need to have a general understanding of how Hosea got to chapter 14, and that will hopefully keep me wedded to the text and keep you informed as to the storyline of Hosea's narrative and how he gets to this place.

The reason I say that is because we need to be able to answer the question that is asked in the very last verse of this book, "Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the LORD are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them." So let's seek to be wise in our understanding and prudent in our knowledge of the ways of the Lord as they are revealed to us this evening in Hosea. We need to exercise understanding and discernment or prudence as we think ahead. In the King James Bible, the word "prudence" is used and it's actually a good translation, especially as we consider this is the last Lord's Day before a new year, the last Lord's Day before a new decade, because prudence means forethought or foresight; it means planning ahead wisely; it means thinking ahead with understanding and an informed knowledge of what lies ahead.

You know, no one here who has bought a house, buys a house on a whim. You don't go online to one of the websites to look for a house and look at the photographs of a house and then contact the realtor and send an email to them right away and say, "I want this house. Here's a \$10,000 deposit from my PayPal account. We're buying this house," without going to see it. You want to take time to go through the house, to have it inspected. You want to exercise prudence before you make the purchase. And so in order for us to prepare for the year that lies ahead, we need to exercise prudence, and in order for us to understand what Hosea is saying to us in these last verses of his prophecy, we really need to understand the whole context.

The message of Hosea's life is a man, he's a man who's been commanded by God to take a wife who will subsequently become unfaithful to him. God gives Hosea this foreknowledge before he marries Gomer, that Gomer will commit adultery against Hosea. And the Lord also commands Hosea to go and search for his wife when she departs from the place of marriage, when she departs from the relationship. He commands Hosea to go out searching for her. You might call this something like an enacted parable, but unlike a parable which is usually a fictitious story with a spiritual point that the storyteller wishes to convey, this is a real life experience. The Lord is going to use this experience of Hosea and his relationship with his adulterous wife as a message to Israel, but it's also a message for us. It's used by God as a kind of spiritual analogy to demonstrate the nature of God's love toward his unfaithful people who have spurned his love and turned their back on him.

Hosea's experience of the broken marriage covenant because of Gomer's sin, is symbolic of Israel's breaking of the covenant relationship that she had with God. The story of Hosea's marriage is the story of God's love towards unfaithful Israel. In the words of Dr.

Michael Barrett, who wrote a helpful little commentary on Hosea, this is a story of love divine and unfailing. That's actually the title of the commentary that he wrote. It's a very very small book, it's only about 150, maybe 170 pages. Very readable. And I confess that I leaned heavily on that very practical commentary to help me as I prepared for this message this evening.

That's really what the story of Hosea is about, it's a story of God's love, a divine love, and an unfailing love. This is the real message of Hosea. It's a message of the gospel of God's restoring grace for his erring bride. It's the story of salvation because that's what Hosea's name means. Hosea means "salvation." It's a derivative or Joshua is a derivative of the name Hosea. Hosea means "salvation." Now we don't obviously have time to go into any detail this evening but the first 13 chapters of this prophecy, I would commend you perhaps to read this at home. It takes approximately half an hour to read through the whole book of Hosea and that will give you a better understanding of what Hosea is saying here at the end of the book.

Now let me give you a brief overview of Hosea from chapters 1 through chapter 13. The first thing we need to note is that Hosea is a prophet who has been commissioned by God to speak to his people. Chapter 1, verse 1, tells us that the word of the Lord came to him. And verse 2 tells us that the Lord spoke by him or through him, in fact, that's true of all the prophets, that God comes to them and says, "Go to the people and say to them, Thus saith the Lord." That's the calling of all prophets. That's actually the calling of the pastors who inhabit this pulpit every Lord's Day. There's a sense in which they are called to tell forth what God has told them and the word, and that's what Hosea's message is here to us this evening. It's a message, a message from God to his people.

God has a few things to say to his people and he's going to do it not only through the mouth of Hosea but also through his life experience. And there's an important, a side lesson for us there. You know, nothing is wasted in God's economy. Every single experience that you go through as a believer however negative, is taken into God's economy and it's used for his purposes. And that's what God is doing with Hosea here, he's taking this very painful experience that Hosea will go through and he's going to use this to communicate to his people. He will break Hosea, as it were. One Christian, famous Christian from the last century said this, that when God calls a man, he bids him to come and die, and that's what Hosea is going through here. As he deals with the adultery of his wife, he goes through a death, as it were. It's a terrible experience to go through. I can't imagine what it would be like, can you imagine what it would be like if God were to call you as a husband or as a wife to deal with your spouse's adultery, and that God told you that he is going to use this for his purposes, and yet that's what God is going to do here with Hosea. God will use your life experiences for his purpose.

The book is commonly broken into two sections, chapters 1 through 3, and chapters 4 through 14. Again, using Dr. Barrett's formulation from his work, the first three chapters provides the foundation that sets up the analogy that will be used to describe Israel's predicament, the remainder of the book from chapters 4 through 14 is a series of three sermons that Hosea preaches to the people. They are delineated as evidence of ignorance

of God, that's from chapter 4, verse 1, to chapter 6, verse 3. Secondly, God brings evidence of disloyalty to him against his people, chapter 6, verse 4, through chapter 11, verse 11. And then finally, God brings forth evidence of Israel's faithlessness, chapter 11, verse 12 to chapter 14, verse 9. These are all indictments, if you will. You can imagine that Hosea is like the prosecutor in a court where God is bringing these charges against his people and he has these three indictments against his people, that they have become ignorant of God, and as a result of that ignorance, they have become disloyal, and because of that disloyalty, they have become faithless. You can see the progression here. You know, the same thing would happen in a marriage, wouldn't it? I'm sure that's what happens in Hosea's marriage. The marriage begins to break down. There's ignorance in the marriage and it leads to disloyalty as Gomer goes out and she looks for intimacy outside of the marriage and that eventually leads to faithlessness. It's actually a pattern here also for backsliding for Christians who may be backsliding.

It's a timeless message. It's as relevant for us today as it was back in the 8th century before Christ. It was a time of national and moral decline and we can see that just as relevant today in our own society. Israel was becoming increasingly reliant upon ungodly nations for military assistance, that was Assyria, as well as looking to its own resources. As a result of this, the worship of Israel became increasingly syncretistic, meaning that they were bringing other things into the sanctuary and using them as aids to worship. Worship was being prostituted, if you like. They adopted Baal worship and they incorporated practices into their worship system which included temple prostitution. God doesn't pull any punches here as he convicts his people of their sin. Israel had effectively become pantheistic in its religion and had regressed into apostasy from its one true God.

The message of Hosea is also a message to the New Testament church. If you look at Revelation 3, for instance, and John's letters to the church at Pergamos and Thyatira, you can see that sexual immorality and idol worship had crept into the worship service. And so God is also not only addressing society but he's addressing the church through this message. He's talking to us. The message is just as relevant for the church today as it was back then, and he's using some pretty explicit language in order to get us to attend to these things. But in fact, he's using more than vocabulary, isn't he? He's speaking to us through the life experience of a man and the reason that God does that is because he wants us to know how he feels. That's why God uses Hosea's experience to communicate something of the gravity and the nature of their apostasy. It's through the reaction of Hosea to his wife's adultery as analogous to the reaction of God against backsliding. God wants us to know how he feels about backsliding. The experience of Hosea is the experience of God.

Now I have to say that reverently because God does not experience things in the same way that we do. God doesn't react, if you will. You know, we can be taken by surprise and we can either react either angrily or with hurt at any given situation, and that's not the way that God reacts. In fact, it would be true to say, theologically true to say that God never reacts. God has a set purpose in everything. There is never a time where God sits on the throne and turns to the Son and says, "Did you see what just happened there?" God is never taken by surprise but he does accommodate our understanding by using the

experience of men to communicate something to us of how he feels about backsliding. He's not subject to the whims of emotion that we would experience at the hands of an adulterous spouse, but he does use this experience to communicate to us how he feels about apostasy. He uses human characteristics to communicate the effect that human sin has on our relationship to him.

And so the main theme of Hosea, as I said earlier, is a theme of God's unfailing love and faithfulness, but there's a sub-theme here that supports that main theme and that's the theme of backsliding. That's what's happening all the way through this prophecy, the people are increasingly departing from God. That's the sub-theme. It's summed up in the words of chapter 13 and verse 2 which tells us that Israel had forgotten the Lord. But you know, it wasn't forgetting in the sense that all knowledge of God was obliterated from Israel's memory, what Hosea is saying to us here is that the people of God were suffering from spiritual amnesia, and that's true of us as well. There's a sense in which sometimes we forget where we've come from perhaps, we forget that it's only because of the gospel of God's free grace that we sit in these pews this evening, that it's nothing of us. The hymnwriter says that,

"Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress,
Helpless, look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the Fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die."

It's easy for us to suffer from spiritual amnesia, to forget where we came from and to lose our heart connection with God. You know, the human marriage analogy is very good because that's exactly how the seeds of adultery are sown. It's exactly the same as our relationship with God, that heart becomes disconnected and the marriage falls into a kind of a mere acquaintance; it just happens, so happens that two people live in the same house but they stop communicating with each other. That's what the Lord means us to think about as we think about this. That's what it's like. We have become sort of disconnected from Jesus, or just going through the motions, and that's what the people of Israel were doing, they were just going through the motions.

Well, you might be sitting here thinking this evening, "Well, that's not true of me. I haven't done that. I come to church twice every Sunday. I pray and I read my Bible every day. I give a tenth of my earnings to the work of the church and attend Christian conferences every summer." Well, Hosea 6:6 tells us that God desires "steadfast love and not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." What he's saying there is, "It's not the worship that I'm looking for, it's the relational connection out of which flows worship."

You know, it's the relational connectedness between a husband and a wife, the emotion, the love, the intimacy flows from that connection, doesn't it? But it's easy to drift away because the people of Israel were still engaging in an external observance of religion but

it was mixed with idolatry and sin. They were backsliding within the marriage. Did you know that was possible? You know, I can bare my own soul here and say as a young man it was possible for me to be going to church every week, to engage in the worship service every week and yet to have another life outside the church, until God convicted me of my hypocrisy.

Matthew 7:21-23, we have this picture of Jesus on the last day and the people are gathered there before him, before the judgment throne, and he says, "Many will say to me on that day, 'We have prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name, and we've done mighty works in your name.'" You know, there are people there who have prophesied, people who have preached. It's entirely possible that I could be preaching this sermon to you this evening and yet to be lost on the last day if I'm looking to this as my credentials for entry into heaven. It's entirely possible for people to do great works in God's name, to cast out demons, to have these spectacular gifts, to be engaged in great ministries in the church, and yet what does Jesus say to them in verse 23 of Matthew 7? "I never knew you. I never knew you." There was no connection and that's what's happening here as well, there's no connection.

Well, that was my introduction and I had to give you the context of the whole book because I don't have the privilege of being here every week. If I had been here every week, we would have been going through Hosea for months now and this would be the final sermon. So these first four verses of Hosea 14 is where we are now.

There are different titles I wanted to give to this. One of them, I mean, "The Way Back Home," actually that's one of the chapter headings in Michael Barrett's book, the way back home, as he comments on these verses. But another title could be, "This Is the Route to Restoration," or you could call it, "The Road to Recovery." I like the title that I've used, "The Way Back Home," because, really, you know, there's only one way back home. I mean, that's true of all of your homes, right? There's only one way to get to your house. There might be different routes that you'll use to get to the path, but once you get to the end of the driveway, there's only one way to go and that's why I used that title, because there's only one way home, there's only one way to be restored from backsliding, there's only one way for Israel to be restored from her backsliding. There's only one way for Gomer to come back to Hosea.

Well, there's really three things that I want to say but there's a foundation for that, first of all, and the foundation, we see it there in this first verse of chapter 14, "Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God." The foundation of the road to recovery is God's call, and that's what God does here at the end of this prophecy. Through the mouth of Hosea, he calls to Israel, "Return to the LORD your God." That's the first and most important thing.

You see, you can't come to God unless he calls you, and you might be sitting here this evening saying, "Well, he's not calling me." Well, he is because you're sitting here, you're sitting here and you're listening to the word of God being read and communicated to you, and every time you read the word of God, he's calling to you. I said earlier in my prayer that God reveals himself in two ways: first of all, in creation. He day to day calls forth

speech, that creation is speaking to the existence of God, and so there's a sense in which you're always living under the word of God, you're always hearing the voice of God, but more specifically as you sit in church this evening, he is speaking to you from his word and he's calling you back. He might be calling you for the first time. He might be calling you back from a period of backsliding. You know, backsliding doesn't have to happen over a period of weeks or months or years, you can backslide for five minutes. All it takes is for someone to cut me up on the road and I will backslide for a few seconds, and I need to hear these verses, I need to hear God's call to return to the Lord my God.

That's the first and most important thing we need to know here before we get to these three things that I want to say. The road back home to God is initiated by him and his calling backsliders to himself. God is the destination, and so with God's help the three things that I want to say briefly are three signposts that help us to find our way back to God. It's really, what we're looking at here is the nature of repentance. Really, what Hosea is giving to us in these four verses is the doctrine of repentance, what does repentance look like. So he says three things: first of all, he tells us about the nature of repentance; secondly, he tells us something about the language of repentance, he tells us to use words; and thirdly, he shows us the result of repentance.

So first of all, the nature of repentance. "Return unto the LORD thy God." The first thing we see about the nature of repentance as it is initiated, as we said earlier, by a call, by a call to return to your God. You know, this is primarily a message to Christians. It's a message for me, it's a message for you because he's saying, "Return to the LORD your God." He's declaring himself to be your God. You know, when Gomer left Hosea, Hosea was told to go back and get his wife and she was told to return to her husband. There was never a time in Hosea's life where he said, "Well, I'm done with her." And that's the same with God. If you're a child of God this evening, however far you may have backslidden, whether it's been for five minutes or five hours or five days or five months or five years, if you belong to him, he will call you back.

But it's not merely a call to come back to church or to reaffirm a lapsed membership vow, or even to clean up your life in order to try to make yourself more acceptable to God. It's not about renovating your life by turning over a new leaf and resolving to do better morally. That kind of repentance is usually motivated by regret. That was the kind of repentance that Judas displayed for the shame of being found out. Judas displayed this when he threw the money back into the temple, you remember. It looked pretty good on the face of it, he regretted what he had done and he decided to try and make amends by giving back the money, but it wasn't biblical repentance that Judas displayed. He certainly had something of a conscience that told him that he had done the wrong thing, the problem was that he went to the wrong place. In a sense, Judas got it half right. He did regret his sin but he took it to the wrong place. He took his repentance to the wrong place. Where did he take it? He took it back to the temple. He threw the money into the temple. He tried to buy his way back but it didn't work.

That's what's interesting about the text that we've read this evening. You know, it doesn't tell us that the Israelites were told to burn their idols, it doesn't tell us that they were told

to give up their sinful practices and then turn to God, it says, "Return to the LORD your God." Because, you see, that's always the first step in repentance. Sometimes we get it the wrong way around, don't we? We think, "Well, I just need to, before I go to church this Sunday, you know, I committed this sin on Saturday or I've been committing this sin during the week and so I need to abstain from that for a set amount of time in order to salve my conscious, or I just need to clean up my attitude a little bit and then I can come to the Table and I'll be fine. I just need to read my Bible a bit more or pray a bit longer or go to that church meeting that I wouldn't normally go to just to try to make myself more acceptable." But God doesn't do that.

It's very telling here that God does not, he doesn't tell his people to clean up their lives, he tells them to come to him, and then as a result of that, their lives will, in turn, be cleaned up. This is and should always be our first step in repentance. Sinclair Ferguson says on this passage, "Your sin should never drive you away from the cross. Your sin should always drive you towards the cross." But quite often, I'm sure you'll agree, quite often we think we need to clean ourselves up a little bit before we can come to him.

And so the first step in repentance, then, is to heed the call to come to God, and the reason for that is because we cannot deal with our own sin. There's no amount of regret, remorse or recompense that we can make that will satisfy God's justice. We can't make bargains with God because God's law is irrevocable. It calls for death for sin because death is a penalty for sin, because God is of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look on iniquity the scripture tells us. There's only one way for him to deal with your sin and it's never going to be by you or by me trying to make amends for it. We have to come to him. That's the way back home. We have to come to him.

That's our first response when we come under conviction of sin, your sin should drive you to the cross. You have to listen to what he has to say. Now why is that? Well, the text tells us, it says, "for you have stumbled because of your iniquity." Why do you sin? Children, ask your parents, did they ever have to teach you how to do the wrong thing. None of us, no human being ever had to be taught to do the wrong thing. We always have to be taught to do the right thing, and that's what the text is telling us here.

"You have stumbled because of your iniquity." Why do you sin? Why do we sin? We sin because we are sinners. We are not sinners because we sin. It's not the act of sin that makes us sinners. The act of sin is an evidence that we are sinners. That's why we never have to be taught to do bad things and we always have to be taught to do the right thing, because by nature we don't do the right thing. That's what David meant when we read in Psalm 51, "In sin was I conceived." It's not meaning that his mother committed adultery, what it's saying is that when he was born, he was born in sin. We are sinners from the womb. We know how to do the wrong thing from our very earliest days.

So we have to recognize that the reason for our sin is because we have an internal problem. All of Israel's idolatry, adultery and apostasy came about because there was an internal problem. No amount of burning idols, burning sacrifices and religious observance could deal with the heart of the problem because the heart of the problem is

the problem of the heart. There's a heart problem here and that's what God is touching on. He's touching on that in Gomer's life, and he's touching on that in the life of Israel, and he's touching on that in our own lives as well. No amount of throwing coins into the temple is going to change a sinful heart. That's why Hosea says to Israel, "You have fallen by your iniquity. You have fallen because of your iniquity. You have sinned because you're a sinner," he's saying. We have an inner perversion and a bias towards sin. It's our default nature unless it's checked by divine intervention. We can abstain from the things that we think are causing us to fall into sin but that will do nothing for the heart which is biased towards sin. We need to come to God. We need to respond to God's call. We need to agree with his estimation of our condition. You have fallen because you're a sinner.

The reason we backslide is because of indwelling sin in our heart and we need to talk to God about it. That's why the text goes on in verse 2 to say, "Take with you words," and that is our second point. Do you know the amazing thing here that came out in this text? He tells us to take words to him, and not only does he call us to come to him, he tells us to take words and then he tells us what we should say to him. Now that's something we need to pause and think about. You know how when you may have offended someone and you're convicted of your offense against the person, and you know that you have to go and confess and say something to the person, and you may come to them and you may say, "I just don't have any words. I don't know what to say." You just can't find the words that you think are needed that will resolve the situation. But the difference between that and this is, that God gives us the words. He tells us to take words with us and then he gives us those words to speak.

He gives us the language of repentance. The Lord in his grace removes all and every barrier to repentance not only by calling us to himself but by giving us the words that we should say to him. And what are the words? Well, he says that we should say to him, return to the Lord and say to him, verse 2, "Take away all iniquity; accept what is good, and we will pay with bulls the vows of our lips. Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride on horses; and we will say no more, 'Our God,' to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy." In verse 2, we have this recognition of our sin and response to God's declaration that we are fallen because of our sin, because we are sinners, and then we reply to that because we have recognized what God has said to us and we say to him, he says to us to say to him, "Take away all iniquity." That's what David said in Psalm 51, "Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Cleanse me and I shall be whiter than snow."

And receive us graciously. This is the words that are followed by the recognition that no external existence or self-sufficiency or false gods can help us. You know, it's like that conversation, I can't remember where it is in Isaiah where Isaiah says or the Lord says through Isaiah, "Come, let us reason together saith the Lord." That's what God is calling us to here. He's saying, "Come to me and let's have a conversation. And it's a two-way conversation but I'm going to give you the words that you should say to me. I want you to repent and here's the words of repentance, say to me, 'Take away all iniquity,'" because in those words we recognize that we're sinners. We're agreeing with God. That's what confession is. When we talk about confession of sin, do you know what confession of sin

is? It's agreeing with God that you're a sinner. That's what confession is and that's what's happening here, "Take away all iniquity and receive us graciously."

You know, the only thing that you contribute to your salvation is the sin which makes it necessary, it's the empty hands of faith at the end of outstretched arms reaching out and taking hold of the mercy that is offered. And here's the amazing thing: not only does he call us to come to him, not only does he tell us to bring words, and not only does he give us those words, but he also responds to those words. That's how God responds, he responds to his own words. He responds to the words that he has given to us. He responds to emptiness and insufficiency. He responds to brokenness. He responds to a recognition and an agreement in his assessment of us as sinners. He responds to brokenness and pleas for forgiveness and grace and acceptance. You see, it doesn't matter what your social status or your standing in the church is. We're all leveled here. The road to repentance is the same road that we all travel regardless of our status in the church or in life.

It's our default mindset and that's what we need to get away from is to think that somehow we can buy God off. That's what the people of Israel were doing all the way through this book. Either with money or service we might think we can give a little more or do a little more and that somehow that can compensate for our sin, but you see, you can never pay for your own sin. Do you know why? Why can't you pay for your own sin? Because chapter 13, verse 14, tells us that God will pay the ransom. And verse 4 from the chapter that we read tells us that God will heal our backsliding and love us freely for his anger is turned away. The healing of our backsliding and God's love are contingent upon the appeasement of his anger at our sin.

What is it that turns God's anger away? That's my third point: the result of repentance. Does their repentance turn God's anger away? Does God look for sincerity and seriousness in our repentance and respond to that? You know, there's a sense in which we can think, "Well, I've given a good account of my sin to God. I've cried some tears. I've shown some regret." That's what Judas did, but it's not enough. Is there something in the words that he gives us as we respond to his call to come to him which appeases his anger at our sin? Is it our confession that appeases God's anger at sin? Is it our declaration that we will seek no other help from outside of ourselves or our self-sufficiency from within ourselves that turns his anger away? If we get rid of our false gods and idolatrous tendencies and sinful habits, will that satisfy God's justice? Isaiah, again, informs us that all our righteousness, all our righteousnesses, all our good deeds are filthy rags. You know, even the good things that we do are, in some measure, tainted with sin. You know that thing that I did for someone....