

WE ARE FREELY LOVED

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Hosea 14.

The prophecy of Hosea contains mostly quite severe prophecies about the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It has been a story mostly of spiritual and moral failure and the prophet speaks strongly to the people to warn them about their behaviour. We can see in verse 8 that Ephraim (the tribe that stands as shorthand for all the Northern tribes) has been ensnared by idols. But here, in the last chapter, there is a note of great hope for the future. This hope is for those in verse 9 who will listen and learn. The great lesson of verse 4 is that the Lord is willing to turn back His anger and replace it with love. He is prepared to love His people freely.

1. God loves freely.

The 'I' of verse 4 is, of course, the Lord Himself. He promises that He will love His people freely. You would not be able to find this in the Qur'an or spoken of by Buddha or any of the Hindu deities. Only the God of the Bible speaks so personally and with such genuine feeling. This love of God is a great stimulus to all who are believers. In fact this love, that the Lord speaks of, is what replaces the anger that He also speaks of in verse 4. The 'him' of verse 4 is Ephraim. Just as the anger of the Lord is very strongly felt and expressed by God, so the love of God is also strongly felt and expressed.

God's anger is justified. People do not like to concede to God that He is entitled to be angry with people. Our anger is often not justified because it has no basis in fact, is a disproportionate response or is tinged with pride. The Lord is angry because of something very important. He is angry because of sin and what it represents. All sin is an offence against the Lord Himself. He is the Giver of the Law and the Upholder of the Law. So to go against the law is to go fundamentally and personally against God Himself. It is therefore to be regarded as the most serious of offences and to be liable to very firm and final punishment.

Sinful people tend to think that they are entitled to the love of God, as though God owed it to us to love us. We are actually entitled to His anger but we do not think that He is entitled to it. So we try to take this right away from Him, by denying that He is angry with sin and sinners in the first place, or that He is just to punish people in hell. It is as though we believe there is a law compelling God to love us and forbidding Him to be angry with us. God knows that His law is good and right, and that He is right to stop sin polluting and invading His moral universe.

So it is remarkable, given how seriously the Lord upholds His honour and how jealous He is for it, that He is willing to turn away His anger and replace it with love. He moves from viewing us with displeasure to viewing us with pleasure, from dissatisfaction to satisfaction, anger to joy, enmity to peace, and from offering us hell to offering us heaven. His love means that He is moved to seeking out our good, looking to introduce remedies into our moral and spiritual chaos, to help us to advance and make progress. Verses 5-7 show us the purposes of God in making us spiritually and morally beautiful, and making us useful to Him. This is part of the scope of His freely given love, which includes all these future prospects. That love is given warmly, genuinely and with great feeling to us. It comes from the Lord for no other reason than that it pleases the Lord to do it. This love will be given in such a way that it overcomes every objection to it being given that the cause of justice or holiness could raise against it. There is no resistance within God Himself against this love being shown. So people, that were not His delight and were not regarded as His people, are now regarded as His people (See Hosea 2:23). It is a reversal of seismic proportions.

2. Who are the people freely loved?

It is not difficult at all to apply this truth to sinners coming to Christ for the first time. They find, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that God's anger is turned away and they are then freely loved when they repent. But in the context of Hosea 14:4, it is actually speaking of backsliders, of people who once walked with the Lord but then stopped and fell away from being His disciples. Such backsliding is like a disease that needs healing. We might be in need of that kind of remedy ourselves.

We can end up in a backslidden state for a variety of reasons. We may be prayer-less Christians, not really seeking the Lord's help. In Hosea's day such people were found trusting in Assyria (verse 3) rather than seeking the help of the Lord. We might be like people thinking that the vaccine will solve all our problems and rescue us from the troubles of Coronavirus. We fail to see that we actually need something more fundamental, namely the Lord's help. We may be Bible-free Christians, not really delving into Scripture or finding out what sort of people the Lord would have us to be. We might be unclean Christians, following the thoughts and the ways of the world. We might have become defiled by having expectations and hopes that are simply for this life only and have no reference to eternity. We might be covetous Christians, all taken up with property and wealth, with hoarding things and spending. Or we might be distracted Christians, just so taken up with burdens and worries, things that may be valid concerns, but which we carry in an unspiritual way, being negative and not trusting the Lord.

We need all of us to look at ourselves and root out the signs of backsliding within. The Lord is not pleased with such attitudes. We are instead to see ourselves in a poor situation and deprived of the Lord's freely expressed love. We need to repent of the way that we have gone backwards, humble ourselves, make amends that we might then discover afresh the freely given love of God.

3. Where do we see God loving freely?

We see God loving freely and generously in the Person and Work of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we look at Him, we see that God is truly love. If we doubt that God is love, or that He can and does love freely, the cross teaches us not to doubt but to believe. We learn there that God does so love the world and that this is clear from what the Lord Jesus did on the cross for His people. The Son in eternity is loved by the Father. But on the cross the anger of God is turned upon His Son and He is punished. Our sins of backsliding as Christians were punished there through our Lord Jesus Christ. All our guilty secrets, our private sins and our public sins, are atoned for through His precious blood. An outside observer, looking at this, would conclude that God puts such a high premium on having sinners reconciled to Him if He is willing that His beloved Son should have to suffer all this pain. At the cross we see provision made for guilty Christians, sad Christians, failing Christians, weary Christians.

We should be encouraged in our Christian walk. If God was willing at all to have His Son put through the agony of the cross when we were His outright enemies, then believers should be encouraged that there is forgiveness and help now that we are His friends (See Romans 8:31-32). His love is very determined to win us back if we are backslidden. He will find a way to humble us so that we will be in a state to appreciate again that we are freely loved. He will not be opposed in that purpose and will not fail. Backsliders are made the most miserable people of all till they come to their senses and see again the wonder that they are freely loved by God.