

"A FALSE RETURN"

I. Introduction

- A. Hosea could be described as a book about backsliding.
 - 1. Backsliding takes place whenever a professing believer loves something else more than he or she loves God.
 - 2. Backsliding can take place on a small scale or on a large scale.
 - 3. In a sense, it takes place every time we choose sin over obedience.
 - 4. Sometimes, backsliding takes a professing believer down a path of disobedience that could very well lead to full-blown apostasy.
- B. In all instances of backsliding, there is only one way out.
 - 1. We need to turn our hearts away from our sin and turn our hearts back to God.
 - 2. Like the Prodigal Son in Jesus' parable, we need to see our sin for what it really is, repent of that sin, and return to the Lord.
 - 3. The opening verses of our passage give the impression that this is describing an instance of Israel returning to the Lord, but the rest of the passage suggests otherwise.
 - 4. As we study Hosea 6 and 7 tonight, we will see that not all claims to repentance are true repentance.

II. Returning to the Lord?

- A. We begin our study of these chapters by looking at the first three verses of chapter 6.
 - 1. The people of Israel are speaking here, and they are responding to the words that were spoken by the Lord at the end of the previous

chapter, where he said, "I will return again to my place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face, and in their distress earnestly seek me."

2. It might appear that the people are earnestly seeking God in these opening verses of chapter 6.
 3. Some interpreters conclude that that is indeed the case, but it seems to me that the context indicates that something else is being described here.
 4. For one thing, God's response to the people's words is not at all positive.
 5. He says in verse 4, "Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away."
 6. That is, their love for God is not constant.
 7. It quickly fades away.
 8. God also says in chapter 7, "They do not cry to me from the heart", and "They return, but not upward". (7:14, 16)
 9. On top of that, the people don't say anything about their sin in these verses.
 10. There is no indication that they are grieved over the fact that they have offended God.
 11. They only talk about the consequences of their sin, saying, "he has torn us", and "he has struck us down."
 12. Taken together, these things indicate that verses 1-3 are not an expression of true repentance on Israel's part.
- B. Instead of repentance, these verses serve as an example of what it means to presume upon God's grace.

1. The people express their confidence that the Lord will bring them relief, saying, “he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.”
2. They tell each other, “he will revive us” and “he will raise us up.”
3. They encourage one another by saying, “his going out is sure as the dawn.”
4. Though this may sound like faith, there is no admission of their guilt.
5. They are simply taking it for granted that God will forgive them because that is what he always does.
6. Their mindset is similar to that of the French atheist Voltaire when he sarcastically said of God, “Forgiveness? That’s his job!” [cited in Boice, 57]
7. Or as Robert Godfrey likes to say when he is describing this erroneous way of thinking, ‘God likes to forgive; I like to sin — what a perfect relationship!’
8. Of course, such an attitude is in direct opposition to the teaching of Scripture.
9. Paul says in Romans 6, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may increase? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (vv. 1-2)
10. And John says in his first epistle, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.” (1 Jn. 3:9)

III. Covenant-Breakers

- A. We turn now to the next part of our passage, where God responds to Israel’s false repentance by describing their covenant unfaithfulness.

1. God begins by saying, “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?”
2. These words bring to mind the picture of a parent who is at his or her wits’ end in dealing with an unruly child.
3. The Lord is lamenting the fickleness of a people who say that they love him one moment but then turn aside to do whatever they please the next moment.
4. It is because of this that he sent the prophets to them.
5. The prophets came speaking harsh words — words of confrontation, rebuke, and judgment, words that hewed the people down.
6. As the Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah, “Is not my word like fire,... and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?” (Jer. 23:29)
7. As enforcers of God’s law, the prophets came wielding the hammer of God in order to destroy the confidence that the people had in themselves so that they would flee to the Lord for mercy.
8. God’s law still functions in this way today.
9. It exposes our failures in order to drive us to Christ.
10. As Calvin explains, “when we compare the righteousness of the law with the life we lead and when we see how little we comply with God’s will, we recognize that we do not deserve to keep our place and position among his creatures, still less to be reckoned as his children... The end result is that man, appalled by the prospect of death and sensing that it is near — a just reward for his lack of righteousness — turns to God’s mercy alone, as to the only safe haven.” [*Institutes* (1541), 111]

- B. God responds to the people's claim to be returning to him by saying that he desires steadfast love and true knowledge of God, not sacrifices.
1. This indicates that the Israelites had fallen into the error of formalism when it came to returning to God.
 2. They assumed that their participation in the rituals of the sacrificial system would be enough to appease God.
 3. But God wasn't interested in sacrifices that were not accompanied by heartfelt faith and repentance.
 4. God does not want us to treat him as if he were a problem that we can learn how to manage.
 5. He wants us to seek to know him.
 6. There is nothing more precious than knowing God.
 7. Jesus spoke of this in his great high-priestly prayer, when he said that eternal life consists in knowing the one true God through the mediation of the Son. (see Jn. 17:3)
 8. Consider these words from J.I. Packer's classic book *Knowing God*: "Once you become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life's problems fall into place of their own accord... What makes life worth while is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this the Christian has, in a way no other man has. For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God." [29, 30]
 9. God is not like a dangerous animal that we can keep in check by throwing him a bone every once in a while.
 10. You were created for the purpose of knowing and serving the Maker and Sustainer of all things.

- C. In verse 7, God further describes Israel's sin by saying, "like Adam, they transgressed the covenant."
1. This is an important verse because it confirms that Adam was in a covenant with God in Eden.
 2. Though the term "covenant" is not used in the opening chapters of Genesis, all of the elements of a covenant are present there.
 3. God entered into a covenant of works with Adam, promising him and his posterity life upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.
 4. Adam broke that covenant, and in doing so he brought its curse upon himself and upon the entire human race.
 5. Our text is saying that Israel did the same thing.
 6. They broke the covenant that God set up with them at Sinai and brought its curse upon themselves.
 7. The remaining verses of chapter 6 and the opening verses of chapter 7 describe some of the ways in which Israel's covenant-breaking was manifested.
 8. And as God describes their covenant-breaking, he also reminds them that nothing that they have done will be forgotten by him.
 9. People may think that they are getting away with their sin, but God never lets sin go unpunished.
 10. This is why we need to be driven to Christ by the hammer of the law.
 11. We need to see that our only hope is if Jesus bears the judgment that our sins deserve.

IV. Images of Unfaithfulness

- A. In the last section of our passage, which begins in 7:4, we are given four images that depict Israel's unfaithfulness.
1. First, Israel is described as "a heated oven."
 2. They burn with passionate lust and anger that cannot be quenched.
 3. They are guilty of both literal adultery and spiritual adultery.
 4. They endlessly plot out murderous schemes.
 5. Verse 7 says that "they devour their rulers. All their kings have fallen, and none of them calls upon me."
 6. This is referring to the fact that four of the six kings who ruled over Israel during the period of Hosea's prophetic ministry were assassinated by the men who usurped their thrones.
 7. By describing Israel's unrestrained passions as an oven, the Lord calls our attention to the destructive power of our lusts.
- B. In the next image, Ephraim is described as "a cake not turned."
1. Think of a pancake that someone forgets to flip.
 2. The cooked side is burned, while the other side is still raw batter.
 3. This image of an unturned cake brings to mind what Jesus said about the church in Laodicea in the book of Revelation: "because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth." (Rev. 3:16)
 4. Like lukewarm water that that you just want to spit out, the only thing to do with a half-baked cake is to throw it away.
 5. That is what God is going to do with Israel.
 6. Their days are drawing to an end.

7. Yet God says that they are not even aware that their strength and vitality is fading.
 8. Listen again to verse 9: "Strangers devour his strength, and he knows it not; gray hairs are sprinkled upon him, and he knows it not."
 9. When people go so far in their backsliding, they lose all sense of their spiritual danger.
 10. In the words of G. Campbell Morgan, "Signs of decadence, which are patent to others, are undiscovered by ourselves; and we go on, and on, and on, the victims of ebbing strength, spiritually and morally degenerate, without knowing it." [cited in Boice, 61]
- C. The next image is that of a silly dove.
1. We often think of a dove as something graceful and serene, but think about a pigeon's erratic movements and you get the idea.
 2. This is a picture of how Israel was turning one moment to the Egyptians for military alliances and the next moment to the Assyrians.
 3. In the end, it won't matter whose side they are on because it is the Lord who will bring his net down upon them.
 4. If they had only turned to him, he would have delivered them, but instead they persisted in their rebellion against him.
 5. Even though they did cry out to him, the Searcher of hearts knows that it is not sincere.
 6. They are only concerned with their outward estate, not with the condition of their souls before God.
- D. Lastly, Israel is likened to a treacherous, or faulty, bow.

1. God established them as his people.
2. He trained them and strengthened them.
3. But then they turned on him and wounded him by their unfaithfulness.
4. Consider what this tells us about the wickedness of our backslidings.
5. When we rebel against God, we are taking the blessings that he has bestowed upon us and using them to attack the One who is the source of those blessings.

V. Conclusion

- A. While these chapters give us a picture of false repentance, we find a description of true repentance in the last chapter of Hosea.
 1. Listen to what the prophet says there: "Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words and return to the LORD; say to him, 'Take away my iniquity... Assyria shall not save us; and we will not ride on horses; and we will say no more, 'Our God,' to the work of our hands.'" (Hos. 14:2-3)
 2. Notice the things that set those verses apart from what the people say at the beginning of chapter 6
 3. In chapter 14, the people are told to bring their words to the Lord.
 4. They need to confess their sins and plead for God's forgiveness.
 5. They need to renounce their reliance on Assyria and on military power.
 6. They need to turn from their idols and seek the living and true God.

- B. True repentance is not a matter of presuming on God's grace.
1. It is not about assuming that it is God's job to forgive.
 2. True repentance involves grieving over your sin and hating it.
 3. It involves turning from your sin and turning to God.
 4. It involves seeking to know God's ways, training your will to love God's ways, and then striving to walk in those ways.
 5. But this is not something that you can do in your own strength.
 6. It has to be done by faith in the Son of God, the One who loved you and gave himself for you.
 7. For it is only when we are convinced of God's love for us in Christ that we will have the power and the desire to set ourselves to the lifelong task of rooting the wickedness out of our hearts.
 8. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5, "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." (2 Cor. 5:14-15)