

Book of Faith for October: Amos 5-9 and Hosea

*We have interrupted our reading of 2 Kings at the long-reigning king of Israel at Samaria, Jeroboam II. For during his prosperous and successful reign the first two great writing prophets (remember that Elijah and Elisha did not write down their words) were active: **Amos** of Tekoa and **Hosea**.*

October 2 assignment. Read by (10/9): Amos 5-7

Note on Hebrew poetry: Hebrew poetry did not rhyme. Like all poetry, words were very carefully chosen for their impact. But there are two elements to the form of Hebrew poetry. One: the lines are in pairs, the second one re-stating the first (which is a huge help for our understanding!) The second was meter. That is, each line had a certain number of beats, or accented syllables. Just hum for yourself the rhythm of a limerick, and you will note that its five lines have many syllables but only a few stressed syllables: 3 beats, 3 beats, 2 beats, 2 beats and 3 beats.

Amos 5 A lamentation, or psalm of mourning, in Hebrew had a characteristic rhythm: a three beat line followed by a two-beat line. A kind of limping meter: Dah, Dah, Dah. Dah, Dah. Say it out loud; can you hear the dull sadness in the second line? So begins Amos' funeral song for Israel! Of course the rhythm is clearest in Hebrew. But even in the English version we can get a feel for the dirge:

FALLen no MORE to RISE,
is MAIDen ISrael.
forSAKEn IN her LAND,
with NO one to RAISE her.

Remember that Amos is preaching not during the Depression, but during the Eisenhower era!! No wonder people regard prophets as crazy: the country has peace and prosperity and Amos is singing her doom! V. 3 the Lord God decrees 90% of the army will be destroyed. 4-7 repeat the theme: Seek the Lord! Look for him; make him your goal! Warnings against the main sins of Israel: Gilgal and Bethel are sites of corrupted worship: where rites are performed but not with the purpose of drawing close to God but to dispense with him! Not to obey him but to pacify him! And the precious social treasures for life of justice and righteousness are made to rot and are thrown away like garbage. 8-9 is about power; because Israel thinks it is so strong that it need not fear God, Amos reminds them of God's power. *Do you think your nation fears God? Do you think it should?* 10-15 "Injustice in the gate." "The gate" of a city was where the community elders sat to make decisions; they were the judicial system. The one who reproves is the one who complains when the elders, like a corrupt state or city government, are not doing what is right but are siding with the rich (vv 11a and 12b). V. 11b reminds me, since I grew up in Oshkosh, that when the lumber baron Paine had grown rich, in large part by taking ruthless advantage of his German mill workers, and built a beautiful stone home (now the Paine Art Center), he was told that if he ever moved in they would kill him. Note in v. 15 that not only is the verdict reached but the sentence delivered; it is so late that it only may be, if they begin to hate evil and love good, that the Lord will spare the remnant. 16-17 Grief will overtake the entire nation. 18-20 "The Day of the Lord" appears first here in Scripture. It last appears in Revelation 1, referring to Sunday, which is "the Lord's Day" because it is the day of His victory because He rose from the dead on the first day of the week. Also for ancient Israel, "the Day of the Lord" would be victory, when the Lord defeats all his enemies. NOW, since they assumed that the Lord was on their side, that meant the glorious defeat of all their enemies! *Does your nation assume that the Lord is on its side? Amos has bad news for them!* The day is darkness, not light! The implication is clear: When the Lord brings justice this will be against corrupt Israel and not for it! What about all their worship? 21-24 is Amos' famous accusation against fake worship, ("honoring God with lips while their hearts are far from Him" --Isaiah) and powerful demand for social justice. *If the Day of the Lord came today, would it be darkness or light for your nation? Is the complaint about worship that does not lead to effort to make a just society valid about you or your congregation or nation?*

Amos 6 1-7 is another funeral song, for the rich. They enjoy their wealth in luxury. V. 2: they trust their military power (though, putting the general statement in 5:9 into historical context, their neighboring nations that were powerful were destroyed by God's judgment on them). But that their society ("Joseph" v. 6) is rotting with economic injustice does not trouble them. 11-14 Another nation (it will turn out to be Assyria) will be the instrument by which God punishes Israel for its bad faith and social injustice.

Amos 7 1-9 are the first three of five visions Amos had (the others are at 8:1-3 and 9:1-4). They are similar in form, but the form changes and the message progresses.

1-3 The locusts, which effectively took most of the food away from an economy, were plainly meant as punishment for sin. Amos, horrified by the devastation, like a faithful prophet pleads with the Lord God for mercy, based not on any deserving of Israel, but only that the nation is so frail. The Lord relents!

4-6 The form is similar. *But does Amos ask the same thing he asked the first time? What is the difference? Does he ask more, or less?*

7-9 What is the first difference (v. 8)? *What do you think it signifies, this time, that Amos does not speak first?* As you consider the plumb line, think about this group of related words: right, upright, righteous.

The three visions show that there is no point in the Lord relenting, because that grace does not change Israel's behavior; they continue to be not "upright." *How do we respond to God's grace to us; do we take his grace as a sign we can continue in wrong, or does it make us love the Lord enough to work to change?* 10-17 is the only biographical episode, the only event (aside from the visions) we know about Amos' life. Amos has been preaching in the temple at Bethel, the capital city. Amaziah, the chief priest there, reports to King Jeroboam II that Amos is an enemy of the king and the nation. This is because Amos is prophesying doom. *Have you ever seen a group or nation turn hostile against someone who criticized the group?* Amaziah disdained Amos as a paid prophet (as, indeed, many prophets were) and tells him to get out of town. Amos replies that he is not a religious professional, but a field hand; the Lord personally gave him this mission. Further, because Amaziah, though a priest, has not heard the Lord's word through Amos but rejected it: when Israel is defeated Amaziah's own family will suffer especial humiliation and loss—and Israel will be exiled anyway!

October 9 assignment. Read by (10/16): Amos 8-9, Hosea 1-3

Amos 8 1-3, the fourth vision, resembles the third. *Why do you think the episode with Amaziah is placed between the third and fourth visions?* The significance of the "summer fruit" is that it is ripe. It is time; *what happens to fruit after it is ripe? What was Amos' response to the first two visions of disaster? Did he plead in vision #3? And what is new at the end of #4 that was not in #3?* (That may answer the first question!) 4-14 is the fuller description of the ripeness for judgment. 4-6 describes the grave lack of social justice in Israel: 1) businesses are impatient for religious days to be over so they can go back to making money; 2) their practices are dishonest, and 3) the powerless poor are always victimized the worst. *To what extent do you find your nation guilty of these charges?* V. 11 is, to those who understand, truly frightening. A constant biblical theme is that the Word is more necessary for life than bread. *Do you understand why that is so?*

Amos 9 V. 1-4 is the fifth vision. *Do you think that God will inevitably be gracious? His forgiveness and kindness are automatic; that he may make a lot of noise but in the end he will not really punish?* The wealthy and powerful of Israel are being evil with all their power; *would God have any justice if he did not destroy them?* 7-10 One of the gravest sins of Israel (and Judah, as we see in Jeremiah's great Temple Sermon in chapter 7) was they thought they had some unbreakable guarantee of God's favor—so that they did not really have to fear the Lord—as if he were under some obligation to them! Here Amos destroys

that, saying “You are like any other nation to me; I have helped other nations as I helped you, and I have judged other nations as I will judge you.” 11-15 end the book with a note of hope. After the great destruction of Israel (and remember, it was in fact utterly destroyed, never heard from again, in 722 B.C.) is the promise that David’s dynasty in Judah will be built up, and will have the blessings of plenty.

Introduction to Hosea

Hosea prophesied in the same country, the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and at almost the same time as Amos, in the last generation before destruction in 722. B.C.. Unlike Amos (from Judean Tekoa), Hosea was a northerner himself. In a terrifying way, the Lord commands Hosea to enact with his own life the message. For example, in order to communicate how awful is Israel’s unfaithfulness to God, God commands Hosea to experience unfaithfulness himself!

That painful message finds its specific basis mainly in idolatry. However, the worship of bogus gods is not a limited problem in human communities, rather it corrupts the community entirely. So Hosea will also point out that Israel/Jacob “has no knowledge of God” which equates to not following the good Law. For to know the Lord is to live right and well. Thus Israel’s “adultery” with Baal is not only a religious corruption, it is moral corruption as well.

Hosea 1 1-3 Hosea marries Gomer, an unfaithful woman and is commanded to name their first child Jezreel. (Jezreel, 2 Kings 9-10, is where the Lord punished the house of Ahab and Jezebel for their idolatry and crimes by raising up Jehu against their descendent King Joram. Now Jeroboam, descendent of Joram, must answer for the crimes of his ancestor at Jezreel.) Naming a child “Jezreel” would be like naming an American child “My Lai” or “Abu Grab” or some other site of national crime. 6-9 The next two children have similarly wrathful names.

Hosea 2 2-15 is a long, sad song. To understand, you would have to have experienced a spouse who was unfaithful through adultery or divorce. The personal rejection and betrayal is hellish, almost deadly. The devastation is far more than emotional; it cuts to the root of life; it robs you of the future you had worked for. If you have experienced that, or can imagine it—this is Hosea’s point—then you know how God feels! He has been nothing but good and gracious to Israel, yet they still worship other gods! What more can he do to win her back? He has already been perfectly good; what option is left but punishment? 2 “Plead”=appeal to her heart, for only from the heart can change come. *Has God won your heart? Most of it? All of it?* “Not wife, not husband” as a betrayed spouse would say, for Israel IS his wife but she does not act like it; she has cut God off. 3 Or else I will turn her unfaithfulness against her. 5-13 is key. Israel believed that it was Baal who provided for her; hence she worshiped him and sacrificed and prayed to him! 7, 9, 12 Only by making her life with Baal bad can the Lord induce Israel to return to “her first husband.” Watch for Hosea to repeat this theme: God brings severe pressure on Israel so that they will return to him. *We have a Baal too; we call it “the Economy.” Do we believe that The Economy provides for us, or that the Lord does? Test it: to prosper, does our nation believe that we should do as the Lord wants, or what The Economy wants?* 14-15 As Israel first loved the Lord in the wilderness, like a clever husband of an unfaithful wife he will take her back out there, into neediness, and woo her back. 16-20 A wonderful, almost honeymoon-like, depiction of when Israel returns to faithfulness to her rightful Lord. 21-23 even the natural world will be more productive, an important economic blessing, when Israel is again what she should be. And the wrathfully named children of Hosea and Gomer, “Not-pitied” shall be pitied, and “Not-my-people” he will call “my people” and they will respond: you are our God.

Hosea 3 Immediately following the poetic description of the restoration of right relations between the Lord and Israel, is the narrative of the restoration of Hosea and Gomer’s marriage.

October 16 assignment. Read by (10/23): Hosea 4, 6-7

Hosea 1-3 gave us the heart-wrenching metaphor of Hosea's betrayal by his wife, to show us what Israel's idolatry, her worship of Baal, was to the Lord. The rest of Hosea are the Lord's specific indictments of Israel's unfaithfulness to the holy covenant.

Hosea 4 "No faithfulness or loyalty or knowledge of God." *How important is loyalty, in any relationship? Isn't it essential for genuine love? Why is "no knowledge of God" so disastrous? What difference(s) does knowledge of God make in your life? v. 2 the commandments are broken; how does that follow from "no knowledge of God"? V. 3 Environmental disaster! In our day, we can see quite directly how the natural world "mourns, languishes and perishes" because of human sin! *How hard do you try not to sin against the natural world?* 4-6 The Lord's first accusation is against the priests and prophets, the clergy, for they are the ones who should be teaching the people the Lord's commandments. The people are destroyed because they have no knowledge. (Hebrew poetry is formed in parallel lines: a statement is made then re-stated. Thanks be to God, that is a great help to understanding! *So, how is "lack of knowledge" in v. 6a explained further in v. 6b?*) *Do your pastors and bishops teach adequately the Lord's commandments?* 7-10 begins with a common theme in Hosea and other prophets, that the greater the prosperity of the nation, the greater their sin. *Does that observation hold true for your nation?* "They changed their glory into shame" is picked up by St. Paul in Romans 1 to describe how Gentiles worshiped creatures instead of the Creator! Our glory is God; and Jacob/Israel, gave up their glory for idols, a shame. "Whoredom" (v. 10) is not quite literal here, but means idolatry (see vv. 12-13)—recall Hosea 1-3! V. 14 here, however, the whoredom is more literal! However, it also seems true that part of Baal religion was that there were *religious* prostitutes in the temple and fornication with them was a religious act—which was believed to influence the gods to having sex with each other which was thought to bring rain and fertility to earth. V. 16 When Israel is a stubborn heifer, how can God feed them like a lamb? *See what a great problem this is for God? God wants above all to bless his people, but he cannot give them the best blessings if they will not be in an honest relationship with them. (If you have had an ungrateful child, you understand what it is like for God.) In what ways are you stubborn, making it impossible for God to bless you as he would like?* 17f is a fair description of parts of our community.*

No notes on Hosea 5, except, 8-15 describe a military disaster for Israel as God's pressure on them to return to Him and seek His favor.

Hosea 6 1-3 present, in an imagined speech of Israel/Jacob, the Lord's goal for pressuring Jacob. It presents a people who admit that it is the Lord, and not mere bad fortune, who has brought their disaster and at the same time their confidence in his mercy to restore them. *Note that Law and Gospel are not only in the NT; here the distinction and yet the interrelation of judgment and grace are clearly set forth.* V.2 Notice how jokes often use three? "A pastor, a priest and a rabbi . . ." Why? Because the second, repeating the first, creates a pattern and expectation. The third, breaking that pattern, causes tension and humor. Similarly here: one day of striking down and a second day of striking down create a pattern. "On the third day" breaks the pattern, in surprise and relief and joy and gratitude. This is probably the OT passage meant when the Lord and apostles say that the Scripture says that the Messiah is to rise on the third day! *Has it been your experience that when you think disaster will have no end, that the Lord turns and lifts you up?* 4-5 Although 1-3 is God's fantasy of how Jacob will return to him, it hasn't happened yet! V. 4 is the Lord wearily complaining WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO? He has been gracious, and they turn to other gods. When he brings pressure, they seek help not in him but in alliances with other nations. They love, but like the dew: it doesn't last long. V. 6 The people have perverted sacrifice. Sacrifice for sin is to be a way of apologizing; sacrifices of thanksgiving are supposed to come from the heart. But in their prosperity they give sacrifices to "buy God off" to push him away, not to come to him in contrition or love.

Hosea 7 1-7 Here Hosea names personal sins against commandments: crooked business, theft and robbery (v. 1), adultery (v. 4), drunkenness (v. 5), anger (v. 6). “But they do not consider that I remember all their wickedness.” 8-13 In contrast to good King David, who in all military matters relied on the Lord’s guidance and deliverance, Jeroboam II and his government seek military help from the great powers Egypt and Assyria. Not only is this a grave mistrust in God, but by mixing (v. 8) with foreigners Ephraim’s own integrity as God’s people is further polluted by foreign religions. *In what ways have you mixed with non-Christians in a way that has corroded your faith?*

Hosea 8 No notes, except the accusations continue against Law-breaking, disregarding God in politics, and idolatry.

October 23 assignment. Read by (10/30): Hosea 9-11

Hosea 9 No notes, except 1-3 There are several biblical references to what must have been a custom at the time, that threshing floors were trysting (meeting) places for prostitutes and johns. Hosea makes a kind of pun here, as Israel has worshiped Baal for the sake of harvest.

Hosea 10 1-2 The more prosperous, the more idolatrous. V. 4 *does this sound like the state of business law in the US?* Again we see the fury of righteous judgment against wickedness: so severe that they people will say, “Let the mountains hide us” (v. 8, picked up in the NT), and v. 15.

Hosea 11 1-4 How striking is this passage, coming on the heels of such anger against evil! Here Israel/Ephraim is pictured as God’s baby. See the tenderness in vv. 1, 3, 4! Poor God! For all his goodness, “the more I called them, the more they went from me” (v. 2). How important for understanding the whole Word is the interplay in Hosea between, on the one hand, the sheer wickedness of Israel and God’s holy fury against such hating and hurting and unfaithfulness, and on the other hand God’s tender love so that all he really wants is to pour out his love on his people—yet he is prevented by their wickedness. *Do you understand that God, because of his perfectly good nature, must be both of these: wrath against evil yet desiring to bless: for both of these are love? The only reconciliation of these two that is possible in the world is the holy Cross: for their both God’s retribution of evil and his grace to sinners become one: as God Himself in Christ bears our sins. 5-7 again a return to Israel’s faithlessness and the disaster it must bring. 8-11 And again we hear of mercy; where God’s own compassionate heart, almost despite himself, overcomes his judgment. 10-11 in fact is the hope that because of his judgment, they will return.*

October 30 assignment. Read by (11/6): Hosea 12-14

Hosea 12-13 An interesting form, these chapters review Israel/Jacob’s (remember “Israel” is the nickname God gave Jacob) history to show that their current disloyalty is genetic to their tribe! 1-6 Jacob a scoundrel, but the Lord came to him. V. 8 As if wealth were proof of virtue! 10-14 God emphasizes his effective use of the prophets. 13:2-3 The ridiculousness of idolatry, and the inevitable evaporation of idolaters. 4-8 By Theological-historical report, the Lord tries (again!!!) to sway the people back to him. There is no other God! I delivered you from Egypt, and also I was the one who fed you (not Baal!). But, he sighs, when I fed them well they became proud and thought themselves self-sufficient and forgot me. *When has it been a problem for you or your church or your nation to do well and then forget God?* 9-11 To win back his people the Lord must demonstrate to them that the idols and foreign nations are no help to them. 12-13 In this striking metaphor, as at many other places in Hosea and indeed of all of Scripture, the very hopelessness of people’s innate sinfulness is described. It just isn’t possible for Ephraim to do right! His condition is worse than bad decisions, he is not even capable of desiring what is good! *Do you have trouble believing that the human condition is really that desperate? (If so, ask how successful even*

a good soul like you is at living a Christ-like life, loving God above all things?!) V. 14 “Sheol” or “the Pit” was understood as where dead souls go; not really an afterlife, but a vague and empty existence. Unlike in 11.8, here compassion is hidden from God’s eyes.

Hosea 14 The book ends, unsurprisingly, with a plea. For unless the human heart is changed, nothing but destruction is possible. The great promise is, if they will only return then God can pour out the fullness of his love on them!

Amos and Hosea have not been our first encounter with prophets. Early in this series we read Jeremiah. And in 1-2 Kings we have heard the exploits of Elijah and Elisha, and earlier stories of Eli, Samuel and Nathan. Yet by reading 2 Kings and then the prophets, we have seen more pointedly that they were not preaching in a vacuum, proclaiming timeless but general truths. Rather, they were addressing concrete and totally practical problems in the life of God’s people.

Perhaps this has affected your understanding of the preaching you here. Is preaching to speak general truths, or is it to direct the Word at specific concrete situations in the county and nation and congregation? How honest do you want your preacher to be?

In fact, do you think that Hosea and Amos are particularly appropriate right now? Our nation is powerful and prosperous and without serious enemies, just like Israel under Jeroboam II. At that time they turned more and more away from God and put their trust in Baal (for us, the Economy); the needy in the land were taken advantage (payday loan centers) and were not helped (no health insurance). Sex left the sacred precinct of marriage and was widespread, along with drunkenness and dishonest legal dealings.

In the prophets we are probably most surprised by God’s fury at his own people! In Sunday School we were taught that Jesus is kind and forgiving, which is true. But we are no longer children and if we are going to live honestly with God then we must have a fuller appreciation of who God actually is. (Just like with spouse or friend, if it is a good relationships, we will in time come to know better who the person is.) When we here, therefore, in the NT the Lord or his apostles predicting horrendous destruction for sinners, they are simply repeating what God’s holy prophets said of old.

Do you love God for how he hates wickedness?

In Hosea, as in Amos and Jeremiah, it is not only that the Lord punishes. Through all these prophets he pleads with the people. Over and over and over he backs off of punishing and gives them “one more chance”—until we almost want to say, “Give it up!” This helps us to see that punishment is God’s last resort, not his first.

In Hosea’s words we have seen God’s own internal struggle: his revulsion at evil and his deep desire to love and bless. “What am I to do?!?!” we hear him cry out loud. It is in the Cross that these two are reconciled: where justice and mercy meet together, as the psalm says. God gets himself out of his predicament precisely by going into it! That is, going into us, into our human nature and even into our sin. So that by condemning sin in himself, in Christ, justice is done but we sinners are not destroyed. And in fact, justice is done even to Christ in that he is even raised from the dead to infinite glory!

Does your knowledge of the Cross help you to believe in God’s wrath against all that is unfair and wrong, and at the same time to appreciate how vast is his compassion?