

COURTROOM PURSUIT

Hosea 4:1-3

INTRO

The story of Hosea is familiar to many of us. God called this man as a prophet to deliver a message to Israel, only the method of delivery was deeply painful and costly for Hosea. God told him to marry Gomer, a woman who would be unfaithful to him – a woman who would leave him for other lovers. So he did – they got married; and as he expected, she left him for other men.

Then God told Hosea to do the unthinkable: “Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods...” (3:1). So Hosea found Gomer in a slave market, bought her back, and loved her again as his wife.

Much like marriage vows, God made a covenant with Israel to be their God, their Husband, and like a marriage there were expectations for how God and his people were to live together in mutual love and delight. Israel’s side of the covenant was summed up in the Ten Commandments – starting with the most crucial: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). “I am your Husband; I love you. No one else will love you like I do.”

In Hosea’s day, over 700 years before Jesus’ birth, Israel had broken her vows, worshiping false gods and trusting in anything but the true God. Through this living metaphor of marriage, Hosea shows more than any other Old Testament book God’s passionate pursuit of his people. Like Hosea’s pursuit of Gomer, God pursues his spiritually adulterous people no matter the cost to himself.

In our text today, we see the beginnings of that passionate pursuit, and we find Israel (and ourselves) in an unlikely place – a courtroom.

I. The Courtroom

You would think that if God wanted to pursue his people, he would start with an appealing offer or a warm invitation to return to him.

Instead, we read in v. 1:

“Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel, for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.”

This word “controversy” was a legal term that could also be translated “the LORD has a *case*” against you.¹

As one commentator notes, “We are suddenly in a court of law, and God is prosecuting. He has no lack of charges to bring.”²

The setting is a figurative courtroom where God will bring charges by identifying their sin and then give a sentencing in the form of the consequences of their sin.

Is this how you would pursue someone you love? By bringing up their sin – putting it right before their eyes. “This is what I have against you – this is what you’ve done!”

Is this loving of God? Naming their sin like this could seem cold and harsh.

But in fact, it is love. God calls sin what it is – not breaking cold commands of an impersonal God but the rejection of love, and the God who loves the unlovely.³

The fact that God brings charges against Israel – that he brings up their sin – shows how real his relationship with them is. If God was distant and unfeeling, would he even care?

This cold courtroom setting is actually part of God’s passionate pursuit of his people. He gives the severe diagnosis before he can offer the cure.

God’s word through Hosea brought up specific charges against Israel – specific ways they had run away from him. What were they?

II. The Charges

God lays out the charges in vv. 1-2:

¹ Holman Christian Standard Bible.

² Derek Kidner, *The Message of Hosea*, p. 46.

³ Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Minor Prophets*, Vol. I, p. 56.

“There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.”

Did you notice the pattern? There is first a lack of good and then the presence of evil? In Exodus 34:6, God says that he is “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” Faithfulness and steadfast love are common attributes of God, attributes Israel was called to reflect. They had none of these. There was this lack of God-likeness that should have been there, and in its place were the evils that should not have been there – this long list of awful things.

Remarkably what we see is that these evils are the exact opposite of the good that should have been there.

Let’s look at each one, first their lack of faithfulness. This word could be translated “truth.”⁴ It meant “common honesty”⁵ or trustworthiness.⁶

Instead of this, there was “swearing and lying.”⁷

“Swearing” here means swearing falsely – possibly swearing oaths one does not intend to keep.⁸

“Lying” described a community characterized by deceit.⁹

Swearing and lying are the opposites of “faithfulness.” Their relationships were marked by saying things they didn’t mean. There was a fakeness about them.

Next, they lacked “steadfast love”?

This is the common Hebrew word *hesed* – can be translated “mercy” or “kindness,” and here it particularly refers to love and mercy extended to others, particularly the lowly and needy.¹⁰

⁴ *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 54.

⁵ Kidner, pp. 46-47.

⁶ McComiskey, p. 56.

⁷ McComiskey, p. 56.

⁸ BDB, p. 46; McComiskey, p. 56.

⁹ BDB, p. 471.

¹⁰ BDB, p. 338.

Instead of this there was: “murder” and “stealing.” Rather than caring for one another, they took from others, even to the point of taking lives.

These sins highlight the social impact their sin was having – as one put it, “the absence of *hesed* led to a rending of the social fabric and threatened the existence of the nation.”

Derek Kidner observes: “what should have been a home and family had turned into a den of lust and violence.”¹¹

Finally, there was “no knowledge of God in the land.” This would have been the most crushing charge.

Knowledge of God was something Israelites prided themselves on. Out of all the nations of the earth, they were the ones God revealed himself to. In Hosea 8:3, they cry, “My God, we – Israel – know you.” But they did not. As one put it, “genuine knowledge of God in the hearts of his people will produce a character like his.”¹²

What does it mean that there was “no knowledge of God in the land”? The final sin listed, “committing adultery,” helps us understand.

This referred to the literal act of men and women in Israel having intimate relationships with people they were not married to. For Hosea, this charge would have been most painful. He understood that knowing your spouse means more than knowing *about* them. It includes an intimate knowing, a vulnerable knowing, a wholehearted, committed knowing.¹³

Israel did not know God like this. If these Israelites were teleported to today, they would be sitting in church next to us. They would sing the songs and put something in the offering plate. But they would not know God. They would not love his word and be careful to follow it.

¹¹ Kidner, p. 47.

¹² ESV Study Bible, p. 1627.

¹³ Dearman

Why? Because they would have other lovers on the side, other lovers taking their heart's attention. Love of comfort. Love of reputation. Love of pleasure. Their hearts would be committing adultery.

Do you see how serious these charges were? Do you see why God would begin his pursuit so starkly?

The next two phrases are amplifiers. If this list of charges is not enough, these two phrases hammer it in.

- 1) “they break all bounds” – This phrase refers to breaking through a barrier, often with violence.¹⁴ God had given his law to say “don’t go past these boundaries; if you do, you’ll get hurt.” They’ve blown right through them. All five of the charges are directly or indirectly spelled out in the Ten Commandments, the laws Israel had vowed to keep.¹⁵ The law was meant for their flourishing, and they trampled it.
- 2) “bloodshed follows bloodshed”¹⁶ – this is graphic – literally “bloodshed touches bloodshed”¹⁶ – the picture is of violent acts happening so frequently that they form a continuous chain of bloodshed. Two examples of violence:
 - a) Of the last six kings of Israel before exile, four were assassinated.
 - b) part of Baal worship (one of the false gods they had embraced) was child sacrifice

This is the climax of social breakdown – murder stacked on murder. It had become a culture of death. This is what happens when the people of God stop reflecting God, the God of *life*, and instead reflect the culture of death around them.

Several applications from this list of charges:

- 1) The danger of unchecked sin – the image of “breaking all bounds” is one of unchecked sin – sin that is ignored, accepted, allowed to

¹⁴ BDB, p. 829.

¹⁵ McComiskey, p. 57.

¹⁶ BDB, p. 619.

grow... like vines slowly choking a tree – sin that has even been cultivated and curated and hidden and treasured.

We deceive ourselves that a certain sin isn't so bad, that we've got it under control, that we could pull the plug at any time, all the while having a sneaking suspicion that it has us by the throat and is making us its slave.

God mercifully brings Israel's sin to light so it can finally be dealt with. What about us? Is there unchecked sin in your life? Is there sin you've grown familiar with or said, "I'm just going to struggle with this"? Sin you couldn't do without? Maybe not so much sin in its adult forms like adultery and murder, but easily hidden sins like hatred and lust? There is immense danger in unchecked sin.

- 2) Sin as a downward spiral¹⁷ - the phrase "bloodshed follows bloodshed" is sobering. Sin never starts there, but it does lead there. The takeaway here is that unrepentant sin inevitably leads to more sin, and more sin leads to more *desire* to sin. It has been said that "increased desire for sin is the beginning of God's judgment on the sinner."¹⁸
- 3) Reflecting the culture – Israel was called to reflect God's character to one another and to all the nations, but instead they resembled the culture of death that surrounded them. This hurt their witness. Israel was stunted in being a light to the nations because they had stopped reflecting the God of light.

You may have heard of what's being called "The Great Dechurching" in America, that Christianity is on the decline here, as evidenced by vast numbers of people no longer attending church¹⁹ – the natural question is why?

I wonder if it has less to do with the evils of the culture around us and more to do with evils within the Church. As one pastor put it, "The greatest dangers for the Church are not the wolves at the door but the termites in the floor."²⁰

¹⁷ Lydia Brownback in her Bible Study on Hosea

¹⁸ Unidentified quote.

¹⁹ Jim Davis and Michael Graham, *The Great DeChurching*

²⁰ Pastor Harry Reeder, sermon at Briarwood Presbyterian Church

What we need is not the world to stop being the world. We need the Church to start being the Church. To be a humble people, honest about our sin, broken, contrite, holding fast to Christ alone.

If the text does not feel weighty and sobering, then I have failed you as a preacher. It really is as bad as it sounds, worse even.

If we were in a courtroom with Israel and heard these charges, sins that we ourselves are guilty of in our hearts, we would expect the heavy sentencing that follows:

III. The Sentencing

Because of their sin, God says in v. 3, all of creation would suffer.

First, “the land mourns.” The land is personified to feel deep sadness because of Israel’s sin. It’s as if the land itself knows better than the people living in it what God said would happen if they broke the covenant.

God warned them in Deuteronomy 28: War, famine, drought, exile. Nothing in the created order would be left unmarred. Verse three lists “the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea [being] taken away.” That covers everything – land, sky and sea – all impacted by the people’s sin.

We hear all creation groaning, “Enough! No more!” crying out for shalom, for all to be as it was meant to be.

And it will be. For as we hear the sentence and as the gavel goes down, our heads in our hands, we see Another stand, walk to the front and be led away chained. We wonder, who is this? That should be me? So we follow, and we witness the horror of the effects of our sin, of our lack of faithfulness, steadfast love and knowledge of God, of our swearing, lying, murder, stealing and committing adultery, of our breaking all bounds. We see this One receiving the full brunt of the curse that we incurred, that we should receive – bloodshed touching bloodshed. We

hear him cry out “Father why have you forsaken me?” as he experienced what truly lacking the knowledge of God would feel like. But then something changes.

We hear the Father call us sons and daughters.

And we now call him, “*Abba*, Father.” Intimate. personal. Forever.

And the Son says, “I did it for you, my Lover, my Bride. I’m the better Hosea. I would go to any length to bring you back.”

And so in Hosea 2:16–20, we read these breathtaking words:

[16] “And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me ‘My Husband,’ and no longer will you call me ‘My Baal.’ [17] For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more. [18] And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. [19] And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. [20] I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.