

Grace in the End: Hosea 12-14
 Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church
 Sunday, May 13, 2012

Many of you know the name Chuck Colson. You may or may not have heard the news that he just recently went to be with the Lord. He died on April 21st at the age of 80. Colson was a powerful politician who was a close advisor to President Richard Nixon from 1969 to 1973. Colson was known as Nixon's "hatchet man," and he was the first to go to prison as a result of the Watergate scandal. In the midst of the Watergate scandal, an amazing thing happened. One night a friend of his, who was a Christian businessman, was praying for Colson and witnessing to him. And he read a passage from *Mere Christianity* where C.S. Lewis writes, "Pride always means enmity—it is enmity. And not only enmity between man and man, but enmity to God. . . . As long as you are proud you cannot know God."¹ Colson realized that those words described him. And his life changed forever as he repented and trusted in Jesus. He did spend 7 months in prison because of his crimes, but then he went on to start Prison Fellowship, which has become a world-wide ministry to inmates.

I think Colson's life reflects something of the message we've been hearing in the book of Hosea. There is punishment for sin. There are consequences for sin. And yet there is grace in the end. For Colson, he experienced the punishment for his crimes. He reaped some of the consequences of his sinful life. But God was gracious to him, even through the discipline. And God used Colson mightily in ministry. And now he is home with the Lord.

I hope the sermon this morning, and the whole message of this book, will be an encouragement to every one of us here. Whatever your sins may be, there is hope. Because no matter what we have done, no matter what sins may entangle us even now, if we repent, there will be abundant blessings.

This morning we'll conclude our study of Hosea. We'll look at the final chapters and see that there is grace in the end. There are many harsh rebukes and threats of judgment in this book, but there is also grace woven through the entire book. And there is grace in the end. God's final word is grace.

My outline for this morning has four headings: One Judge, One Savior, A final call to repentance, and grace in the end.

One Judge

Chapter 13 has some of the harshest language in the book having to do with God's judgment upon His people because of their sin. Verses 7-8 say, "So I am to them like a lion; like a

¹ See article in World magazine, May 5, 2012.

leopard I will lurk beside the way. I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs; I will tear open their breast, and there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild beast would rip them open.” It’s hard to read that. It sounds overly grotesque. Why would God speak like this?

This is the language of judgment. There are other places in the Bible where similar things are said, describing punishment for sin.² Even here in Hosea, there was the same metaphor in 5:14, "For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, and like a young lion to the house of Judah. I, even I, will tear and go away; I will carry off, and no one shall rescue." This imagery of a wild animal tearing a person to pieces is one of the descriptions of what it was going to be like for Israel to be destroyed by Assyria. That destruction was on the near horizon as Hosea was preaching these things. In 722 B.C. big, bad Assyria would capture Samaria, the capital of the Northern kingdom of Israel and exile the Israelites off to various cities in the Assyrian Empire.

We can read further about the historical details of this in 2 Kings 17. I’ll read a few of these verses because it shows us just the things Hosea has been writing about. "In the twelfth year of Ahaz king of Judah, Hoshea the son of Elah began to reign in Samaria over Israel, and he reigned nine years. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, yet not as the kings of Israel who were before him. Against him came up Shalmaneser king of Assyria. And Hoshea became his vassal and paid him tribute. But the king of Assyria found treachery in Hoshea, for he had sent messengers to So, king of Egypt, and offered no tribute to the king of Assyria, as he had done year by year. Therefore the king of Assyria shut him up and bound him in prison. Then the king of Assyria invaded all the land and came to Samaria, and for three years he besieged it. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had practiced. And the people of Israel did secretly against the Lord their God things that were not right. They built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. They set up for themselves pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, and there they made offerings on all the high places, as the nations did whom the Lord carried away before

² See Deuteronomy 32:24; Jeremiah 2:14-15

them. And they did wicked things, provoking the Lord to anger, and they served idols, of which the Lord had said to them, “You shall not do this.” Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, “Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets.”” (2 Kings 17:1-13)

That’s the account of Israel’s downfall. It would have been brutal. The Assyrians were known for their violence and cruelty as they defeated various nations and expanded their territory. We read an even more repulsive description in Hosea 13:16, where it says, “Samaria shall bear her guilt, because she has rebelled against her God; they shall fall by the sword; their little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open.” This is the language of absolute destruction, in the most horrific terms. And that’s what was coming upon Israel because of their rebellion against God.

This is a glimpse into God’s fierce judgment for sin. And even if we don’t understand why it would be described in such a gruesome way, the point we ought to take away from this is that God is serious about sin. We’re also going to see God’s grace in these chapters, but we first have to make sure we’re clear about God’s judgment. God’s grace does not mean that He just winks at sin. When we are tempted, and we are contemplating sin, we should never think, “Oh, God will be OK with this. He’s gracious. He will let this one go.” We must never think that way. When we’re tempted, and when we are contemplating sin, we must remember the intense, fierce, just wrath of God against sin. He hates sin with a passion!

And He is omnipresent and omniscient. He is everywhere and knows everything. So we can never hide anything from Him. He knows every website you look at on your computer, even if you delete your browsing history. He knows every video and show you watch on your TV. He knows the thoughts that go through your mind—thoughts of lust, bitterness, revenge, pride, jealousy, self-pity, greed. He knows all and sees all, and He is right there with you when you do these things and think these things. And He hates our sin with an intensity that we ought to tremble at.

Now, this knowledge of our sin and this knowledge of God’s judgment upon sin should make us aware of our need for a Savior.

One Savior

The one Judge is also the one Savior. God judges sin, but He also saves His people from the ultimate punishment for their sin. There are still severe consequences for sin, even for God’s

children. God's grace does not mean that there will be no consequences for sin. It does mean that the ultimate consequence for sin is removed. We will not go to hell. But His grace does not always erase other consequences we may face for our sin.

This is what we're seeing in Hosea and in the history of Israel. God is warning them of the exile they will experience because of their spiritual adultery. They have been like Gomer, running off on her husband. And because Israel, as a nation, has acted like a wayward wife, God will punish her for it. But, as we have seen throughout this book, there is not only punishment, but also grace beyond the punishment. The one Judge is also the one Savior.

Verses 4-5 remind the people of how God saved them from Egypt. They were slaves there, and God miraculously and powerfully delivered them from their captivity. "But I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no savior. It was I who knew you in the wilderness, in the land of drought;" (Hosea 13:4-5)

The One who will punish them for their rebellion is the same One who saved them—and the *only* One who can save them now. The fact that there is only one Savior is one of the most offensive teachings of biblical Christianity. It's highly offensive to all those who don't hold to biblical Christianity. It might seem a lot easier to say, All roads lead to salvation. There are many different saviors. There are lots of different religions, and they're basically the same, so let's stop bickering about who is right and just get along.

But as nice as that may sound, it's simply not the truth. There are not many ways to be saved. There is one means by which we can be saved. The One living and true God, who has revealed Himself in this Book, has appointed one means of salvation, and that is through His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus, Himself, said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) And we read in Acts 4:12, speaking of Jesus, that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

So when we recognize our sin and understand the predicament we are in because of our sin, who is it that we should run to? Jesus Christ. He is the One who never sinned, but who went to the cross to bear our sin, and rose from the dead in triumph over sin, and He saves all those who repent of sin and trust in Him for forgiveness.

For those whom God saves, the last word is grace. There will still be discipline. There will still be consequences for sin that

we face in the course of this life. But God will spare us from hell, and instead we will receive the gift of eternal life in heaven.

Verse 14 is a glimmer of hope in the midst of a chapter heavy with warnings and judgment. Verse 14 says, “Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.” This is a bit difficult to interpret, because the first two lines of that verse could be rendered either as rhetorical questions or simply as statements. The ESV, which I just read, has them as rhetorical questions. And the assumption would be that the answer is no. God is saying that He will NOT ransom them from the power of Sheol. He will NOT redeem them from Death. On the other hand, another way of translating the verse is the way the NIV and NKJV translate it, making the statement, “I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death.” In light of what we’ve seen earlier in the book, I think that’s the better way to take it. It’s true that this is a chapter full of judgment, and so it would be consistent with that theme for God to say that He’s not going to redeem them from death. But in the previous sections of judgment, there have also been glimmers of hope that shine through.

We saw this in 6:2, “After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.” And also in chapter 11, the tender words that God speaks to His people right after many words of warning and judgment. The Lord says in 11:8-9, “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.”

We see this kind of thing again and again in Hosea. And I believe this is another example of it in chapter 13. In the midst of warnings, there is also hope. Israel will certainly go into exile. But even exile, even death, will not have the final word.

It’s this very verse that Paul quotes in his great discourse on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. In verses 54-55 of that chapter he first quotes from Isaiah 25:8, “Death is swallowed up in victory.” And then he quotes from Hosea 13:14, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” And then the next two verses go on to say, “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is our hope, brothers and sisters, that we have victory in Jesus Christ—victory even over death.

When we scratch our heads and wonder how this book of Hosea jumps so abruptly from judgment to mercy, we should think of the Gospel. This is the Gospel message contained in Hosea. God hates sin, and He will punish sin. But God is also gracious to His people. The cross of Christ is the answer to this riddle in Hosea of how those two truths fit together. God pours out His wrath on His own Son, so that we might receive grace.

A Final Call to Repentance

As we come to the last chapter of Hosea, there is yet another clear call to repentance. Look at verses 1-3, "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 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.'"

Here, again, we have a description of what real repentance would look like. We saw this earlier at the beginning of chapter 6. Here in chapter 14 the call again is to return to the Lord your God. Like Gomer, Israel has left her husband. She has gone away to sell herself to the Baals, to the pagan gods. Hosea's plea to them is that they would return to the Lord. And he even gives them the type of words that would signify real repentance. Not that repentance is contained merely in words. We saw earlier what empty repentance looks like. In 6:6, God tells them that He desires "steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." And in 7:14 He chastises them that "they do not cry to me from the heart." So we understand this statement in chapter 14 to be a statement of true, heartfelt repentance. It's not merely words, but an expression of what's going on in the heart of the truly repentant person.

First of all, there is the acknowledgement of iniquity. The request is, "Take away all iniquity." When we come to God in repentance, we first of all need to own up to our sin. We can't come to God with a half-hearted apology, minimizing our sin. We can't come to Him in a nonchalant way, saying, "Well, I messed up again, God. But You know I'm not perfect. I'll try harder next time." And we can't come to Him simply blaming others for our sin. "You know, God, it was really so-and-so's fault. I never would have said those things if they hadn't made me so angry." Real repentance accepts the guilt, accepts responsibility, acknowledges iniquity, and asks God to take away that iniquity.

Second, there is the acknowledgement that no one else can save. Do you see that in verse 3? Israel had been foolishly seeking salvation through Assyria, the very nation that would

destroy them. We need to stop looking to other things for our salvation. Only God can save. There is no savior besides Him. And that's why we go to Him in repentance. He's the One we are accountable to for our sin. He's the One who judges sin. And He's the only One who can save us from our sin.

A third component of true repentance is the rejection of idols. The second half of verse 3 says, "and we will say no more, 'Our God,' to the work of our hands." That captures the foolishness of idolatry. You make something with your hands, and then you bow down and worship it and call it, "Our God." That's ridiculous. But that's what we do when material things become our treasure, or when fame, or comfort, or pleasure becomes the thing we want most. We need to crush those idols and turn from them, and return to our God.

The book of Hosea ends with a summary statement that applies all of this to us, even today. Don't think that this book is limited in its application to the nation of Israel in Hosea's day. These things are preserved for our instruction, and the last verse shows us that it's for all of us. Don't let this message fall on deaf ears. Verse 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." There are two paths you can take. You can continue in your transgressions, in which case you will stumble and fall. Or you can walk upright in the ways of the Lord, repenting and reaping the blessings of knowing Him.

Grace in the End

The last thing I'll note is the expression, again, of God's amazing grace. Even with all that has been written in these chapters about sin and judgment, God's grace toward His people is heralded again in the final chapter.

Look at verses 4-8. "I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon; his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. 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. 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."

Even for sinners such as us, who have rebelled against our God, and have sold ourselves into slavery to idols, there is hope, there is forgiveness, and there is sweet freedom to be enjoyed in the presence of our God.

I began this sermon by talking about Chuck Colson. I want to close by mentioning another individual with a very radical conversion, and that is John Newton, who is best known because he wrote the famous hymn we sang earlier in this service—“Amazing Grace.” John Newton was born in London in 1725, and in his early life he worked aboard slave ships. He was a sea captain of slave trading ships, something that haunted him later in life because he realized what a horrific thing he had been involved in. God saved him out of that wretched life, and transformed him into a loving and godly pastor. And the words of his famous hymn are a fitting way to end our study of Hosea. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” My prayer for us is that we will recognize that our sin is wretched in God’s sight, but that His amazing grace saves us. And because of that, we have much reason for rejoicing.