

How to Drift Away From God

Hosea 8

Relentless (Book of Hosea)

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Wednesday, April 29, 2015, 7pm at Living Hope Church of Roselle, Illinois

Introduction: Open your Bible to Hosea 8. I want to bring a teaching to you tonight entitled: "How to Drift Away from God."

Hurricane Elena

Hosea 8:7 gives us a key verse, "For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind." Sometimes sin can be like a hurricane in our lives.

Only once in my life have I been close to the eye of a hurricane. It was August 29, 1985. I was a young boy at the time, and we lived in Louisiana, near the Gulf of Mexico and Lake Ponchartrain. While we were there a hurricane moved up the coast passing within ten or twenty miles of where we were living. As news of the approaching storm reached our community, many people evacuated and left the state. Our family stayed, and I will never forget the storm.

The wind began gently, then grew to a mammoth intensity; the rains were torrential. The streets surrounding our house in Ponchatoula, Louisiana were flooded. Trees snapped at the high winds. Rain was pouring sideways. As I stood watching the storm, I asked myself what could ever produce winds of such intensity and violence. Nearly one million people in low lying areas from New Orleans, Louisiana to Tampa, Florida were forced to flee.

Neglecting God

Today I still do not know everything that goes into the making of a hurricane. But because of the Book of Hosea I do know what produces similar scenes of spiritual force and destruction. It is not big things. It is "little" things, like forgetting God and then trusting in our own resources rather than in him. This neglect seems small at the beginning, but it grows big and ends in destruction.¹ You might say it is the "respectable sins" that cause the hurricanes in our lives. I can tell you from personal experience and from observing some very sad situations that this is absolutely the case.

Hosea 8:7 gives us a key verse, "For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind." Israel planted little sins like forgetting and neglecting God, and it resulted in the destruction of their nation.

Since "wind" in Scripture often refers to what is empty or illusive, the proverb means that Israel has sown the seed of meaningless religion along with their little "respectable sins" and shall therefore reap a harvest of judgment at the hand of God.²

Spiritual Shipwreck in the New Testament

There are respectable sins in our lives that will make our lives a shipwreck. Paul talks of this in the New Testament book of 1 Timothy.

¹ Boice, J. M. (2002). *The Minor Prophets: an expositional commentary* (pp. 63–64). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

² Ibid.

1 Timothy 1:19, "holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith."

1 Timothy 6:9, "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction."

We hear of times when God's people are cast out of the church "for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (**1 Cor. 5:5**).

I don't want that to happen to me, but it could. It could happen to any one of us. Let the "fear of the Lord" be the "beginning of knowledge" for all of us.

Examples of Faith Shipwrecked

What God has begun in you He will finish dear saint! He will not leave you or forsake you!

Yet as Christians, it is possible to make choices in life that shipwreck God's best for us. I knew of a man in Spain - a pastor, who chose to commit adultery in his marriage with a Spanish woman. His marriage survived, but his ministry did not. His plans of planting more churches in Spain were shipwrecked. My friend never planned on this happening, but it did.

I have also seen marriages fall into shipwreck, and it is a slow fade of pride, bitterness, and the desire for peace. Daily we sow to the wind, and we are shocked when we reap the whirlwind.

Forgetting God

The specifics of what Israel has done are spelled out in the chapter. But these specific sins flow from that more basic sin mentioned at the end: "Israel has forgotten his Maker" (v. 14). Does this mean that Israel has forgotten that there is a God? Has she forgotten who the true God is? No. That is not the meaning of the word. Not only had Israel not forgotten God—she still knew that he existed and even thought that she was worshipping him—it is actually the case that no one ever forgets God in the absolute, intellectual sense. It is our inescapable knowledge of God coupled to our unreasonable and sinful rejection of that knowledge that makes us guilty before him (Rom. 1:18–20). What the word "forget" actually means is "neglect." Israel knew God intellectually, but she had neglected him by pushing him aside. She had allowed other, lesser things to become central in the national life.³

Grounds for Judgment

There are ways we can drift from God. Five sins resulted from Israel's forgetting of God:

- (1) Don't maintain your walk with God
- (2) Don't have godly mentors in your life
- (3) Enslave yourself to idols that don't satisfy
- (4) Turn to false saviors that cannot save
- (5) Build Empty Monuments of a False Spirituality

These are brought forward in this chapter as grounds for God's judgment.⁴ I'd like to apply these ideas to us at their root and consider the "respectable sins" that lead us to a slow fade in our lives. I don't want my life to be a shipwreck.

Let's look at five sins that lead us to the slow fade of a drift away from God. It could end up in shipwreck!

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

I. Don't maintain your walk with God (vs. 1-3).

Hosea 8:1-3, "Set the trumpet to your lips!
One like a vulture is over the house of the Lord,
because they have transgressed my covenant
and rebelled against my law.
²To me they cry,
“My God, we—Israel—know you.”
³Israel has spurned the good;
the enemy shall pursue him.

Breaking God's Covenant

The word “covenant” means “agreement.” It is essentially personal. “Law” is an objective standard. In some circles it has been customary to set these two ideas over against one another as two conflicting definitions of sin. It is said that the old orthodoxy defined sin as a transgression of law, as in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (Q. 14). It is said that the new orthodoxy defines sin more correctly as a broken relationship. But these two ideas cannot be set over against one another. To break God’s covenant *is* to break God’s law. Similarly, to break the law of God is to offend against God personally.

Jesus is Not Lord without Obedience

When our text combines the breaking of God’s covenant with rebellion against God’s law, it is saying something very timely and significant. It is saying that we cannot call God, God, without obedience. Jesus indicated the same thing when he asked, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46). This question is immediately followed by the parable of a man who built his house on sand and suffered the loss of everything when the storm struck.

God Takes Hypocrisy Personally

There is one more thing we need to notice about this breaking of God’s covenant. It is the reaction of God to the hypocrisy. We see his reaction in the tone of the passage, primarily in the emphasis on the words “my” and “me” in these verses. Read them with that emphasis and you will see what is being said: “To me they cry, “My God, we—Israel—know you”” (vs. 2). God is saying that he hates the hypocrisy of it all. They dare to claim that they are acknowledging him when actually they are disregarding *his* law.

It's not okay to disregard your covenant with God. Paul instructs us in so many ways by reiterating the message of sanctification in the Old Testament - that the blessed man does not walk in the way of the ungodly, but meditates on the law of the Lord day and night (Psa. 1:1-3). Paul says, "Put off the old way of living, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new way of living." (Eph. 4:23-24).

Hang Like a Crucified Person

Covenant living means obedience. You want to follow Jesus, you need to hang like a crucified person when it comes to the things of the world. And you need to live like a resurrected person when it comes to God. Dead orthodoxy is NO orthodoxy.

Another way we can drift from God...

II. Don't have godly mentors in your life (vs. 4).

Hosea 8:4a, "They made kings, but not through me.
They set up princes, but I knew it not."

Choosing Leaders Without God's Guidance

Israel continued her slow fade into worldliness by choosing kings and other national leaders without God's direction or consent (v. 4). One of the great gifts of God to a nation is upright and godly leadership. We cannot see into human hearts. Character is known to God alone. To choose those who lead us without the direction of God is not only sinful, it is foolish. Those who follow their own wisdom in the choice of leaders inevitably get what they deserve.

That's not only true in our national politics, it is true with those we look up to personally in our private lives. Who do you emulate? Who do you look up to? Who are your mentors? Are they godly? We all have the tendency to follow someone. Who are you following?

Choosing No Leaders

Perhaps you are a loner. Perhaps you don't trust anyone. That's just as dangerous as having the wrong mentors in your life. Perhaps you are not connected with other godly men (if you are a man) or women (if you are a woman). That's tragic. That means in a sense you are making decisions solo. You are choosing paths in life through your own bent and imperfect heart.

Paul's Example: Barnabas, Timothy

You are going to have a slow fade into worldliness and hypocrisy if you don't follow the example of Paul. He had a Barnabas in his life. He had someone above him who was stronger. He had someone to whom he was accountable. He also had someone below him who he was helping. He had a Timothy. Who is your Barnabas? Who is your Timothy?

Another way we can drift from God...

III. Enslave yourself to idols that don't satisfy (vs. 4-6).

Hosea 8:4b-6, "...With their silver and gold they made idols
for their own destruction.

⁵ I have spurned your calf [Throw out your calf-idol], O Samaria.

My anger burns against them.

How long will they be incapable of innocence?

⁶ For it is from Israel;

a craftsman made it;

it is not God.

The calf of Samaria

shall be broken to pieces.

Calf-Idols of the Northern Kingdom

The choice of bad rulers leads to bad religion, and vice versa. So it is no surprise that the next step in Israel's rebellion against God is idolatry.

God condemns the worship of the "calf-idol" at the cult centers of the northern kingdom as idolatry, but we miss the point if we think of this calf-worship as an outright rejection of Jehovah for idols.

The Subtlety of Idolatry

The sin of worshipping the golden calf-idols was far more subtle. What had happened was quite similar to what had happened in the days of Moses and Aaron when the people were gathered around Mount Sinai. In those days **the people clamored for a god like the gods of Egypt**, and Aaron made them a little calf out of the gold they had brought from Egypt. **Aaron did not think of this as an idol**—that is the point. He thought of the calf as a representation of the strength of Jehovah and even proclaimed the dedication feast (which turned into an **orgy**) as "a festival to the Lord" (Exod. 32:5). But the people missed the distinction, identified the calf with the fertility bull-gods of Egypt, and behaved accordingly.

Calf-Pedestals

Now it was all happening again. In theory the calves of the cult centers were not gods. They were actually **calf-pedestals** on which the true and invisible god was supposed to stand. But because the people could not see the invisible god, while they could see the calf, it inevitably happened that the true God was debased and the "idol" worshiped.

This interesting use of the calves has been traced by the well-known dean of archaeologists William Foxwell Albright in *From the Stone Age to Christianity*. He writes,

"It is true that the 'golden calves' have been assumed by most scholars to have been direct representations of Yahweh as bull-god, but this gross conception is not only otherwise unparalleled in biblical tradition, but is contrary to all that we know of Syro-Palestinian iconography in the second and early first millennia b.c.

Among Canaanites, Aramaeans, and Hittites we find the gods nearly always represented as standing on the back of an animal or as seated on a throne borne by animals—but never as themselves in animal form. ... The storm-god of Mesopotamia is actually represented on seal-cylinders of the second millennium b.c. as a schematic bolt of lightning set upright on the back of a bull, and this iconographic device may go back to Sumerian seals [stone circular tablets] showing the bull who was the central figure in the ritual of consecration on a sacred drum with the winged shrine of music (so labeled!) on his back. The bull on which the storm-god stood is sometimes represented as a bullock of two or three years."⁵

Whatever We Love More than God is an Idol

Anything we love in place of God is an idol. You do not have to say, "I am worshiping an idol," to be actually worshiping an idol. We can say that we are worshiping God but be worshiping an idol—our money, homes, cars, position, wife, husband, children—even when we associate those things with God or think of them as the gift of God. It is a question, not of what we say, but of that to which we actually give our time and allegiance.

⁵ William Foxwell Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process*, 2d ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957), 299–300.

Idolatry is a theme of the Old and New Testaments because it is a theme of our lives:

- “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex 20:3).
- “. . . how I [God] have been hurt by their adulterous hearts which turned away from Me, and by their eyes which played the harlot after their idols . . .” (Ez 6:9).
- “And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity’” (Ez 14:2, 3).
- “. . . you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God” (1 Thes 1:9).
- “For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen” (Rom 1:25).

One might say that we all want the cup of their idolatry full. As it is often said, "When a man stops believing in God, he does not believe in nothing; he believes in anything."

CH Spurgeon Quote

“O ye sons of men, think not that God is blind. He can perceive the idols in your hearts; He understands what be the secret things that your souls lust after; He searches your heart, He tries your reins; beware lest He find you sacrificing to strange gods, for His anger will smoke against you, and His jealousy will be stirred. O ye that worship not God, the God of Israel, who give Him not dominion over your whole soul, and live not to His honor, repent ye of your idolatry, seek mercy through the blood of Jesus, and provoke not the Lord to jealousy anymore.”⁶

Idols are Masters

Lust is a slave master. Once a person gives himself to it, he is blind to reality. It can never satisfy. You can have a hunger for almost anything: money, sex, a great marriage, gambling, getting your way, etc.

How Can I Know My Idols?

- What is really driving me?
- What is really depressing me?
- What goal(s) must I obtain?
- What is my chief joy?
- What do I demand?
- What do I fear or tend to worry about?
- What do I manipulate others over?
- What do I functionally trust in daily life?
- What do I crave or long for?
- What controls or rules me?
- What do I see as my right?
- What do I dwell on or what consumes me?

⁶ C.H. Spurgeon. A Jealous God, Sermon 502, March 29, 1863.

- What makes my emotions the most uncontrollable?
- What is the foremost desire of my heart?
- What is my underlying motive?
- What do I try so hard for to create a righteousness of my own?
- Where do I seek happiness, peace, and contentment?
- What is more important than personal holiness?
- Why did this anger me?
- What do I want more than to be a reflection of Christ?
- Why did this bother/frustrate me so much?
- What must I have for life to be meaningful?
- What do my thoughts drift to? What private thoughts give me comfort?
- What do I spend too much money on?
- What unanswered prayers make me angry or hopeless?
- What do I have to resist not spending too much money on?

Another way we can drift from God...

IV. Turn to False Saviors (vs. 8-10).

Hosea 8:7-10, "... For they sow the wind,
and they shall reap the whirlwind.
The standing grain has no heads;
it shall yield no flour;
if it were to yield,
strangers would devour it.
⁸ Israel is swallowed up;
already they are among the nations
as a useless vessel.
⁹ For they have gone up to Assyria,
a wild donkey wandering alone;
Ephraim has hired lovers.
¹⁰ **Though they hire allies among the nations,**
I will soon gather them up.
And the king and princes shall soon writhe
because of the tribute."

Submission to False Saviors

This drift of policy was all quite literal in the northern kingdom's very last days as a political entity. Hoshea, Israel's last king, ascended the throne through the murder of his predecessor Pekah, and his first act after his assumption of the throne was to submit to **Assyria**. He submitted by paying tribute, his only chance of remaining king.

The same thing had been done by Menahem some years before. No doubt these kings would have pleaded "political expediency" or "emergency measures." They would have said, "It is all we can do."

But God is not impressed with reason that comes from carnal panic. Instead of congratulating them on their astute political wisdom, he compares such leadership to a wild

donkey and a prostitute. Political expediency will not work. Instead of surviving, Israel will become scattered among the nations to whom she looked for support (v. 8).

How do we turn to false saviors?

False saviors promise so much. How many people have gotten out of their marriage for a man or a woman that was a savior to them? How many have turned to the false savior of alcohol. How many have turned to a false savior of bitterness and unforgiveness and revenge? What about the false savior of escape? Just run, and everything will be alright! It's all a lie!

Israel paid a price of tribute to the nations, but vs. 10 rightly says, "And the king and princes shall soon writhe because of the tribute."

Hallelujah What a Savior

What a price to pay! But oh what a Savior we have! He's already paid it all! We have a Savior that is infinitely greater than the puny saviors invented by our sinful hearts. Why do we turn to anyone else?

A final way we can drift from God...

V. Build Empty Monuments of a False Spirituality (vs. 11-14).

Empty Monuments

The final ground of God's pending judgment on Israel cited in this chapter is the construction of empty monuments and altars, false not because they were dedicated to a god other than Jehovah but because they contributed to the **mere formality of Israel's religious practices** and thus became a cause of further sinning.

Hosea 8:11-14, "Because Ephraim has multiplied altars for sinning,
they have become to him altars for sinning.

¹²Were I to write for him my laws by the ten thousands,
they would be regarded as a strange thing.

¹³As for my sacrificial offerings,
they sacrifice meat and eat it,
but the Lord does not accept them.

Now he will remember their iniquity
and punish their sins;
they shall return to Egypt.

¹⁴For Israel has forgotten his Maker
and built palaces,
and Judah has multiplied fortified cities;
so I will send a fire upon his cities,
and it shall devour her strongholds."

Israel Has Forgotten Her Maker

Our equivalent to these altars could be churches and other Christian "monuments." We might say, taking comfort in the trellis over the vine. It's fine to have the trellis of God's programs, of Bibles, of a church building, of a church library, of a good reputation in the community. But we must not allow these things simply to be monuments.

Verse 11, "Ephraim has **multiplied altars for sinning.**" Wow. What does that mean? We find out in verse 14, "¹⁴**For Israel has forgotten his Maker and built palaces, and Judah has multiplied fortified cities; so I will send a fire upon his cities, and it shall devour her strongholds.**"

Israel slowly faded into a neglect of YHWH. Busyness took over. She looked to false saviors, so now she is building false palaces and altars. She is building monuments that will come to nothing.

Unless the Lord Builds the House

I love **Psalm 127:1**, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain."

Conclusion

Are you drifting from God?

- (1) Maintain your walk with God
- (2) Get have godly mentors in your life
- (3) Get rid of idols that don't satisfy
- (4) Get rid of false saviors that cannot save and turn to the True Savior, Jesus!
- (5) Turn those empty monuments into a trellis that can hold something that is alive!

What God has begun in you He will finish dear saint! He will not leave you or forsake you!