



## Hosea - Chapter Four

### Summary of Chapter Four

The Lord continues to prosecute his controversy against unfaithful Israel. He condemns both their lifestyle and their idol worship.

### **II. Hosea 4:1-14:9 - Hosea Spells Out His Parable with Accusations, Warnings, and Promises**

In the rest of the book, Hosea goes into detail about the various aspects of Israel's life that constitute their unfaithfulness to the Lord, urges them to repent, and reveals to his audience God's powerful and passionate commitment to his people, in spite of their unfaithfulness. Throughout these chapters the prophet changes the subject abruptly, without an obvious plan. Perhaps this shows that the sections were once independent oracles that have been stitched together.

Hosea describes how Israel has been unfaithful to God. God wants Israel to repent and turn from their wickedness. He wants to restore Israel; however, they continue to disobey and follow their own ways: *<<My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children>>* (Hosea 4:6).

#### **II.a Hosea 4:1-19 - Legal Proceedings Continued**

Refer to the chapter summary above.

##### **II.a.i Hosea 4:1-11a - God Accuses Israel**

The lifestyle choices of the people show that they have abandoned God and his laws, thus his condemnation is upon them. God is especially critical of the

priesthood for they have not taught or led the people as they should have. They will face the appropriate punishment for their sins, as will the people also.

- 1 Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel;  
for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.  
There is no faithfulness or loyalty,  
and no knowledge of God in the land.
- 2 Swearing, lying, and murder,  
and stealing and adultery break out;  
bloodshed follows bloodshed.

### Hosea 4:1-2

Charges against Israel are framed in the vocabulary of a lawsuit, i.e. an indictment, a setting used by Hosea's 8<sup>th</sup> Century contemporaries: <<*The Lord rises to argue his case; he stands to judge the peoples. The Lord enters into judgement with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord God of hosts*>> (Isaiah 3:13-15), and: <<*Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel*>> (Micah 6:2). The charges are offenses against God's law, particularly the Ten Commandments: perjury, i.e. false swearing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery, and all manner of violent bloodshed.

There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Each of these three points is connected. When people forsake the knowledge of God, soon truth and mercy are both gone. Truth must be rooted in something more than personal opinion, and mercy means going beyond self-interest. Faithfulness and loyalty are attributes of God: <<*The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*>> (Exodus 34:6); genuine knowledge of God in the hearts of his people will produce a character like his.

**True wisdom and understanding always begin with the knowledge of God:** <<*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight*>> (Proverbs 9:10).

Stealing and adultery break out. It all connects back to departing from the knowledge of God. Soon, truth and mercy are things of the past, and people no longer practice restraint. When man will not or cannot restrain himself,

bloodshed and destruction follow. In the ancient Hebrew, bloodshed follows bloodshed is literally ‘bloody deed touches bloody deed.’ Apparently violent crimes had become so common that one seemed immediately to follow another, as if touching it.

<sup>3</sup> Therefore the land mourns,  
and all who live in it languish;  
together with the wild animals  
and the birds of the air,  
even the fish of the sea are perishing.

### Hosea 4:3

The whole land suffers from the curses of the covenant, because it is the arena in which God’s unfaithful people are chastised; it is little wonder that it mourns.

All who live in it languish. This is the tragic fruit of forsaking the knowledge of God, truth, mercy, and restraint. Satan sings sweetly especially to the people of God, making them think or hope that casting these things away is a doorway to freedom. However, it is only a path to destruction as Jesus warns: <<**Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it**>> (Matthew 7:13). Paul probably had Hosea’s chapter in mind as he penned his own indictment of the gentile nations. This can be seen by comparing v.6 with Romans 1:24-28; v.7 with Romans 1:23; and v.11 with Romans 1:21-22.

Together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing. The effects of sin and disobedience have an impact on the whole of creation like an end times judgement: <<**the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and the animals of the field, and all creeping things that creep on the ground, and all human beings that are on the face of the earth, shall quake at my presence, and the mountains shall be thrown down, and the cliffs shall fall, and every wall shall tumble to the ground**>> (Ezekiel 38:20), and: <<**I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will make the wicked stumble. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says the Lord**>> (Zephaniah 1:3).

<sup>4</sup> Yet let no one contend,  
and let none accuse,  
for with you is my contention, O priest.

#### Hosea 4:4

Yet let no one contend, and let none accuse. While determining the precise meaning is difficult, this is certainly a reprimand. In passages like Deuteronomy 17:9-12, God clearly commanded his people to listen to and submit to the priests, who would lead and help the people with the Word of God. However, because the people cast off the knowledge of God, truth, mercy, and restraint, they would not listen to the priests, and contended with them instead. This helps to explain the opening of the verse. The idea is ‘They will not listen to the priest, but they contend with him instead. So do not waste your time trying to contend or rebuke them yourself.’

<sup>5</sup> You shall stumble by day;  
the prophet also shall stumble with you by night,  
and I will destroy your mother.

#### Hosea 4:5

You shall stumble by day. It is bad enough to stumble in the night, but at least people can understand it: <<*We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work*>> (John 9:4). But when God’s people cast off the knowledge of God, restraint, and guidance from leaders then they shall stumble even in the day.

The prophet refers to false prophets, the companions of the priests: <<*But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them – bringing swift destruction on themselves*>> (2 Peter 2:1). Together they were leading the people astray.

Your mother is an allusion to Israel: <<*Upon her children also I will have no pity, because they are children of whoredom. For their mother has played the whore; she who conceived them has acted shamefully. For she said, ‘I will go after my lovers; they give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink’*>> (Hosea 2:4-5). Hosea’s symbols of Israel include a mother, children, and young women.

<sup>6</sup> My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;  
because you have rejected knowledge,  
I reject you from being a priest to me.  
And since you have forgotten the law of your God,  
I also will forget your children.

## Hosea 4:6

The people are the focal point in this chapter and are referred to as my people throughout. The priests had the responsibility of teaching the people God's Word and his laws: <<*You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean; and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them through Moses*>> (Leviticus 10:10-11), and: <<*True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in integrity and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts*>> (Malachi 2:6-7), but they had failed miserably, and as a result, the people lacked knowledge of God's laws and his ways. Therefore God says my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. However, he puts the blame squarely on the priests: because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. The statements have the air of a judicial decision and sentence.

I reject you from being a priest to me is a reminder that church leaders not only minister to the people, they are there to serve the Lord.

The kind of knowledge the priests had rejected is further specified: since you have forgotten the law of your God. The consequences of this neglect of God's Word would be seen in the lives of what was most precious to the priests: I also will forget your children. The future tense still may indicate a warning, hinting that repentance might avert this judgement. But the great privilege of knowing God was in danger of being forfeited, even for the next generation. God will hold the unfaithful minister, pastor, or preacher accountable: <<*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness*>> (James 3:1). They have much to answer for before God.

- 7 The more they increased,  
the more they sinned against me;  
they changed their glory into shame.
- 8 They feed on the sin of my people;  
they are greedy for their iniquity.
- 9 And it shall be like people, like priest;  
I will punish them for their ways,  
and repay them for their deeds.

## Hosea 4:7-9

The more they increased, the more they sinned against me; they changed their glory into shame. God blessed the priests with increase, but they took God's blessing for granted and only sinned against God all the more. Their elevated status in the community as priests should have brought glory and not shame: <<*You will be sated with contempt instead of glory. Drink, you yourself, and stagger! The cup in the Lord's right hand will come around to you, and shame will come upon your glory!*>> (Habakkuk 2:16). Blessing is a two-edged gift; it is obviously wonderful to be blessed, but it also brings more accountability and more opportunity for sin.

They feed on the sin of my people. Sin can mean 'sin-offering', and perhaps that is what is meant here. It was a most holy offering, intended only for the priests; refer to Leviticus 6:25-30.

They are greedy for their iniquity is literally, 'they lift their soul to their iniquity.' This obliterates the strict distinction between the priest and the laity that was required by God's law.

The priests may have thought they would be immune from the judgement coming upon Israel. After all, they were priests! But God promises that when it comes to judgement, like people, like priest. There is no doubt that the priesthood of Israel was corrupt. Jeroboam I had made priests from all sorts of people: <<*He also made houses on high places, and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not Levites*>> (1 Kings 12:31), and: <<*Even after this event Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way, but made priests for the high places again from among all the people; any who wanted to be priests he consecrated for the high places*>> (1 Kings 13:33). Therefore, large numbers of true priests, and doubtless true prophets also, had left the northern kingdom: <<*The priests and the Levites who were in all Israel presented themselves to him from all their territories. The Levites had left their common lands and their holdings and had come to Judah and Jerusalem, because Jeroboam and his sons had prevented them from serving as priests of the Lord, and had appointed his own priests for the high places, and for the goat-demons, and for the calves that he had made. Those who had set their hearts to seek the Lord God of Israel came after them from all the tribes of Israel to Jerusalem to sacrifice to the Lord, the God of their ancestors*>> (2 Chronicles 11:13-16).

There is also another way to understand the phrase 'like people, like priest.' It also means that as the people go, so go the priests. Sometimes people expect their religious leaders to be holy for them or instead of them. However, since the priests come from the people, if the people are backslidden then many backslidden people will seek to be priests and pastors.

<sup>10</sup> They shall eat, but not be satisfied;  
they shall play the whore, but not multiply;  
because they have forsaken the Lord  
to devote themselves to <sup>11a</sup> whoredom.

#### Hosea 4:10-11a

They shall eat, but not be satisfied. If this is still directed to the priests, it means that although they eat the sin-offerings, they will be spiritually hungry: <<*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food*>> (Isaiah 55:2), and: <<*You shall eat, but not be satisfied, and there shall be a gnawing hunger within you; you shall put away, but not save, and what you save, I will hand over to the sword*>> (Micah 6:14). But v.10 may expand the focus to speak of punishment for all the people, in which case God is saying that no food will satisfy their hunger.

They shall play the whore is an allusion to Baalism. The prophet here makes little distinction between abuses of God's law and Baal worship.

#### II.a.ii Hosea 4:11b-19 - The Idolatry of Israel

Here God gives the reasons why the people of the northern kingdom live in such debauchery; it is because they have turned to pagan idols and away from the Lord.

<sup>11b</sup> Wine and new wine  
take away the understanding.

#### Hosea 4:11b

Wine and new wine take away the understanding. In addition to the moral perversion of whoredom, Hosea warns against the common link between sexual immorality and the effects of alcohol, both of which cloud one's thinking, taking away one's ability to discern good and evil: <<*Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise*>> (Proverbs 2:1).

<sup>12</sup> My people consult a piece of wood,  
and their divining-rod gives them oracles.  
For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray,  
and they have played the whore, forsaking their God.

<sup>13</sup> They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains,

and make offerings upon the hills,  
under oak, poplar, and terebinth,  
because their shade is good.  
Therefore your daughters play the whore,  
and your daughters-in-law commit adultery.

### Hosea 4:12-13

My people consult a piece of wood. These verses describe ritual violations against God's laws, in accordance with Canaanite practices. They would ask for guidance from an idol carved out of wood: <<*As a thief is shamed when caught, so the house of Israel shall be shamed – they, their kings, their officials, their priests, and their prophets, who say to a tree, 'You are my father', and to a stone, 'You gave me birth.'* For they have turned their backs to me, and not their faces. But in the time of their trouble they say, 'Come and save us!'>> (Jeremiah 2:26-27).

**Demetrius, a silversmith in Ephesus, sums up the folly of his own pagan thinking:** <<*You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her'*>> (Acts 19:26-27).

For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray like sheep following a wicked shepherd. Israel's idolatry was like adultery against the Lord. Every sacrifice made to a pagan god was like an act of adultery. The picture is striking when it is considered what a faithful and good husband the Lord is to his people. Adultery is never excusable, but is even more heinous against a good, faithful, loving spouse. The picture is striking when it is considered how Israel wanted to add pagan gods to their worship of the Lord. It is not as if Israel officially said, "We want to leave the Lord, and now serve only pagan gods." Instead, Israel wanted to add the worship of pagan gods to their worship of the Lord. God received this the same way a husband would if his wife said, "I want you to still be my husband, I just want to take on a few more lovers also."

Therefore your daughters play the whore. There is a connection between following a false religion, which is spiritual adultery, and the immoral conduct, the physical adultery, of the next generation. The parents turned away from God, and as a consequence he allowed their daughters and other young women, your

daughters-in-law, to stray into sexual immorality. In some translations, the term daughters-in-law is translated as brides.

14 I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore,  
nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery;  
for the men themselves go aside with whores,  
and sacrifice with temple prostitutes;  
thus a people without understanding comes to ruin.

#### Hosea 4:14

I will not punish your daughters is perhaps spoken in sarcasm, as if to say, how can anyone blame them when the whole people is unfaithful? Because the men of Israel sinned this way, God would not single out the women of Israel for judgement when it came to this sin. God does not have a double standard for sexual conduct between men and women. This can also be seen in the case of the woman caught in adultery when only she and not her lover were brought before Jesus for judgement: <<*Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again'*>> (John 8:10-11). Not only was this an act of compassion, it demonstrates justice in action.

For the men themselves go aside with whores. Describing idolatry as spiritual adultery is especially appropriate when it is understood that many pagan gods were 'worshipped' by the hiring of a temple prostitute. This was far more enticing than just praying to a statue.

Sacrifice with temple prostitutes. This is the only place in Hosea where shrine prostitutes are mentioned. Hosea's wife is never called that. But here an unfaithful spouse is grouped alongside those who participate in sexual activity at pagan places of worship.

Thus a people without understanding comes to ruin. The idea of v.6 is repeated: <<*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge*>>. Without understanding God and his Word, God's people are destined for destruction.

15 Though you play the whore, O Israel,  
do not let Judah become guilty.  
Do not enter into Gilgal,  
or go up to Beth-aven,  
and do not swear, 'As the Lord lives.'

## Hosea 4:15

Do not let Judah become guilty. At this time, God's people were divided into two nations - Israel to the north, and Judah to the south. Israel's apostasy was far more ingrained, so Judah is cautioned that they must not follow her neighbour's sinful ways, although eventually Judah did.

Several shrines that might entice Judah are named. The cities of Gilgal and Beth-aven were centres of idolatry in Israel. For a citizen of Judah to travel there meant they shared in Israel's idolatry. When people get too close to sinful practices, they often rub off on them: Do not be deceived: <<**Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals'**>> (1 Corinthians 15:33).

Gilgal, near Jericho, is where Israel circumcised the new generation, observed the Passover, and where they camped when they marched around Jericho on each of seven days; refer to Joshua 4:19, 5:10, and 6:1-14 respectively. It was a place where prophets were trained under Elijah and Elisha: <<**Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal**>> (2 Kings 2:1), and: <<**When Elisha returned to Gilgal, there was a famine in the land. As the company of prophets was sitting before him, he said to his servant, 'Put the large pot on, and make some stew for the company of prophets'**>> (2 Kings 4:38). However, in Hosea's day it had become a centre of false worship: <<**Every evil of theirs began at Gilgal; there I came to hate them. Because of the wickedness of their deeds I will drive them out of my house. I will love them no more; all their officials are rebels**>> (Hosea 9:15), <<**In Gilead there is iniquity, they shall surely come to nothing. In Gilgal they sacrifice bulls, so their altars shall be like stone heaps on the furrows of the field**>> (Hosea 12:11), <<**Come to Bethel – and transgress; to Gilgal – and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days**>> (Amos 4:4), <<**but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beer-sheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing**>> (Amos 5:5).

Beth-aven, referred to as Aven in Hosea 10:8, means 'house of evil' or 'house of deceit'; here it serves as a pejorative name for Bethel (see Hosea 10:15 and 12:4), which means 'house of God' as it was named by Jacob following his dream of heaven; refer to Genesis 28:19. Bethel was the southern centre of calf worship established by Jeroboam I: <<**So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people, 'You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.' He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan**>> (1 Kings 12:28-29).

They are commanded to not swear, 'As the Lord lives' at these pagan sites. The name of the Lord is not to be associated in any way with such practices. These

sites violate the Mosaic Law, which requires one central sanctuary and a Levitical priesthood; refer to Deuteronomy 12:8-14.

16 Like a stubborn heifer,  
Israel is stubborn;  
can the Lord now feed them  
like a lamb in a broad pasture?

17 Ephraim is joined to idols –  
let him alone.

#### Hosea 4:16-17

Like a stubborn heifer, Israel is stubborn. Cattle are known for their stubborn temperaments. They can safely feed out on the open range, because they are not easy prey for most predators. However, a lamb in a broad pasture or in open country has strayed from the shepherd and is vulnerable. Hosea's point is plain: if a person acts like a stubborn cow, they should not expect to be protected like an obedient sheep. Ezra would remind the people of the folly of the stubbornness of their ancestors that had led to the exile: *<<And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your ordinances, by the observance of which a person shall live. They turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey>>* (Nehemiah 9:29)

Ephraim is joined to idols – let him alone. This is one way to express the judgement that is coming against Israel. God will simply leave Ephraim alone. When the mighty Assyrian army comes against them, they may fight for themselves - God will leave his people alone.

Christians should not want God to leave them alone because they need him to protect them against their spiritual enemies. Satan wanted to sift Peter like wheat, but Jesus did not leave Peter alone to face the attack. Jesus prayed for Peter, and he emerged victorious; refer to Luke 22:31-32. Christians should not want God to leave them alone because they need him to protect them against themselves. Left to their own devices, with their own sinful hearts, they will surely drift away from the Lord. All God must do to make certain a man goes to hell is simply leave him alone. The Christian's prayer should always be, "Lord, do not leave me alone. Keep working on me."

This is the first time Hosea uses the name Ephraim for Israel, using the prominent and centrally located tribe to stand for the whole. He will use it thirty four more times. Other prophets used this language too: *<<The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you do not stand*

*firm in faith, you shall not stand at all>> (Isaiah 7:9), <<Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord>> (Jeremiah 31:20), and: <<For I have bent Judah as my bow; I have made Ephraim its arrow. I will arouse your sons, O Zion, against your sons, O Greece, and wield you like a warrior's sword>> (Zechariah 9:13).*

18 When their drinking is ended, they indulge in sexual orgies;  
they love lewdness more than their glory.

19 A wind has wrapped them in its wings,  
and they shall be ashamed because of their altars.

#### Hosea 4:18-19

They love lewdness more than their glory. The people of God lived in a privileged position yet they would rather turn to their base instincts rather than follow the Lord who had chosen them.

A wind has wrapped them in its wings. The Hebrew word for wind, *ruach*, can also mean spirit or breath; in v.12 <<*a spirit of whoredom*>> has engulfed Israel like a whirlwind.

They shall be ashamed because of their altars. The people will be ashamed because they have built altars to other gods. The priests will be ashamed because they have defiled the altar of God to which they were called as ministers. Above all, everyone will be ashamed because they chose a different path away from God: <<*For you shall be ashamed of the oaks in which you delighted; and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen*>> (Isaiah 1:29).