



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Hosea 4:1-19

“The Saving Power of Theology”

TRANSCRIPT

We are turning for our Scripture reading to Hosea chapter 4 and are reading the entire chapter, so if you have your Bible with you – and why should you be here without your Bible? – turn with me to the first verse of the 4th chapter of Hosea, and follow along as I read. We’re reading again from the New America Standard Bible.

“Listen to the word of the LORD, O sons of Israel,
For the LORD has a case against the inhabitants of the land,
Because there is no faithfulness or kindness
Or knowledge of God in the land.
There is swearing, deception, murder, stealing and adultery
They employ violence, so that bloodshed follows bloodshed.
Therefore the land mourns,
And everyone who lives in it languishes
Along with the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky,
And also the fish of the sea disappear.
Yet let no one find fault, and let none offer reproof;
For your people are like those who contend with the priest.

(It is possible, incidentally, to render that expression differently, and I personally think that it is likely that that should be rendered something like this,)

Yet let no one find fault, and let offer reproof;
With you is my contention, O priest. (And so it is a direct reference to the priest;
the following context seems to support that. Verse5,)

So you will stumble by day,
And the prophet also will stumble with you by night;
And I will destroy your mother.
My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge
Because you have rejected knowledge,
I also will reject you from being My priest
Since you have forgotten the law of your God,
I also will forget your children.

(There’s a great deal of emphasis in this passage right at this point on “you” and then “I also,” and in fact, in the Hebrew text, that expression “I also” is reserved for the end of the clause and the end of the sentence for special stress)

I will forget your children; I also.
The more they multiplied, the more they sinned against Me;
I will change their glory into shame.

(That’s very much like saying, the more preachers there are, the more sin there is; the more the priests multiplied, the more they sinned against me.)

They feed on the sin of My people
And direct their desire toward their iniquity.
And it will be, like people, like priest;
So I will punish them for their ways
And repay them for their deeds.
And They will eat, but not have enough;
They will play the harlot, but not increase,
Because they have stopped giving heed to the LORD.
Harlotry, wine and new wine take away the understanding.
My people consult their wooden idol, and their diviner's wand informs them;
For a spirit of harlotry has led them astray,
And they have played the harlot, departing from their God.

(You know, when we read something like this, we think, how is it possible for a people who were the people of Yahweh, the people whose history included the great deliverance from Egypt through the Red Sea into the Promised Land, and all that was involved in the ministry of Moses and Aaron and others – how is it possible for them to consult wooden idols and a diviner’s wand?

And one might ask the question of the Christian church today, how is it possible for the Protestant church, for example, the Protestant church founded in the doctrines of the triune God, Father, Son and Spirit – a divine Father, a divine Son, a divine Spirit – how is it possible to keep within their midst men who proclaim a non-divine Son of God? How is it possible? Well, if we can find it very difficult to understand how an Israelite could bow down to a piece of wood, we should find it, if anything, even more striking that a man who holds the Bible in his hands and stands in a pulpit and proclaims it, can hold a doctrine to the effect that Jesus is nothing more than one of us.

So really, the things that are said in the Scriptures have a very, very direct application to us today. And notice God feels about things like this. Verse 13)

They offer sacrifices on the tops of the mountains
And burn incense on the hills,
Under oak, poplar and terebinth,
Because their shade is pleasant. (Ah what a bit of irony there is in that; we'll speak about in a moment)

Therefore your daughters play the harlot
And your brides commit adultery.
I will not punish your daughters when they play the harlot
Or your brides when they commit adultery,
For the men themselves go apart with harlots
And offer sacrifices with temple prostitutes;
So the people without understanding are ruined.

Though you, Israel, play the harlot,
Do not let Judah become guilty;
Also do not go to Gilgal,
Or go up to Beth-aven
And take the oath:

"As the LORD lives!" (Hosea was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom, but you can see here that there is in his prophecy a word or two here and there addressed to the Southern Kingdom as well. And so he says,)

Though you, Israel, play the harlot,
Do not let Judah become guilty;
Also do not go to Gilgal,
Or go up to Beth-aven (false places of worship that we'll talk about in a moment.

Verse 16)

Since Israel is stubborn
Like a stubborn heifer,
Can the LORD now pasture them
Like a lamb in a large field?

Ephraim (this is the word for the Northern Kingdom, because Ephraim was the large tribe and there its name is given to the ten) is joined to idols;

Let him alone.

Their liquor gone,
They play the harlot continually;
Their rulers dearly love shame.

The wind wraps them in its wings,
And they will be ashamed because of their sacrifices.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his word. Let’s bow together in our morning prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we read these words and sense the earnestness and zeal and the seriousness of the prophet as he warns us of the dangers of apostasy, apostasy in mind and doctrine that leads to apostasy in life and action. And we pray O God, that through the ministry of the word of God, we may be straightened out in our minds that our feet may follow in the ways of the Lord.

We confess to Thee, Lord, the many failures that we in the Christian church have been responsible for, because we have not paid attention to the knowledge of the Lord as found in holy Scripture. And even when we have known what the Scriptures say, we have so often strayed from the path that Thou hast set forth for us. O God. We come to thee with a confession of our sins, and we ask that Thou wilt cleanse us and set us upon a right path.

Give us, Lord, an understanding of what it means to have a word from God, and something of the sense of the importance of following the teaching of holy Scripture. We ask, Lord, for this body of people who are here and are listening to this prayer, and will listen to the ministry of the word, that through the Scriptures, we all may be strengthened in our faith, delivered from our sins, built up so that we may truly represent Thee, and receive from Thee the blessings of life that Thou dost so bountifully desire to pour out upon us.

We pray, Lord, for our country, for its leadership, especially in this year, the year of decision, we pray that Thou wilt give guidance and direction to the people of this country, that the leader might be elected that will be most pleasing to Thee and most beneficial to this country.

We ask, O God, for the whole church of Jesus Christ, and pray that wherever its members are, in the four corners of the earth, they may have the sense of Thy blessing upon them today.

We pray for the ministry of the word, and the ministry of the word not simply in Believers Chapel, but wherever that word of God goes forth in its purity. And Lord, we pray for the ministry of the Chapel, too. We pray for its leaders, its elders, its deacons, its members, its friends, and we ask Lord that through the tape ministry that has been mentioned and through the radio ministry and through the publications ministry, we may have Thy blessing upon us to the building up of individuals in the faith of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Deliver us from error. Keep us from apostasy. Keep us, Lord, cleaving to Thee and to Thy word.

And then, we would not forget those who have need of physical blessing from Thee. We would bring to Thee, Lord, those of our calendar of concern who have many trials and troubles, physical ailments and other forms of difficulties. O God, minister to them. We bring them all to Thee individually. May we have, Lord, the sense that Thou

wilt have, as Thou hast said in the Scriptures, a God who hears our petitions. Hear Lord and answer.

We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

[Message] The subject for today in the continued exposition of the prophecy of Hosea is “The Saving Power of Theology.” To put the present chapter into a proposition would result in something like this: religious apostasy leads to moral depravity and divine judgment. Or, to put it in Paul’s words, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven upon all unrighteousness and all ungodly men who are holding down the truth in unrighteousness.”

There is today, as one looks at the history of the Christian church and at the way in which it has developed, a great rejection of the idea that doctrine is important. In fact, the idea of a doctrinal Christianity is certainly in disfavor today, but when one looks at the Scriptures one cannot help but think that that is false. Sometimes people object to doctrine along these lines. They will say, Christianity consists of facts and not dogmas. And we, therefore, should lay stress upon the facts that are the fundamental grounds and foundations of Christianity, not upon its dogmas.

And then it is very popular for people to say today, that Christianity consists of life and not doctrine. In other words, we should not be so concerned about the great doctrines of theology as we should about spiritual life. Sometimes it takes the form of, “We should lay stress upon the person of Jesus Christ, and we should not stress Christian theology.” Coleridge expressed it this way, “Facts, stubborn facts, none of your theory.”

Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, one of the greatest of theologians of the 20th Century, replied to Mr. Coleridge by saying, “A fact without doctrine is simply a fact not understood.” And I’m sure that if there are philosophers in the audience, there is no such thing as a fact that is neutral. All facts are ultimately interpreted facts.

What, after all, is peculiar to Christianity? What is it that is peculiar to Christianity? Well, the thing that is peculiar to Christianity is not its religious sentiment or its working,

but its message of salvation. [infant sounds] In a word, it’s doctrine. [more infant sounds] I take it from those sounds in the back are amens [laughter] beginning to be expressed early in life [more laughter].

Warfield went on to say, “To be indifferent to doctrine is to be, is just another way of saying that we are indifferent to Christianity.” So, it is well for us who claim to be Christians to realize that when we claim to be Christians, and when we make statements concerning Christianity, we are making doctrinal statements. And when in fact, if we are Christians at all, we have been saved by theology.

Now, we may not like to put it that way. We may not think that that is the proper way to do it, but that is the fact – an interpreted fact, of course – but a fact. We are saved by theology, the truths that are expressed as theological truths when they are brought home to us by the Holy Spirit and salvation results, it is due to that which is represented by these spiritual truths. So, we should never take the position that what we’re interested in is life and not doctrine. There is no good life without doctrine.

Well, Hosea, I’m sure would have agreed 100% with the essence of what I’m trying to say. This fourth chapter expresses that over and over and over again. Destroyed for lack of knowledge is the condition of the Nation Israel.

Chapter 4 has what might be called a few pemmican passages. Pemmican is the word that comes from the American Indian word “making fat meat,” and thus it means, according to Webster, “dried, lean meat pounded into a paste and preserved in the form of pressed cakes,” or “dried beef, raisins, suet and sugar prepared as a concentrated food as for explorers.” In other words, it’s a concentration of food to be masticated and digested and remembered, and also easily transportable.

Well, Hosea chapter 4 has some pemmican passages. Notice, for example, chapter 4 and verse 17 where he says, “Ephraim is joined to idols” – let him alone. That text has rung down through the years in the ears of readers of the Bible. Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone. Or in chapter 4 verse 9, “and it will be like people, like priest.”

That’s another statement that has stuck with us: like people like priest. And then in chapter 4 and verse 6, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.”

Israel’s spiritual adultery is exposed in a symbolic manner in the first three chapters, when Hosea is given this message from the Lord God that he should marry Gomer who was characterized as having a disposition like a harlot and then she left him for her harlotry. And then Hosea is told to marry her again. And under these symbols and figures, God sought to express the message to Israel that he had been married to her, but she had proved unfaithful to him, guilty of spiritual adultery. But at the end of chapter 1 and the end of chapter 2 and the end of chapter 3, prophecies had been given to the effect that while that’s the situation now, the time is coming in the future when the relationship is going to be restored, and it will be restored permanently because Israel is ultimately to inherit the eternal kingdom of God.

Now, in chapter 4 through chapter 14 of the prophecy of Hosea, the prophet speaks in detailed and vivid language of the sins of Israel, the things that mark her adultery. In other words, that which is represented in symbol now is represented in plain language. And so we have chapter 4 through verse 14, remarkable category of the sins of the Nation Israel against the Lord God who had brought her up out of the land of Egypt, and the spiritual consequences of apostasy are spelled out in great detail.

You’ll notice as the other Minor Prophets, and some of the Major Prophets do, the prophets like to speak of God’s case against Israel as a lawsuit. It’s almost as if, in opening chapter 4, the prophet should call out, “O Yea, O Yea,” like a court crier might call out to say “the court is now in session,” and we’re going to listen to the accusation of the prosecutor. For Hosea writes, “Listen to the word of the Lord, O sons of Israel, for the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land,” and what follows is an indictment of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, called Ephraim because, as I mentioned in the Scripture reading, Ephraim was the populous and powerful of the ten tribes, and so consequently the nation was referred to from time to time as Ephraim.

Now first of all, the prophet brings a general accusation against the people, and then a particular application and accusation against the priests and the prophets. In the first two verses, we have the general accusations against the people. He goes on to say at the end of verse 1 and 2, “Because there is no faithfulness.” That word is something that means truth or faithfulness in the sense of honesty, just plain honesty. Or, kindness – and this is his favorite word for loyal love – kindness – or knowledge of God in the land.

And then in the details. There is swearing, deception, murder, stealing and adultery. They employ violence so that bloodshed follows bloodshed. Now I’d like for you to notice that in that first verse, when he says, “because there is no faithfulness or kindness or knowledge of God in the land,” he begins with the effects and traces those effects to the cause. There is no honesty and there is no lovingkindness *because* there is no knowledge of God in the land.

You see, the difficulty ultimately lies in the doctrine. When there is no knowledge of God, then we may expect dishonesty and we may expect all of the other kinds of things that characterize a people who do not know the lovingkindness of God. So honesty and love are the products of the knowledge of God.

Now in the details, one who knows the Ten Commandments immediately recognizes that what Hosea is doing is charging the Nation Israel with the breaking of the commandments that have to do with the relationship of man to man, the second table of the law. There is swearing, deception, murder, stealing and adultery – they’ve broken the sixth, the seventh, the eighth and the ninth commandments, and the results even touch the lower creation.

One wonders in the United States of America and in our Western world that some of our problems with our environment are not really the products of the moral conditions that exist in our Western world. Well of course, we must be careful about this it seems to me, because in Israel’s case, Israel was a theocratic nation, and it is very plain that the things that Israel does in the moral and spiritual sphere are things that ultimately touch

their environment. It’s one of the ways God had of disciplining the people who were dependent upon their physical environment. But we cannot help but look around us today and see the damage that has been done to our environment and not reflect upon the fact that there may be some definite relationship with the way in which we have spiritually departed from the teaching of the word of God.

Now, he says, “therefore the land mourns, and everyone who lives in it languishes along with the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky, and also the fish of the sea are taken away.” The blame is fixed now mostly on the spiritual leadership of the people, and with verse 3 and following the prophet speaks primarily against the priests and the prophets, and he primarily lays stress upon the priests. He says in the fourth verse, “Yet, let no one find fault and let none offer reproof, (and then as I suggested we should render this) for with you, is my contention, O priest.”

And he continues, “So you will stumble by day and the prophet also will stumble with you by night, and I will destroy your mother. My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge, for you (there’s emphasis in the Hebrew text on that you) because you -- *atab*, singled out for stress -- because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being my priest since you have forgotten the law of your God. I will forget your children; I also.” In other words, stress upon what you have done, and stress upon what God is going to do as a result of it. So having broken the sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth commandments among others, it’s not surprising that the Lord speaks as he does.

Incidentally, in the singling out of these commandments, one see what is taught generally in the word of God, that it is very difficult to make a distinction between light sins and serious sins. As our Lord points out in the Sermon on the Mount, many of those sins that we consider to be very light sins are in essences sins that are very heinous. In other words, to look upon a woman to lust after her is to commit adultery. To hate a brother is really to commit murder. And so we are not permitted to make distinctions in

sin and say, well, here are some light sins and here are some serious sins – all sins are serious.

Now of course, there is a degree in punishment, we know that. We must be careful that we do not excuse sin by the way in which we treat some particular sins. But notice now the charge and accusation against the priest: you have rejected knowledge. And the rejection of Him leads to the rejection of national privilege. Because you have rejected knowledge, I have also rejected you from being my priest.

It was Israel’s great privilege to be a priestly nation. They were to be a kingdom of priests, and thus they could stand for the nations. As a man became a Jewish man, he became a member of Israel and thus had relationship to the true God. Israel was the priestly nation, but by virtue of their apostasy, that privileged position is being taken from them. “Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.”

Blind priests. Blind priests were for Israel not only a mortal danger to the priests themselves, but a disaster to others. We, of course, are in what we would call, the professing Christian church. And in fact, in Believers Chapel, we probably would be regarded as belong the professing Protestant Christian church.

It’s possible for the same sins that Israel committed to be committed by us. And as we look at the history of the professing Protestant church, putting all of the professing Protestant church together as a body – and of course, this pertains even more so to other bodies of Christian profession – we find the same principles at work. Rejection of the Scriptures, rejection of the Lord of the Scriptures, rejection of the knowledge of God, and therefore we stand under the condemnation of God, and often, its spiritual leadership proves a disaster to the spiritual history of the people of God.

If you attend our churches today, you do not have any expositions of the word of God as a general rule. There are exceptions, and one attends a church and is astonished at times to find the minister expounding the Scriptures. Two weeks ago I attended a church in Newberry, South Carolina. And, [names redacted], I want you to know, [name

redacted] is from Newberry, I want you to know I had nothing to do with the tornado that come through the land just a few days ago.

But I attended the church, and of course I expected a certain thing because I knew who the pastor of the church was, but it was something of a strange thing to attend the church and find the word of God expounded. Because, ordinarily today, when you attend Protestant churches, the word of God is very rarely expounded. Oh, certain thoughts are taken from the Bible, certain texts are occasionally commented upon, but generally speaking, the preaching and the exposition of the great doctrines of the Christian faith are largely omitted. The priests have neglected that in Israel, and they proved to be a mortal danger to themselves and a catastrophe and a disaster to others.

Take, for example, the church in which I grew up. One of the ministers a few years ago, within the past three years, publicly, as he was transferring from another denomination to this denomination, propounded the view that Jesus Christ was not God – the Father alone was God, and Jesus, therefore, is not God. He was challenged by some, and in the church courts the question raged for a while, and he was approved as a minister of the church. Still others objected and finally, at the General Assembly of the church, the General Assembly of the church made a pronouncement to the effect that Jesus was God in order to protect themselves. But the minister is still a minister in the church, in good standing, preaching, and yet, he denies the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I referred just a few messages back to the experience of Dr. John Hick, who has come from England and the Presbyterian church there, and has sought to be attached to the San Gabriel Presbytery in California. And, some have objected to Dr. Hick’s acceptance by the Presbytery. He was accepted by them, but protest has been made, and rightly so, because listen to what Professor Hick believes about the Lord Jesus Christ. He says,

“The proper conclusion seems to me to be that the notion of a special human

being as a Son of God is a metaphorical idea which belongs to the imaginative language of a number of ancient cultures.”

In other words, the fact that Jesus is the Son of God is really a metaphorical fact, not something we’re to take literally, but it is derived from the language of a number of ancient cultures.

“The Christian tradition, however, has turned this poetry into prose, so that a metaphysical Son of God (that is, a Son of God who really possesses divine nature), a metaphysical Son of God, the second person of a divine Trinity, and the resulting doctrine of a unique, divine incarnation, has long poisoned the relationships, both between Christians and Jews and Christians and Muslims, as well as affecting the history of Christian imperialism in the Far East.”

So, here is a man who contends that Christ is not the Son of God, but the Christian church is guilty of taking a metaphorical idea generally believed by ancient cultures and making him into the Son of God – very God of very God – the precise thing that the Westminster Confession of Faith under which this man is ordained, sets forth in specific language.

Now this is the kind of man who ministers the word of God in the church. Now it would appear to me, if I read Hosea properly, that he would have some rather vivid words to say about such a priest, and I don’t feel in any way that I have gone beyond the sense and the feeling and the emotion of the Prophet Hosea in saying that it appears to me that Professor Hick, an outstanding philosopher, for that is his calling in life, is in fact a spiritual apostate and should be no minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ at all until he has been converted by the grace of God.

Now that may seem to be very strong language, but I do not find it nearly so strong as some the things that Hosea says here about the priests of his day. “They feed

on the sin of my people,” the prophet goes on to say. What does he mean by that, “They feed on the sin of my people”? Well, it’s possible that he means simply this. That the priests, looking out on the prevailing wickedness of the times, seeing that everybody is wicked and also engaging themselves in the practice of all kinds of wickedness such as swearing, deception, murder, stealing, adultery – great stress in this chapter on adultery – since the priests themselves are like the people, they rather like it. So, my people, they feed on the sin of my people. They like it, and they say nothing about it, because they really like it.

Why is it that whenever any moral issue comes to the attention of the United States, and we have articles in the newspapers and in other publications and in the media over the issue in various communities – there’s always some Protestant minister who comes along to stand on the side of wickedness and iniquity. You can always find some.

Now, it may be that that is what the prophet has in mind. I’m going to suggest that it is likely, it seems to me, that he has something slightly different. When he says, “my people,” or when he says, “the priests feed on the sin of my people,” I think that what he has in mind is that the priests were the appointed individuals, the religious individuals to offer the sacrifices for the people.

For example, if I were guilty of a trespass or a sin of a particular kind, and I wanted to confess my sin or my trespass, the Mosaic law said that I was to bring an animal sacrifice, to bring it to the priest, and the priest was to slay the sacrifice for me, and I would receive forgiveness of my sin by virtue of my confession and my sacrifice.

But the Mosaic law also said that since the priests were supported by the people, that they were to receive certain parts of the animals. In other words, they lived by those sacrifices. And so when we read here, they feed on the sin of my people, of course they were encouraged by the fact that many people were sinning and bringing their sacrifices, because the more sin took place, the more sacrifices took place, the more they could fill their meat lockers with food. So, they feed on the sin of my people. They rather like it

that the people are wicked, because it means that they are obtaining more from the people. It is actually financial gain for them. And in fact, their goal is gain and not godliness.

Now in the light of that, I think of what Paul told the elders at Ephesus, in Acts chapter 20 and verse 28 he said to those elders who were there, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock among which the Holy Ghost has made you overseers to shepherd the church of God which he has purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock, and from among their own selves men will arise speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them.” And then Paul adds, “I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothes.”

Characteristic of the false teachers is not to be concerned with godliness, but to be concerned with what they can get out of it. So, they feed upon the sin of my people.

Now, in verses 9 and 10, the prophet speaks of Yahweh’s judgment against Israel. He’s already spoken of the drought in verse 3, but now he states, “And it will be like people like priest.” That is, people and priest are equal in sin and judgment. And verse 10, “They will eat and not have enough. They will play the harlot and not increase because they have stopped giving heed to the Lord.” In other words, God says to the priests and to the people, your food and your sex will fail. Your food will fail by shortage and your sex by virtue of sterility.

The Lord Jesus made a statement in John chapter 4 and verse 13 that expresses the principle of this. For there he said to the woman of Samaria by the well, “Everyone who drinks of this water shall thirst again.” One can never really ultimately be satisfied by the things of this life apart from the revelation of God.

And now, in the final verses, Hosea reaches the climax and discusses the effects of faltering leadership. He talks about Israel’s private and public life in verse 11 through verse 14. Listen again to these verses. Verse 11, “I will put an end to all her gaiety, her

feasts, her new moons, her Sabbaths and all her festal assemblies. I will destroy her vines and her fig trees of which she said, ‘These are my wages which my lovers have given me.’” In other words, Israel was saying, “These the baals have given to me. By worshiping Baal, I have gotten all these things – Baal the fertility god.”

“‘Which my lovers have given me,’ and I will make them a forest. And the beasts will devour them.” And God says, “I will punish her for the days of the baals when she used to offer sacrifices to them and adorn herself with her earrings and jewelry and follow her lovers so that she forgot me, says the Lord.”

“Therefore, behold” – I’m reading the 2nd chapter there; I meant to read here in the [sic., 4th] chapter, “Therefore your daughters play the harlot and your brides commit adultery. I will not punish your daughters when they play the harlot or your brides when they commit adultery, for the men themselves go apart with harlots and offer sacrifices with temple prostitutes; so the people without understanding are ruined.” It’s very interesting that man’s sins are not treated more leniently here than the woman’s sins. That’s rather striking, because I think our society has generally treated men’s sins more leniently than women’s sins. In fact, I think some people think it’s characteristic of men to stray from marital fidelity, but not for women. But here, there is none of that sexism at least in this chapter.

One of the striking things of our society is the increase of just this kind of sin, this kind of sexual sin. Yesterday, I read a report about the release of the National Federation of Decency, which reported not too long ago in January to be exact, a 140% increase in profanity on network television over a one-year period. The organization’s recent monitoring of network programs also found increases of 35% and 22% respectively for acts of sex and violence. 85% of depicted sexual activity was outside marriage. So why should we be surprised when we see individuals today who have been living two years together without getting married and having large weddings? Why should we be surprised?

We are being bombarded with that kind of news, and it’s not surprising that young people who no longer have any opportunity to read and study the word of God do not have the intellectual, spiritual faculty to deal with that kind of bombardment from the media and its views.

Now, in the closing words in verse 15 through verse 19, look at what Hosea says about Judah’s peril by virtue of their fellowship with Ephraim. “Though you, Israel, play the harlot, do not let Judah become guilty; also do not go to Gilgal, or go up to Beth-aven and take the oath, ‘As the Lord Lives!’” Now one needs to remember at this point the history of the Northern Kingdom.

Remember when Solomon was king, Solomon had a great, grand, glorious empire. Great stress on the material, on the lavish, on the things that affected the eyes. Culture and art was emphasized. And at the same time, Solomon was extorting vast sums of money from Israel. And as a result of the burden of taxation, when Solomon died and Rehoboam came to the throne, Jeroboam came to him and suggested to him that he should lower taxation. I don’t think that has anything to do with our present President’s policies, but he suggested that the taxation should be lowered.

Now Rehoboam was a very young man and a very arrogant man, and unfortunately, he took the advice of some young men, so [sic., 1] Kings says, “But he forsook the counsel of the elders, which they had given him, and consulted with the young men who grew up with him and served him. So, he said to them, ‘What counsel do you give that we may answer the people have spoken to me saying, Lighten the yoke which your father put on us?’ And the young men who grew up with him spoke to him saying, ‘Thus shall you say to the people who have spoken to you saying, Your father has made our yoke heavy; now you make it lighter for us, now you shall speak to them, My little finger is thicker than my father’s loins. Whereas my father loaded you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.’”

Well it was inevitable when it happened, Jeroboam took the ten tribes and the Kingdom of Ephraim, or Israel, was severed from the Kingdom of Judah and Benjamin in the South. Now of course, people who separate like this in a religious society must worship, and so Jeroboam knew that if the people in the Northern Kingdom worshipped as the Scriptures had said they should worship, they should go up to Jerusalem and offer their sacrifices and worship there.

But Jeroboam was a good politician, and he knew that if the Northern Kingdom’s members kept going to Jerusalem to offer the sacrifice which was the only place authorized for it, it wouldn’t be long before the Northern Kingdom, again, might become subject to the Southern Kingdom and the Davidic throne. And so he determined to set up the worship of God in two other more convenient places. And you can imagine the things that he would say: “It’s very inconvenient to go all the way up to Jerusalem; why don’t we worship under the oaks and under the poplars and under the terebinths (verse 13) because the shade is so pleasant up here, and it’s hot in Jerusalem in the temple area?”

And so he managed to, have it come to pass that they had worship in Beth-el (house of God), and in Gilgal, which had great historical associations with the children of Israel as they came into the land. So we have two places for worship in the north, apostate places of worship contrary to the word of God, and Jerusalem in the south.

Now, the Prophet Amos, of course, saw all of this and he was a prophet who prophesied to the Northern Kingdom as well, though he was from the south, and he had some very strong things to say about this, because in the 4th chapter of his prophecy,

“Enter Bethel and transgress;
In Gilgal multiply transgression!

So, go to Bethel and sin, because he saw that to go to Bethel or to go to Beth-aven was to sin. But mind you, they were religious. And they could offer anywhere, could they not? And it was so reasonable. And it was a shady place. It was more comfortable. Why should I travel all the way from Oak Cliff if there are no places of worship over there where the word of God is preached and go over to Believers Chapel where I know the word of God is preached? Or some other place in another part of Dallas, or reverse it, whatever. It’s the same principle. In other words, it’s more convenient, and it’s shadier.

So, the prophet says, “Ephraim is joined to idols; (you, Judah, let him alone!)” Now that’s a very strong word. It’s as if he should say, Don’t go to Gilgal, for if you do, you will sin. Don’t go to Bethel – and notice, he’s changed it to Beth-aven. Do you know why? Because Beth-el means “house of God;” Beth-aven means “house of evil.” Can you imagine a nice prophet doing that? Can you imagine a nice prophet saying of a place where Israelites worship, it’s the house of evil.

And when Amos says, “Go to Bethel and transgress.” How would you like it if I said to you, “Go over to the First Congregational Church in Timbuktu and sin because the gospel isn’t preached there”? You wouldn’t like that, would you? You would say that I was not very loving. Well, that’s what the prophets said. They were very forthright and direct. We have a responsibility to hear the word of God in its purity. And to go elsewhere because it’s more convenient or for other reasons that are unscriptural, they are sinful reasons. And to go and worship under those circumstances and in that kind of situation is to commit sin against God. Go to Bethel and transgress. The prophets – I like them. [Laughter] I’m looking forward to meeting them. I wish that I had more of their courage.

Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone. That word joined is a word that speaks of binding with spells. In other words, Israel is like a person who has been brought under hypnotic spells. They are completely taken captive by their false doctrine. Notice,

the idolator has not broken with religion; he’s still religious. But to be falsely religious is to sin against Yahweh.

And what does he worship? Why, he worships false representations of God. And ultimately, the highest form of idolatry is nothing more than a human being projected into infinity, and a human being projected into infinity is sinful, for there is no such thing as a human being projected into infinity.

I know there are some people who say, “But we need some representation of God. It helps us if we have a little idol, a little picture on the wall, or something like that; it helps me in my worship.” Ah, but have you ever reflected upon the fact that when God is represented as an idol, or represented even as a picture, you have denied certain characteristics of his being: his incorruptibility, his eternity and infinity. And various other things are indirectly denied by our idols.

There is only one representation of God, and it is true we need a representation of God, and Paul gives us that representation. He says, concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, “That he is the image of the invisible God.” And in the Lord Jesus, we have had the representation of God, the one who has given us a message from God in divine power because he is himself the eternal second person of the Trinity, and his message can be relied upon.”

So, the human being projected into infinity. Israel didn’t do that. They worshiped the animals, the beasts, as so many have done. Idolaters insult the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s no wonder that Professor Hick does not like the idea of an incarnate Son of God, because his idea of worship is an idolatrous kind of worship, ideally and ultimately. Let him alone, Israel.

Many of the commentators say that’s not really the force. Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone means let him persist in his idolatry. No, this is a word addressed to Judah and those who slip north to worship there. I remember a Bible teacher once saying, “The commentators remind me of Isaiah chapter 53 and verse 6, ‘All we like sheep

have gone astray,” but fortunately, in this case, there are some well-established and recent commentators who have finally come to see that this particular text is a text that applies to Judah. Ephraim is joined to idols; Judah, leave him alone. Let him alone. In other words, loyalty to God cannot be compromised.

Tolerance can be high treason in the church of Jesus Christ. Now of course, we do not say that Christians who do not see and know the truth of God should not be compassionate. We should be compassionate; we should have the love of God. But we should never for one moment give up any part of the truth of God. It is not something with which we can play freely. It belongs to God, and to steal his truth and transform it is to be guilty of spiritual robbery and stealing. No complicity with evil is permissible.

Well, someone might say, my goodness, if you believe things like that, that will surely thin the ranks of the Christian church. Well that’s not necessarily bad. That may be good. [Laughter] We sometimes sing Luther’s great hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is our God.” It has a little stanza that includes these words, “Let goods and kindreds go / this mortal life also.” And a preacher friend of mine who’s also a professor of philosophy at a Christian school says, “Perhaps we should read that second line, ‘Let goods and kindreds go / some membership also,’ [laughter] in order to purify the church of Jesus Christ. There is nothing wrong with that.

We are not to have any complicity with evil. No alliances. No bitternesses, but no alliances. What does that mean? The religious pluralism of our day is wrong. The religious pluralism of our day would come under the judgment of God. Multi-faith services in which Christians mingle with those who are not Christians because others profess the faith of Yahweh, just as they did in the Northern Kingdom, those types of services are taboo for those who truly believe in the doctrine of the word of God. The neutrality of courses on world religions – that’s something that we cannot accept as good.

Now, verse 18. The prophet concludes, “Their liquor gone, they play the harlot continually; their rulers dearly love shame. The wind wraps them in its wings, and they

will be ashamed because of their sacrifices.” Now we began by saying that doctrine has saving power. It does.

When Paul gives his magnificent exposition of the doctrines of the grace of God in Romans 1 through 11, coming to the 12th chapter, he says, “Therefore beloved, in the light of the grace and mercy of God, we should live in this way.” His words are, “I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God.” His tremendous therefore is the true picture of the relationship between doctrine and life. Apostasy leads to depravity, spiritual depravity and moral depravity, and ultimately to divine judgment, and the doctrine of the word of God leads to life, eternal life, and the blessing of God.

If you’re here this morning and you’ve never believed in our Lord Jesus Christ, there is no hope except in him and in the blood that was shed on Calvary’s cross. And may God in his marvelous grace open your mind and your heart to see your need, for you are a sinner and divine wrath and condemnation, and may you flee to him and receive eternal life. My dear friends, the gospel which our Lord has given to us is a serious call and a solemn call to men who are outside of Christ. Do not lead this auditorium without the assurance of the forgiveness of your sins and of right relationship to him. Come to Christ. Believe in him. Trust in him. There is no hope in anyone else.

And for you who are Christians, boldly stand up for God and put yourself in the company of the prophets and the apostles and trust the one who loved us and gave himself for us. May we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] Father, we are so grateful to Thee for these marvelous expositions of divine truth. How blessed we are to be able to read the Prophet Hosea’s message and to feel his heart throb with the truth of God, with compassion and also with conviction. And O God, may we heed his warnings. May we give ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ.

As John the Apostle said, May we as little children, keep ourselves from idols.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

“The Saving Power of Theology” by S. Lewis Johnson
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