

Hosea 4:4-10

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The LORD accuses the priests for their failure to keep the law and for their neglect of their responsibilities. The LORD will reject their priestly status; they and the people they are misleading will be end up in the same boat.

In this section, the Suzerain (ruler) God accused the priests for their lack of adherence to the covenantal laws and for their neglect in properly attending to their priestly duties. Most particularly, the priests are failing to do a proper job of instructing the people of Israel.

The scene appears to be a confrontation between the LORD and a high priest, the supreme religious leader who supervised the activities in the temple, and represented the people before God (Leviticus 4:3-21; Numbers 27:11). In this case, the LORD was rebuking all the priests, in the person of their supreme leader, for leading the people astray.

The LORD declared, *Yet, let no one find fault, and let none offer reproof*. This might be the prophet Hosea confronting the priests, who do not want to hear about any problems. They won't listen to *reproof*. They are not seeking instruction. So they simply say *let no one find fault*, because they simply want their ears tickled (2 Timothy 4:3-4). They only want to hear that everything is fine and dandy. Or perhaps their attitude of *let no one find fault* reflects a refusal to confront those whom they are supposed to instruct and correct.

Rather than *offer reproof*, the priests seem to be going along with the people, rather than leading them. Apparently both the priests as well as the people are refusing to listen to the reproof being offered by the prophets. This is a consistent reaction to prophets in Israel (Acts 7:51-52). Amos experienced the same attitude, when the priest told him to cease his prophecies, because they didn't want to hear *reproof* (Amos 7:16).

All reproof offered by Hosea would be futile, *for your people are like those who contend with the priest*. The priests were to be the instructors to Israel (Deuteronomy 33:10). It was their job to instruct the people. But this was a people who did not take instruction. Rather than listen and learn from the priest, they would *contend with the priest*.

But the priests did the same basic thing to God's prophet, and therefore to God. So, in essence, the priests provided a bad example to the people. As Hosea will say in verse 9, like people, like priest. In verse 9, God states that each will be judged. But part of the reason each will be judged is because each has adopted the same basic attitude of refusing to seek the truth. They are not willing to listen to correction or reproof. They only desire to hear what they want to hear.

The phrase *your people* refers to the people of Israel, whom the priests have a responsibility to lead and instruct. The religious leaders, who were assigned to represent the people before God and lead them to righteousness, were unresponsive, just like those who rebuked the priestly office. The entire congregation of Israel was corrupt and stood guilty before God, from the

people to the priests. God would deal with each one and would begin with the priests and the prophets, because they were the ones who led the people astray (v. 6).

Therefore, the LORD proclaimed judgment on the priests, saying, *So you will stumble by day and the prophet also will stumble with you by night*. Because of the lack of instruction, the people will *stumble* even though it is day time. They will be like a blind person, who can't see obstacles, and trips over them. Because the people will not accept *reproof*, they are doomed to make avoidable mistakes. Not only is it the people, but also *the prophet*. This likely refers to the prophets among them who are not true prophets of God, but rather who are telling people what they want to hear. It ought to be the prophet who can lead people even in the dark. But they too will *stumble with you by night*.

It seems then that in Israel the people are not being taught by the priests, and neither the priests nor the prophets are listening to God. It must be a lonely time for the few prophets like Hosea who are in fact listening to God, and faithfully speaking His words.

The LORD also threatened to destroy their *mother*, that is, the nation of Israel, the soil from which these individuals came forth (Hosea 2:2). This would be consistent with the provisions of the covenant between God and Israel, that Israel has now thoroughly broken (Deuteronomy 28:15ff).

Furthermore, the LORD stated, *My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge*. God's people were being led astray because they did not have the proper knowledge of God. It was the duty of the priests to instruct the people about God's ways (Deuteronomy 33:10). However, it seems neither the priests were teaching, nor were the people willing to learn. As a result, ignorance reigns.

To be sure, the Israelites had the word of God available to them, but did not seek it or obey it. They ignored the LORD and His covenantal laws. Instead of living by the LORD's precepts and pleasing Him in every regard, the Israelites failed to acknowledge His authority as their Suzerain (Ruler) God. Hence, ignorance of God's law was at the core of Israel's destruction. They are, however, liable for their ignorance; it is willful ignorance.

Israel's ignorance of God's law speaks loudly about the poor job that the priests did in Hosea's days. It explains the failure of the priests to teach the whole counsel of God. This is made clear in the next verse, where God said, *Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest*. Those appointed as priests not only failed to provide spiritual leadership and nourishment to the people (Deuteronomy 31:9-13), but also failed to live out a godly life. Since the priests had *forgotten the law of their God*, they would appropriately lose their priestly privileges because God would *forget their children*. The priestly office would come to an end.

Not only did the priests fail to keep the law of the LORD, they also expressed a greedy attitude in their priestly duties. God declared, *The more they multiplied, the more they sinned against Me*. Under King Jeroboam II of Israel (793 BC-753 BC), the number of people serving as priests increased.

In a normal situation, one would expect a spiritual revival with such an increase in number. However, the spiritual condition of the priests declined greatly in those days, and this resulted in the spiritual decay of the entire population. Because of the priests' condition, the LORD would *change their glory into shame*. That means, the priests would be deprived of their privileges and social status. It seems that the reason people wanted to be priests was not to serve the LORD and His people. It was, rather, to gain the privileges of office.

To top it all off, God described what the priests were doing in their worship, saying, *They feed on the sin of My people and direct their desire toward their iniquity*. Since the word translated as *sin* can also be translated as "sin offerings" (Exodus 29:36; Leviticus 4:8, 20), it is likely that the priests' emphasis on *the sin of My people* was not on reproof (vs 4) as it ought to be—leading to repentance. Rather, the priest's emphasis was to bring more sacrifices, in order to increase their own wealth. Since the priests kept most of the sacrifice, the priests' attitude seemed to be "More sin is good for business." So they were making money from sin, which provided a perverse incentive that deterred them from instructing the people to avoid sin. As a result of their refusal to do their duty, Israel has broken their covenant with God, which they agreed to follow (Exodus 19:8).

As the Israelites persisted in their sins, the priests would encourage them to bring offerings to the LORD so that the priests might receive their portion of the offerings, as commanded by the LORD (Leviticus 7:7-10; Deuteronomy 18:1-5). But the priests were simply increasing their own wealth from the practice, rather than teaching the people and leading them away from sin. In this way, the sacrificial system that was meant to restore the people to fellowship with God had lost its original purpose.

Consequently, the priests would no longer enjoy special privileges. As the LORD stated, *And it will be, like people, like priest; so I will punish them for their ways*. Priests and people alike would fall under God's judgment because the entire congregation of Israel was corrupt. God would *repay them for their deeds*, which were nothing but perverse.

God's judgment would be severe, but appropriate. The priests along with the people would experience great frustration because *they would eat, but not have enough; they would play the harlot, but not increase*.

The phrase *eat but not have enough* likely indicates that Israel had adopted the tenants of materialism, which defines happiness as "having more." Since "more" is always what we do not have, one can never acquire "more." Therefore, the philosophy of materialism is a sentence to endless futility. We seek more, but can never obtain it.

In addition to eating and drinking, Israel would also pursue sexual indulgence. They would *play the harlot*, likely referring to indulging in the pagan Canaanite religions. These cults typically focused on sexual immorality as a core part of their worship.

A list of the typical practices among the Canaanites is found in Leviticus 18, and includes a vast array of sexual immorality, ranging from many expressions of incest to bestiality and child sacrifice. The New Testament tells us that sexual sin is particularly damaging to humans (1

Corinthians 6:18). As a result of these corrupt philosophies, the people would *not increase*. The phrase *not increase* means they will not prosper. Seeking after the world's definition of gain will actually lead to loss.

Because the people turned to the Canaanite gods like Baal to ensure fertility instead of turning to the true God, the land would fall under judgement. All these calamities would happen *because they had stopped giving heed to the LORD*. They ignored the law of the LORD to give themselves to apostasy. They are listening to the pagan gods, who promise to give people whatever they want.

This passage speaks much about the problem that sin can cause in the believer's life. Sin leads to disaster. The consequence of sin is always death (Romans 6:23). Death is separation. Sin is pursuing our desires in our own ways, apart from God's ways. When we live apart from God, we end up being separated from all God created us to be. Rather than be at oneness with others, being held together with love and service, we end up alone. Rather than being bound together in partnership with others, we engage with others in a competition to see who can best exploit the other.

God created cause-effect, and His laws of moral cause-effect are just as certain as physical laws like gravity. We can choose to not believe in gravity, but we will hit the ground notwithstanding. The same is true in the moral universe. Israel suspended belief in and pursuit of God. They substituted pursuing their own ways and passions. It has led to injustice throughout the land. It will soon lead to Israel falling before the most exploitative of all peoples: the Assyrians.

Sin is like a rhythmic pattern in a musical song. It often leads to other sins (v. 7). For this reason, believers are to seek to have a good knowledge of God and His word. A deeper relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ is important for every believer, for there is no greater thing than knowing God and His Son Jesus Christ, whom He sent to save the world (John 17:3).

Biblical Text

**⁴ Yet let no one find fault, and let none offer reproof;
For your people are like those who contend with the priest.
⁵ So you will stumble by day,
And the prophet also will stumble with you by night;
And I will destroy your mother.
⁶ 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.
⁷ The more they multiplied, the more they sinned against Me;
I will change their glory into shame.
⁸ They feed on the sin of My people
And direct their desire toward their iniquity.
⁹ And it will be, like people, like priest;**

**So I will punish them for their ways
And repay them for their deeds.
¹⁰ They will eat, but not have enough;
They will play the harlot, but not increase,
Because they have stopped giving heed to the Lord.**