

Hosea 5:8-15

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The LORD commands trumpets to be blown to announce judgment on Israel and Judah. He will withdraw His help and plunge His people into war so that they might acknowledge their guilt and earnestly seek His face.

This section begins with a string of imperatives, like the previous one did (Hosea 5:1). The Suzerain (ruler) God used these imperatives to alert His covenant people of an imminent battle that would overwhelm them. He said, *Blow the horn in Gibeah, the trumpet in Ramah. Sound an alarm at Beth-aven: behind you, Benjamin!*

In ancient Israel, trumpets were blown to signal an impending conflict. In the book of Numbers, Moses mandates, “When you go to war in your land against the adversary who attacks you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, that you may be remembered before the LORD your God, and be saved from your enemies” (Numbers 10:9).

In such a context, the sound of the *trumpets* served to remind the Israelites of their covenant relationship with the Suzerain (or Ruler) God, the one who would go before them to give them victory over their foes. Trumpets were also blown over burnt offerings and peace offerings to celebrate the New Moon feast (Numbers 10:10). However, the sound of the *trumpet* here in Hosea would signal an impending battle in which the Suzerain God would act as Israel’s adversary.

The sound of the war would be heard in *Gibeah*, *Ramah*, and *Beth-aven*, all of which were Benjamite cities and part of the southern kingdom. *Gibeah* was the home of Saul, the first king of Israel. *Ramah* was the home of Samuel, the last judge and first prophet, who anointed Saul. ([See Map](#)) *Beth-aven* was the location of a great military victory led by Jonathan, son of King Saul (1 Samuel 14:22-23). However, at that great victory, Saul made a rash, self-centered vow that lessened Israel’s success.

The reason these three places are mentioned must be connected with the last part of the sentence, which says *behind you Benjamin*. The word translated *behind you* is usually rendered “follow” or “after.” Hosea will soon warn Judah that they are next. It seems here that Hosea is introducing to Judah that they need to sound an alarm of battle in their cities that border Israel, because they are next.

The imminent battle signaled by the sound of the *trumpets* would be overwhelming. Concerning the northern kingdom, God stated, *Ephraim would become a desolation in the day of rebuke*. Israel was going to be ravaged by an invading army. This would come to pass when Assyria invaded and conquered Israel in 722 BC. This would be the first judgment. But judgment on Judah would certainly follow.

The Suzerain (Ruler) God of Israel will *declare what is sure among the tribes of Israel*. God's word is always true because God is faithful and perfect in all His ways (Deuteronomy 32:4). Such a judgment on *Ephraim* would be fatal. *Ephraim* was the largest of the ten tribes of Jacob that made up the northern kingdom of Israel, so it stood for the entire northern kingdom.

Not only would God's judgment overwhelm Israel (or *Ephraim*), it would also threaten the southern kingdom of Judah because she [Judah] showed no reverence for God and His covenantal precepts. This is why *Benjamin* was told to blow the alarm, since the disaster that occurred in Israel would come to it as well. The reason is because of the same corruption that has taken place there.

The text tells us that *the princes of Judah have become like those who move a boundary* to take some land belonging to another person. Just as in Israel, the leaders in Judah have grown corrupt.

Boundary markers—often made with stones or piles of stones—were very important in the Israelite society because they served as evidence of land ownership. These markers showed where a person's land ended, and another person's land began. The Mosaic Law warned the Israelites against moving boundaries, for doing so would be a sign of disrespect for their neighbor's property (Deuteronomy 19:14; 27:17). This would violate the principle of private property, which is enshrined in the eighth of the Ten Commandments. It would also violate the spirit of the application of God's law, which is to love others as we love ourselves.

The rulers (or *princes*) of Judah acted corruptly, just like those moving the boundary of their neighbors. They were, accordingly, using their position of authority to enrich themselves. They had no fear of God. Had they feared God, they would have served the people with integrity.

Consequently, God said, *On them I will pour My wrath like water*. God's *wrath* would come upon the *princes of Judah* like a flood of water. In this case, God's wrath was doing unto them what they had done to others. The oppressor would be oppressed. The one who took from others will have much taken from them.

Returning to the northern kingdom, God declared, *Ephraim is oppressed, crushed in judgment*. The verbs "oppress" and "crush" suggest that the Israelites would suffer severe and harsh treatment. This recalls the curse in Deuteronomy 28, where God declared that if His people broke the covenant by not following the terms they agreed to, then the resulting consequence would be that they would *be oppressed and crushed* continually by a people whom they did not know—in other words a foreign nation would defeat them utterly (Deuteronomy 28:33). This would surely happen because *Ephraim was determined to follow man's command*, rather than following God's command.

The statement that *Ephraim followed man's command* might refer to the false worship in Israel installed by Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom. Jeroboam reasoned that if his subjects traveled to Jerusalem to worship, as God commanded, then they might shift their allegiance back to the house of David (the kings of Judah).

So Jeroboam set up golden calves at Dan in the north and Bethel in the south (1 Kings 12:26-29). Therefore, Israel then followed the commands of a person (*man's command*) rather than the commands of God. Because of this sin, Jeroboam was removed from his throne and his entire line was ended (1 Kings 14:9-10). Further, God said that He would “give up Israel on account of the sins of Jeroboam, which he committed and with which he made Israel to sin” (1 Kings 14:16).

Because of Israel's submission to *man's command*, she would be *crushed*. This prophecy was fulfilled a few decades later: “In the days of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came and captured” many Israelite cities and “carried them captive to Assyria” (2 Kings 15:29).

The LORD continued to explain how His people would suffer defeat, saying, *Therefore I am like a moth to Ephraim and like rotteness to the house of Judah*. A *moth* is an airborne insect that consumes garments, as indicated in Isaiah 50:9. *The moth* is equated to *Ephraim* as *rotteness* is for *Judah*. *Rotteness* is a decay that enters the bones (Habakkuk 3:16). The image might be of a *moth* that eats or consumes garments, thus destroying their beauty and usefulness, thus the LORD would gradually destroy *Ephraim*. And just like *rotteness* causes bones to decay, the LORD would rob Judah of all her strength.

God's judgment on both kingdoms would leave them desperate and confused: *When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his wound, then Ephraim went to Assyria and sent to King Jareb*. The terms *sickness* and *wound* describe an inability to govern and a loss of wealth and power. When a society falls into a culture of mutual exploitation, it results in an inevitable decline. There is no foundation for collaboration. People spend their resources on securing what they have against others who would take it away. There is no ability to invest productively in growing resources. Thus the society falls into *sickness*.

The condition of Israel and Judah was likened to an illness involving open sores. *King Jareb* probably refers to king Pul of *Assyria* (also known as Tiglath-pileser III), with whom the people of God formed alliances (2 Kings 15:19, 20). Israel had no strength of its own, so it had to resort to becoming a vassal state of Assyria. In Nahum's prophecy of doom upon Assyria, Assyria is assailed for its ravenous exploitation of other nations, having preyed upon them like a lion (Nahum 2:11). Israel had become an exploiter, and will be judged by Assyria, a nation that is even more exploitative.

Both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah took on vassal status, being subservient to Assyria, and its capital of Nineveh. Israel, represented here by her most prominent tribe (Ephraim), turned to Assyria for help because in those days Assyria was a mighty power. This verse likely refers to Israel's alliance with Assyria under King Menahem (732 BC-722 BC), when “Pul, king of Assyria, came against the land, and Menahem gave Pul a thousand talents of silver so that his hand might be with him to strengthen the kingdom under his rule” (2 Kings 15:19).

Under King Ahaz, Judah had done something similar, when Israel and Syria formed a coalition against her. According to the Kings account, “Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, ‘I am your servant and your son; come up and deliver me from the hand of the

king of Aram and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are rising up against me” (2 Kings 16:7). Nevertheless, God clearly stated that the Assyrian king would not be able to help Israel and Judah: *he is unable to heal you or to cure you of your wound*. God’s people would be disappointed.

The reason Assyria would be unable to provide help for God’s people is evident in God’s own statements: *For I will be like a lion to Ephraim and like a young lion to the house of Judah*. The pronoun *I* is emphatic in the Hebrew language, emphasizing God as the agent of judgment. In so doing, the pronoun serves to contrast God’s power to that of the Assyrian king, who could not do anything to rescue Israel and Judah.

Moreover, the terms *lion* and *young lion* are synonymous. A *lion* is ruthless and is an almost unstoppable killer. God used the leonine imagery to evoke ferocity, destructive power, and irresistible strength. That is to say, God’s judgment would be harsh on His covenant people. This is made plain when God declared, *I, even I, will tear to pieces and go away, I will carry away, and there will be none to deliver*.

Again, the pronoun *I* is emphatic in Hebrew and occurs twice, as the NASB puts it: *I, even I*. This is to emphasize God as the agent of judgment, the only one to whom all power belongs. God Himself would pounce on the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah like a ferocious and ruthless *lion* to rip them up and carry them away. Nobody would be able to rescue the people from God’s hand because He alone is all-powerful, and will execute the terms of Israel’s agreement, which it had violated (Deuteronomy 32:39). The Suzerain God alone is the sole powerful lion. He would bring judgment on His disobedient people for their wickedness and idolatry. Assyria will be God’s agent to exercise this discipline, but it will be His hand (Proverbs 21:1).

God’s judgment on Israel and Judah was His way of disciplining them so that they might repent and turn back to Him. As the LORD said, *I will go away and return to My place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek My face; In their affliction they will earnestly seek Me*. In this verse, God continued the imagery of the ferocious lion and said that He would withdraw His presence from His people after destroying their nations.

After catching and devouring a prey, a lion will *go away and return to his place*. But the image is not quite the same here because a lion would not give a second chance to a deer to continue to live. The LORD, however, would withdraw His presence from His covenant people to allow them to be alone and at risk for a time, so that they might come to their senses and earnestly renew their allegiance to Him.

For the northern kingdom of Israel, the severe judgment predicted occurred in 722 BC, when the Assyrian empire captured the city of Samaria and carried its inhabitants into captivity (2 Kings 17). For the southern kingdom of Judah, this prophecy was fulfilled in 586 BC, when the Babylonian empire captured Jerusalem and deported the people of Judah to Babylon (2 Kings 25). God used the Babylonians to execute judgement upon the Assyrians; Nineveh was destroyed and burned in 612 BC.

God is true, and His words are always true. God is a God who speaks and demands an appropriate response. God wants His people to listen to His warnings so that they might draw near to Him. The truth is that God alone is the solution to every problem. He alone has the power to wound and to heal. And because of His gracious love, He sometimes judges His people to direct their thoughts and attention to Him (v. 15).

Biblical Text

**⁸ Blow the horn in Gibeah,
The trumpet in Ramah.**

Sound an alarm at Beth-aven:

“Behind you, Benjamin!”

**⁹ Ephraim will become a desolation in the day of rebuke;
Among the tribes of Israel I declare what is sure.**

**¹⁰ The princes of Judah have become like those who move a boundary;
On them I will pour out My wrath like water.**

**¹¹ Ephraim is oppressed, crushed in judgment,
Because he was determined to follow *man*'s command.**

**¹² Therefore I am like a moth to Ephraim
And like rottenness to the house of Judah.**

**¹³ When Ephraim saw his sickness,
And Judah his wound,**

**Then Ephraim went to Assyria
And sent to King Jareb.**

**But he is unable to heal you,
Or to cure you of your wound.**

**¹⁴ For I *will be* like a lion to Ephraim
And like a young lion to the house of Judah.**

**I, even I, will tear to pieces and go away,
I will carry away, and there will be none to deliver.**

**¹⁵ I will go away *and* return to My place
Until they acknowledge their guilt and seek My face;
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