

Hosea 11:8-12

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Even though Israel will be judged and exiled to Assyria, the LORD's compassion will cause Him to temper His judgment; this exile will be temporary. God will retain a remnant. He will not abandon or destroy His people utterly because He keeps His promises, and has promised to restore Israel if they break the covenant and are exiled. In due time, God will end their exile and resettle them in the Promised Land.

The LORD's message of judgment suddenly shifts to a message of salvation occasioned by His compassion for Israel. Because of His covenant love and compassion for Israel, the LORD would not abandon him (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). Israel is still God's firstborn son (Hosea 11:1, Exodus 4:21-22, Romans 11:1).

God would restore Israel from captivity and allow him to walk obediently before Him. This is also according to God's covenant with Israel. Although there were enforcement provisions of the contract against Israel's disobedience to the covenant, there was also a promise of restoration included (Deuteronomy 32:36, 43).

The New Testament continues this pattern. Anyone can become a child of God by a new spiritual birth received by faith in Christ (John 3:3, 14-16). Nothing can separate any of God's children from His love (Romans 8:38-39). But it is also true that God chastens those whom He loves (Hebrews 12:6, Revelation 3:19). God will use all things to conform His children to the image of Christ (Romans 8:28-29). God will also judge all deeds of His children to determine their rewards (2 Corinthians 5:10). Each believer determines the standard by which they are judged based on the manner in which they judge others (Matthew 7:2).

Moved with compassion, the LORD asked four rhetorical questions. The first two reflect God's unwillingness to abandon Israel: *How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you, O Israel?* (vs 8). *Ephraim* is the largest of the northern ten tribes and the geographic location of Israel's capital of Samaria. It is used in parallel with the name *Israel* to represent the northern kingdom.

The inferred answer to the questions *How can I give you up* and *How can I surrender you* is "I cannot." The rhetorical questions apply to *Ephraim* and *Israel*, both of which represent the northern kingdom, and ten of Israel's twelve tribes who received allotments of land (1 Kings 12:17).

To *give up* or *surrender* someone is to abandon him. God would discipline the Israelites as set forth in their covenant agreement. But He would not abandon them because of His love for Israel, and His promises to Israel (Deuteronomy 32:36, 43, Romans 11:28-29). God rejects evil behavior (which is always self-destructive). He removes His people from positions of influence when they fail to represent Him well. He chastises those whom He loves. But He never casts off His people from being His people.

The last two rhetorical questions explain the LORD's determination to treat Israel differently from other nations despite Israel's refusal to obey: *How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?* (vs 8). Again, the expected answer to the rhetorical question is "I cannot."

The places named *Admah* and *Zeboiim* were the two other cities of the plain that are tied to Sodom and Gomorrah as sites that were destroyed (Genesis 14:2, Deuteronomy 29:32). The LORD "overthrew those cities" because of their wickedness (Genesis 19:25). These cities of *Admah* and *Zeboiim* were destroyed and no remnant remained. But for Israel, there would be a remnant, and ultimately a restoration.

God would not destroy Israel utterly, without any remnant or restoration, because of His compassion, as He stated, *My heart is turned over within Me, all My compassions are kindled* (vs 8). The LORD's *compassions* for His unfaithful people grew warm and tender, prompting Him to stay His anger, and preserve a future and hope for Israel (Jeremiah 29:11).

Therefore, the LORD voiced a resolve and said, *I will not execute My fierce anger; I will not destroy Ephraim again* (vs 9). This sounds somewhat like God's statement after judging the earth with a flood, after the earth filled with violence (Genesis 8:21, 9:15-16). God stayed His hand to ensure that Israel still had a future hope. However, the immediate chastisement would still be severe. This is likely an application of God's covenant promise to remain with Israel even while in exile, and ensure their continuance (Leviticus 26:44, Deuteronomy 32:36, 43).

The term *Ephraim* is used for the northern kingdom of Israel because it was one of the most prominent tribes. Despite the sinful deeds of *Ephraim/Israel*, God's compassion would replace His *fierce anger*, causing Him to perpetuate Israel's existence. God then made clear the reason why He would have mercy on Israel, *For I am God not man, the Holy One in your midst* (vs 9). A *man* would most likely take out a full revenge. But *God* would exercise compassion, as He had promised to do (Deuteronomy 30:3).

Human beings by nature are revengeful. Sometimes we are eager to do harm to those who have wronged us, and are unable or unwilling to show mercy and love. But the LORD is merciful and compassionate. He would judge *Israel/Ephraim* for his sins but would not utterly destroy him. God's emotions are always in perfect balance because He is the *Holy One*. The LORD is not marked by human failings or bound by human limitations. He is unique. God is existence itself (Exodus 3:14). And because of His uniqueness and holiness, the LORD told Israel that He would *not come in wrath* (vs 9). This raises the question of what God means by the phrase *come in wrath*. How could God go anywhere when He is in all places at all times?

This phrase asserting that God would *not come in wrath* could be a prophetic foreshadowing of Jesus coming to earth and taking on the form of a human in order to take on the sins of the world. As John states:

“For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”

(John 3:17)

Having explained His compassion for Israel, *the LORD* anticipated a time when Israel would *walk after Him*. At that time, He would *indeed roar like a lion and His sons would come trembling from the west* (vs 10). In God’s covenant with Israel, it was predicted that Israel would disobey God and break the covenant, and accordingly be exiled (Deuteronomy 31:16-18). As stated in the Song of Moses, given by Moses as a reminder to Israel of the inevitable cause-effect of their choices:

“Vengeance is Mine, and retribution,
In due time their foot will slip;
For the day of their calamity is near,
And the impending things are hastening upon them.”

(Deuteronomy 32:35)

This verse predicts that in “due time” Israel will fail to keep its covenant, and “calamity” will be the result.

However, the very next verse promises an ultimate redemption:

“For the LORD will vindicate His people,
And will have compassion on His servants,
When He sees that their strength is gone,
And there is none remaining, bond or free.”

(Deuteronomy 32:36)

The song of Moses was given to Israel to remind them of their covenant obligations, including the certainty of judgement for disobedience (Deuteronomy 31:16-19). However, it also included a certainty that God would “have compassion” on “His servants” and rescue them from bondage:

“Rejoice, O nations, with His people;
For He will avenge the blood of His servants,
And will render vengeance on His adversaries,
And will atone for His land and His people.”

(Deuteronomy 32:43).

This same principle applies to New Testament believers. In fact, this very passage from Deuteronomy 32 is used to assure believers that even though there is severe judgement for willful disobedience, there is assurance that all of God’s children belong to Him (Hebrews 10:29-31).

In Hosea 5, the LORD stated that He would be like a ruthless lion to ravage His covenant people (Hosea 5:14). But here, the leonine imagery is used in a positive way. The LORD would *roar*

like a lion to call His people to Himself, and they would come to Him with genuine reverence. God would heal His people, and they would *come trembling from the west* (vs 10).

The west likely refers to the regions around the Mediterranean, such as Greece and Rome, since they are *west* of Israel. That the sons of Israel will *come trembling from the west* seems to indicate three things:

1. The Jews' exile will ultimately lead them to the west. It will begin in Assyria (for the northern kingdom) and in Babylon (for the southern kingdom) but ultimately migrate to the west (Europe and European nations). This in fact has transpired historically.
2. The Jews will *come trembling*. This would indicate that when they come from the west they will be fleeing out of hardship. This prophecy could be fulfilled in part by the return of Jews to Israel beginning in 1948, many of whom migrated from Europe. After World War II, many Jews were decimated, and came to Israel fleeing persecution and escaping poverty.
3. There will be a restoration of the people of God to the land. The fulfillment of this restoration may have begun through the repopulation of Jews into the land of Israel, beginning in 1948.

The LORD then made a vivid comparison to explain how the Israelites would return to Him: *They will come trembling like birds from Egypt and like doves from the land of Assyria* (vs 11). This would indicate that not all Jews would ultimately migrate to the west. Many would remain in the Middle East. However, they would end up migrating back to the land of Israel as well. The territory covered by *Assyria* in the time of Hosea covered all or parts of modern nations such as Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria . It was centered around the "fertile crescent" area of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Earlier in Hosea, Israel acted as a gullible dove, without any sense of direction because he vacillated between allying with and opposing the Assyrian empire (Hosea 7:11). But here, Israel would be like the peaceful dove returning to Noah's ark (Genesis 8:9). This would indicate that those returning to Israel would have little or no military might. They would *come trembling* and be like migratory birds seeking refuge from the LORD with a genuine heart.

Following Israel's speedy return from exile, they would regain their possessions. So, God further said, *I will settle them in their houses, declares the LORD* (vs 11). Israel's disobedience would cause God to drive them from the Promised Land and scatter them among the nations. But one day, the Israelites would return to their homeland. This would surely happen because it is a declaration of *the LORD*, who is faithful and true. When they return, they will not be refugees, but residents. They will *settle* and live in *houses* in the land.

Chapter 11 closes with a verse that probably fits better with the next chapter, as reflected in the Hebrew text of Hosea 12. In the last verse, verse 12, the language shifts from a promised restoration in Hosea 11:8–11 to God's indictment of Israel and Judah. This fits better with Chapter 12 because the Suzerain (ruler) God stops talking about the future restoration of the Israelites when they return to their land. Verse 12 refocuses on Israel's current apostate situation during the days of Hosea, and their looming judgement.

As the LORD switched back to the present condition of Israel, He made it clear that the people were hypocritical and unfaithful: *Ephraim surrounds Me with lies and the house of Israel with deceit* (vs 12).

The name *Ephraim* and the phrase *house of Israel* are used synonymously to represent the northern kingdom of Israel. Here God made it clear that the northern kingdom dealt with Him treacherously. Instead of practicing righteousness, as they had promised to do according to their covenant with God, the people of Israel encircled God with *lies* and *deceit* (Exodus 19:8). That *lies* and *deceit* had become accepted in the culture meant that Israel was not choosing to keep their covenant with God to obey His laws, which requires that each person tell the truth (Exodus 20:16).

Truth is a necessity for a society to have a self-governing culture filled with collaboration seeking mutual benefit. But Israel had instead adopted the pagan culture of deceit, exploitation, and violence (Hosea 4:2). Not only Israel was failing to follow God's ways—so was the southern kingdom of Judah.

Hosea noted that *Judah is also unruly against God* (vs 12). To be *unruly* means to wander off. So, the statement that Judah was *unruly against God* means that the inhabitants of Judah were not responsive to God's discipline. They wandered off from the true God to Baal and to foreign nations like Assyria in search of aid (2 Kings 16:7–9). Judah also fell into following exploitative and self-centered pagan practices such as child sacrifice (2 Chronicles 28:1-4).

Judah was unruly *even against the Holy One who is faithful* (vs 12). The phrase *Holy One* is in the plural in the Hebrew text, thus emphasizing God's triune nature, as well as His majesty and sovereignty as king and ruler. The idea of being *Holy* is to be set apart, in this case to be set apart from sin and evil. Jesus is prophetically called the *Holy One* (Acts 2:27). This verse could also foreshadow that the Son (a member of the triune Godhead) will come to Israel and be rejected (Philippians 2:5-10).

Biblical Text

⁸ How can I give you up, O Ephraim?

How can I surrender you, O Israel?

How can I make you like Admah?

How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

My heart is turned over within Me,

All My compassions are kindled.

⁹ I will not execute My fierce anger;

I will not destroy Ephraim again.

For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst,

And I will not come in wrath.

¹⁰ They will walk after the Lord,

He will roar like a lion;

Indeed He will roar

And His sons will come trembling from the west.

**¹¹ They will come trembling like birds from Egypt
And like doves from the land of Assyria;
And I will settle them in their houses, declares the Lord.**

**¹² Ephraim surrounds Me with lies
And the house of Israel with deceit;
Judah is also unruly against God,
Even against the Holy One who is faithful.**