

Hosea 6:4-6

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/hos/hos-6/hosea-64-6/>

The LORD accuses and condemns both Israel and Judah for their covenant infidelity and false devotion to Him. He tells the people that He desires loyalty more than sacrifices performed as religious formalism (vv. 4-6).

After a brief interlude recording the words of salvation that a future generation of Israelites will speak after experiencing severe judgment (vv. 1-3), the text switches back to oracles of judgment, thus resuming God's indictment on Israel and Judah that began in Chapter 4.

The LORD began this section by asking a rhetorical question to invite both Israel and Judah to think about their hypocritical devotion to Him: "*What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?*" (vs 4).

Both the northern kingdom of Israel (represented here by its most prominent tribe, *Ephraim*) and the southern kingdom of Judah were addressed because both were corrupt and guilty. Both kingdoms had "dealt treacherously against the LORD" because they had gone after pagan deities, resulting in them living a lifestyle of pagan exploitation rather than a lifestyle of self-governance, where they loved and served their neighbors (Hosea 5:7).

The Suzerain (Ruler) God expressed His dissatisfaction about the kind of worship His people offered to Him, likening their *loyalty* to Him to be *like a morning cloud and like the dew which goes away early* (vs 4). Their so-called *loyalty* to God was superficial because it was fleeting; it disappeared as quickly as *morning cloud* (fog) or *dew* before sunlight. There was no substance to it. The people were not committed to following God, nor to keep the covenant agreement they had made with Him (Exodus 19:8).

The Hebrew term translated *loyalty* in verse 4 is "ḥesed." It was translated as "kindness" in 4:1. There it referred to brother-love. Here, however, it refers to the love of man to God. The Israelites failed to give allegiance to God. Jesus stated that the greatest commandment was to love God with all our being (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Matthew 22:37). Israel did not show any such loyalty and love to Him. It is no surprise then that they also did not follow the second greatest command, which was to love their neighbor as themselves (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39). We see this from Hosea 4:2, that the land had filled with exploitation and violence.

Because of their unfaithfulness and false devotion to the LORD, Israel and Judah would be judged severely, per the terms of their covenant agreement with God (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). God used the word *therefore* to introduce the consequences of such a false devotion and said, *I have hewn them in pieces by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of My mouth* (vs 5). Here God pictures these prophetic words of correction as an axe hewing an enemy in battle.

The phrase *hewn then in pieces* describes how God's prophetic judgment on Israel and Judah would be carried out. It would result in death and destruction, as spoken by the *prophets*. God's

word would come to pass through the sword of Assyria. But it would be as a result of God's proclamation, *the words of My mouth*, as all authority is given by God (Romans 13:1) and the king's heart is in the hand of the LORD (Proverbs 21:1). In Revelation, Jesus is pictured as defeating the nations of the earth with a sword coming from His mouth (Revelation 19:15). Just as God spoke the world into existence, He can speak judgment both upon His people as well as upon the nations (Genesis 1:3).

The *prophets* were God's spokesmen. Prophets like Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea faithfully and honestly proclaimed the words of God to the people of God. The *prophets* were called to proclaim a message of repentance to God's people and to announce judgment. Their words were from God, through His spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).

The LORD loved His covenant people, and sent warnings to them, urging them to repent to avoid judgment. God's warnings of looming judgement upon His people thus became a reality because they refused to give heed to His instructions. In their covenant agreement with God, they agreed to incur this sort of discipline for disobedience. Notwithstanding, they did not keep their word, and they did not heed God's warnings.

Therefore, God would bring judgement, per the terms of Israel's covenant agreement with Him. Israel and Judah would incur death and destruction (Deuteronomy 28:25-26). His *judgments* on them would be *like the light that goes forth* (vs 5). That means, God's judgment, like bright sunlight, was obvious to everyone. It could have been avoided because it was clear from the prophets' messages. This evokes the truth that God is always righteous and just when He judges (Psalm 51:4).

The rationale for God's judgment on His people is reiterated in clear terms: *For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings*. Here God is explaining why He is judging Israel even though they were diligent in participating in ritual worship. We get an explanation of this from the companion prophetic warning to Israel given through the prophet Amos:

"I hate, I reject your festivals,
Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.
"Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings."
(Amos 5:21-22)

The reason Amos gives for God's rejection of this formal worship is because it was not affecting Israel's hearts, nor therefore their actions. Instead of spending time and attention on festivals, assemblies, and offerings, God desired instead:

"But let justice roll down like waters
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."
(Amos 5:24)

“Righteousness” is living according to God’s standards. And “justice” is treating others according to God’s standards, summed by God’s command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39). Israel was doing the opposite, and living according to the world’s standards. They were exploiting others, and using coercion and violence to extract from others (Hosea 4:2).

A necessity of living righteously is to walk by faith, believing that God’s ways are for our best (Habakkuk 2:4). The leaders were abusing their power in order to extract from those whom they were supposed to serve (Hosea 4:6-8). The purpose of religious acts of worship is to align hearts with God, that we might walk in His ways. Since Israel also performed pagan worship practices (Hosea 4:13) it seems that their approach to worship was a form of manipulation; approaching God as a power to be manipulated in order to gain their desires. God’s desire is the opposite. He desires we approach Him in faith, believing that His ways are for our best. Then in following His ways, we come to know Him, which leads to our greatest possible experience in life (Hosea 6:3; John 17:3).

Sacrifices brought to God without a genuine heart are futile and insignificant. Samuel asserted this to Saul after Saul disobeyed Samuel’s command to wait for him to come and offer a sacrifice to the LORD before they went into battle. Samuel made clear to Saul that God’s primary desire is for His people to trust Him, and follow His ways. Samuel said to Saul:

“Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices
As in obeying the voice of the LORD?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice.”
(1 Samuel 15:22)

God rejected Saul as being king of Israel because of His unwillingness to follow God, and instead insisting on following his own way (1 Samuel 15:26). This is likely a picture of what it means to fail to be an overcomer, as those who overcome will receive the great reward of reigning with Christ (Revelation 3:21). One of the main things believers must overcome is the temptation to follow our own ways instead of trusting God and following after Him.

The Israelites in Hosea’s days failed to understand this truth. They apparently thought they could appease and manipulate God by their rituals. But God was more interested in sincere and honest relationship than sacrifices. Even sacrifices that the Suzerain God commands would not please Him when they are offered as mere formalism, or as an attempt to gain a transactional benefit.

The psalmist David stated this truth quite emphatically in his prayer to God:

“For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;
You are not pleased with burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”
(Psalm 51:16-17)

Psalm 40:6 says something similar to Psalm 51, and is quoted in Hebrews as being words Jesus spoke as He left heaven to enter the world as a human:

“Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says,
‘SACRIFICE AND OFFERING YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED,
BUT A BODY YOU HAVE PREPARED FOR ME;
IN WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND SACRIFICES FOR SIN YOU HAVE TAKEN NO
PLEASURE.
‘THEN I SAID, ‘BEHOLD, I HAVE COME
(IN THE SCROLL OF THE BOOK IT IS WRITTEN OF ME)
TO DO YOUR WILL, O GOD.’”
(Hebrews 10:5-7)

The reason Jesus left His home in heaven and came to earth was in order to follow the will of His Father. In doing so, Jesus trusted that His Father had in mind His own best interest. This is manifested in the immense reward the Father granted to His Son for His obedience, in that He elevated Jesus above all authorities and above all names (Philippians 2:5-9; Revelation 3:21).

The truth of the matter is that God delights in *loyalty* rather than sacrifice. God is pleased with His people when they display true devotion and faithfulness to Him. He desires that we believe His ways are for our best, and follow in them; this is what pleases Him (Hebrews 11:6).

God also delights in *the knowledge of God* rather than *burnt offerings*. The *knowledge of God* entails having an intimacy with Him and acknowledging Him as Lord in our lives. Such knowledge comes through submitting to His leading, and walking by faith in following His ways. Such a knowledge speaks of a genuine recognition of God’s authority that produces submission and obedience to His covenantal precepts. Israel did not follow this attitude. In doing so they broke their covenant, so they would be judged. The covenant also provided that God would never reject them, and would eventually restore them. In Israel’s immediate future is much self-induced pain.

Biblical Text

**⁴ What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?
For your loyalty is like a morning cloud
And like the dew which goes away early.
⁵ Therefore I have hewn *them* in pieces by the prophets;
I have slain them by the words of My mouth;
And the judgments on you are *like* the light that goes forth.
⁶ For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice,
And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.**