

Hosea 7:8-12

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The LORD describes Israel's ignorance and vulnerability due to her pride. The nation has become like a senseless dove, flitting back and forth between trusting in Assyria and Egypt rather than turning to God, and trusting in Him.

Having described His exposure of the people's sin, setting up their ultimate redemption, and the unresponsiveness of the people of Israel to His call (vv. 1–7), the LORD goes on to describe the results of their ignorance. Instead of turning to the LORD for help during this time of political instability (2 Kings 15), *Ephraim mixes himself with the nations*. *Ephraim* here stands for the northern kingdom of Israel, as *Ephraim* was the largest tribe, and the tribal area that contained the northern kingdom's capital city of Samaria.

The verb to *mix* (“balal” in Hebrew) used in the phrase *Ephraim mixes himself with the nations* is usually associated with mixing ingredients, as in Exodus 29:2 or Leviticus 2:4–5. It is sometimes translated as “to confuse” or “to confound,” as in the story of Babel, where “the LORD confused the language of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:9). Here the verb describes Israel's relationship with other nations, notably Assyria and Egypt. Israel had intermingled with the other nations and confused herself. As in the previous chapters, the term *Ephraim* is used to represent the northern kingdom of Israel.

During the days of the prophet Hosea, the northern kingdom of Israel formed alliances with Assyria. To consolidate his power, King Menahem of Israel paid the Assyrian king a heavy tribute (2 Kings 15:19–20). As a result, *Ephraim has become a cake not turned* (vs 8), that is, a loaf left half-baked on the oven—burnt on one side and uncooked on the other.

Cakes in ancient Israel were quite different than present-day pastry. To make cakes, the ancient Israelites used honey and dibs, a syrup made from the juice of grapes, dates, or figs. Such cakes were to be *turned*, in order to cook thoroughly and be good to consume. Without being turned they burned and became worthless. The LORD used the picture of an unturned *cake* that is near to burning to describe Israel's condition. A *cake not turned* is of no use to the baker or those whom he desires to serve. In the same way, Israel has become useless to God in serving the role it agreed to as a nation of priests to the surrounding nations (Exodus 19:6). Israel had become useless in serving this assigned task. Instead of serving as a priest, showing the other nations the way, it has become like a *silly dove*, floating between Assyria and Egypt (vs 11).

This is made clear in the next verse, where the LORD said, *Strangers devour his strength. Yet he does not know it* (vs 9). The word *strength* refers to Israel's economic and political power. The heavy tribute that Israel paid to Assyria weakened her, causing her to lose her power, and reducing her to a vassal state (2 Kings 15:19). This heavy tribute paid by King Menahem was so that his alliance with Assyria would “strengthen the kingdom under his rule.”

Menahem allied with Assyria to protect himself from being assassinated or contested within Israel. Thus the rot of the culture in Israel caused its strength to be sapped. A culture of exploitation causes people to expend their resources on protecting themselves from one another, and saps them of strength to invest and collaborate.

The nation's freedom and identity was slipping away, as *strangers* (like Assyria) *devour* Israel's *strength*. Yet *he* (Israel) *does not know it* (vs 9). Apparently Israel became desensitized to the fact that the mutual exploitation within it, and the exploitation of Assyria and Egypt toward Israel, were devouring their *strength*. This went unnoticed. *Ephraim* (or Israel) did not *know* it. It apparently did not occur to them that there was a better way. And when the prophets called on them to listen to a better way, they did not listen.

Sadly, *Gray hairs also are sprinkled on him, yet he does not know it* (vs 9). Graying hair is one of the signs that someone is getting older and is in a declining state. But this phenomenon occurs so gradually that it can sometimes go unnoticed. Like an old man whose hair has gradually grayed, *Ephraim* was in a spiritual decay but failed to recognize his mortal danger. Ironically, a man's *gray hair* was an "honor" in ancient Israel because it symbolized wisdom and knowledge (Proverbs 20:29). Proverbs 16 makes clear that "a gray head is a crown of glory; it is found in the way of righteousness" (Proverbs 16:31). But this metaphor does not refer to Israel gaining the wisdom of age. Rather it refers to the fact that Israel was approaching the end of her days, and failed to recognize it. This would indicate that they did not listen to the prophets, including Hosea.

All this happened because Israel was filled with arrogance: *Though the pride of Israel testifies against him, yet they have not returned to the LORD their God nor have they sought Him, for all this* (vs 10).

The people of God relied upon themselves instead of trusting the true God who had redeemed them and chosen them to be His treasured possession among all the peoples of the earth (Exodus 19:4–6). Their wicked deeds caused them to be insensitive to God; it did not even occur to them to call on God. They did not return to Him nor even seek Him (Hosea 7:7). Their own *pride* served to bear witness against them.

The truth of the matter is that *pride* leads to nothing but dishonor (Proverbs 11:2), deception (Proverbs 29:23), and destruction (Proverbs 15:25). The prophet Habakkuk says pride is what causes corrupt hearts to go astray from God's design, which is for our good:

"Behold, as for the proud one,
His soul is not right within him;
But the righteous will live by his faith."
(Habakkuk 2:4)

It is noteworthy in this verse that the opposite of living in pride is walking by faith. Israel is a picture of a nation that sunk to relying on their own wits in order to extract pleasure from others. This leads to a culture of exploitation and violence, which ultimately leads to decay. The opposite is to trust that God's ways are for our best, and walk in this. Thus, the "righteous will

live by his faith.” This verse from Habakkuk 2:4 is the theme verse of Romans (Romans 1:16-17) and is also quoted prominently in Galatians 3:12 and Hebrews 10:38.

As a result of this dedication to self-reliance, *Ephraim has become like a silly dove, without sense* (vs 11). A *dove* is a bird that was often used for sacrifice in ancient Israel (Genesis 15:9; Leviticus 1:14; Leviticus 5:7). It is harmless and not particularly bright. In our modern era, doves frequently fly into glass panes on windows of houses.

The LORD compared *Ephraim* (or Israel) to a *silly dove, without sense* (literally, “without heart”), because the nation was easily seduced and had no sense of direction. She lost her ability to think correctly. Instead of turning to God for help, Israel flitted from one nation to another: *They call to Egypt; they go to Assyria*. Israel was always looking for the “best deal” between these nations of superior strength. But they trusted in nations that were exploiting marauders, and inherently untrustworthy. Much of Israel’s trouble came about due to breaking her treaties with other nations. One of the themes of Jeremiah is that Judah (the southern kingdom) should keep its treaty with Babylon rather than trust in Egypt (Jeremiah 27:8-22). Judah did not listen to God’s true prophet, but rather chose to listen to false prophets.

Indeed, Israel vacillated between allying with and opposing the Assyrian empire. For instance, although King Menahem paid tribute to Assyria (2 Kings 15:19), King Pekah participated in a coalition against Assyria, so:

“Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came and captured Ijon and Abel-beth-maacah and Janoah and Kedesh and Hazor and Gilead and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali; and he carried them captive to Assyria.”
(2 Kings 15:29)

Hoshea, the last Israelite king, submitted to Assyria for a while, then stopped paying tribute to the Assyrians and allied with Egypt against Assyria (2 Kings 17:1–4). All this happened because Israel ignored the law of the LORD (see map on sidebar).

Therefore, the LORD would discipline His covenant people. He declared, *When they go, I will spread My net over them* (vs 12). This means that the Israelites would be ensnared in God’s *net* of judgment. *When they go* between Assyria and Egypt in search of aid, vacillating like a senseless *dove*, they would become helpless. God would catch them in a *net*, and they would not be able to escape His judgment.

Once caught in God’s *net*, the Israelites would be defeated. God stated, *I will bring them down like the birds of the sky* (vs 12). The Suzerain (Ruler) God would act as a crafty fowler to bring the Israelites down. He would thus *chastise them in accordance with the proclamation to their assembly* (vs 12). The *proclamation to the assembly* might refer to the requirement in Deuteronomy 31:11-12 that the Law was to be read to an assembly of the people every seven years. If so, then God would be saying here that His judgment on the people will be according to the provisions of the law, which contained specific remedies for non-performance (Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

In God's covenant with Israel, He warned that He would *chastise them* if they disobeyed His covenant law, which Jesus summed up as loving God with all our being and loving our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40).

God would take corrective measures against His covenant people, as He had promised to do in the covenant, to which they had agreed (but had forgotten). The Israelites would suffer shame and dishonor because of all their evil deeds. This would demonstrate that God—not Assyria or Egypt—exercises the ultimate dominion over the world that He created. It would also demonstrate that God keeps His word, and is a faithful covenant partner, unlike the adulterous Israel. However, since God is a faithful partner, He will work this chastisement for Israel's good, that He might restore her to Himself (Hosea 6:11-7:1).

Biblical Text

⁸ Ephraim mixes himself with the nations;

Ephraim has become a cake not turned.

⁹ Strangers devour his strength,

Yet he does not know *it*;

Gray hairs also are sprinkled on him,

Yet he does not know *it*.

¹⁰ Though the pride of Israel testifies against him,

Yet they have not returned to the Lord their God,

Nor have they sought Him, for all this.

¹¹ So Ephraim has become like a silly dove, without sense;

They call to Egypt, they go to Assyria.

¹² When they go, I will spread My net over them;

I will bring them down like the birds of the sky.

I will chastise them in accordance with the proclamation to their assembly.