

Hosea 8:11-14

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The LORD pronounces judgment on Israel because she has offered sacrificial rituals to Him while ignoring His covenantal laws. The nation will be disciplined for having forsaken her covenant agreement, per the terms of the agreement.

In this final indictment of chapter 8, the LORD pronounced judgment upon Israel for her hypocritical worship and false devotion to Him. He declared, *Since Ephraim has multiplied altars for sin, they have become altars of sinning for him* (vs 11). *Ephraim* is the largest tribe in the northern kingdom, so is often used as a synonym for the northern kingdom, which is the application here. *Ephraim* was the second son of Joseph, and became a tribe along with Joseph's eldest son Manasseh (Genesis 48:5).

The term *Ephraim*, which means "doubly fruitful" (Genesis 41:52), is used ironically for the northern kingdom of Israel, who has become completely unfruitful. In vs 8, Hosea pictured Israel's lack of fruitfulness by likening it to a vessel that no longer has a use.

The word translated as *sin* in the phrase *Since Ephraim has multiplied altars for sin, they have become altars of sinning for him* is "ḥaṭṭā" in Hebrew. "Hatta" can also be translated as "sin offerings" (Exodus 29:36; Leviticus 4:8, 20). So it seems that Israel/Ephraim had multiplied *altars* to offer sacrifices to the LORD for their sins. But those *altars* that were designed for sin offerings had been transformed into *altars of sinning for him*. This likely means that the altars originally built to worship Israel's covenant God Yahweh were now being used to worship pagan idols. The *him* here refers to Ephraim, which stands for the northern kingdom of Israel. The altars Ephraim built have become *altars for sinning*.

The people are supposed to come and offer sacrifices for sin, but their act of coming to sacrifice has itself become sinful. This is because they are going through the motions of offering sacrifice, but are neither listening to nor even attempting to obey God's covenant laws. These are laws that God gave, which the people promised to follow (Exodus 19:8). The laws were set out for Israel's good (Deuteronomy 10:13). But Israel apparently did not believe it was for their good, because they didn't pay any attention to God's word.

The LORD stated, *Though I wrote for him ten thousand precepts of My law, they are regarded as a strange thing* (vs 12). Israel was paying no attention to God's laws. His laws were like a *strange thing*, something so unfamiliar they would not even recognize it. They did the sacrifice, because they wanted God to do something for them, but the sacrifice was to remind them to follow His covenant law. So, since they ignored the covenant law, God made clear to them that the sacrifice will do them no good. God does not want to be appeased. God wants Israel to follow Him, so that they will gain the great benefits of the *precepts of My law*.

The term *law* ("Torah" in Hebrew) refers to the body of teaching that the LORD gave to Israel at Mount Sinai through His servant Moses (Deuteronomy 1:5). The term *ten thousand precepts* is a

translation of a single term that means “myriads.” The word *precepts* is implied. The *law*/Torah includes many instructions. The problem is not a lack of instruction. The problem is that the people are not paying attention to any of them. The instructions are so neglected that they sound like a *strange thing*. This infers that Israel had become immersed in the exploit-one-another pagan culture of the surrounding nations (Hosea 8:8), so that the idea of creating and living in a love-one-another culture sounds like a *strange thing*. (Seek the best for someone else over myself, why in the world would I do that?).

The Suzerain God gave His precious *law* (the “teaching” or “Torah”) to His covenant people so that they might learn how to live in a way that was for their own good (Deuteronomy 10:13). It would lead to great blessing (Deuteronomy 28:1-14). A society with a culture of truth, mutual respect, and neighborly love will of course prosper. It is a culture that results in creativity, innovation, and productivity.

The pagan culture of exploitation and violence requires people to expend most of their energies protecting themselves. As Moses taught Israel, following God’s way is a simple process: believe, speak/think, then do (Deuteronomy 30:14). The Apostle Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 30:11-14 to explain how to gain the “righteousness based on faith” (Romans 10:6-8). He then emphasizes believing and speaking (confessing) with a chiasm of confess, believe, believe, confess in Romans 10:9-10.

The love-your-neighbor cultures inspires collaboration and community investment. But to pursue this approach takes faith. One must believe that God’s path is for their actual benefit, rather than pursuing immediate gratification, which often takes the form of exploiting others. But Israel had no such faith, so they were not generating righteousness, which is to live in harmony with God’s original design. In place of faith, Israel had substituted religious observance. They were observing sacrifices to God (vs 11), while also sacrificing to pagan deities (Hosea 4:12-13). They apparently just wanted their own way, and viewed these sacrifices as a form of transactional payment. Therefore, for these *sacrificial gifts* from Israel, *the LORD has taken no delight in them*.

God’s laws were given in written form to ensure they were well preserved for Israel and her posterity. So, the Israelites were required to learn the laws, apply them, and share them with their children (Deuteronomy 6:4–9). However, this admonition was not being followed. God’s laws were regarded as alien to Israel. She acted as if she was not aware of them.

Since the Israelites ignored the laws, their sacrifices did not please God. They were supposed to point to His statues, and cause people to follow His ways. But that link had been broken. Therefore, God stated, *As for My sacrificial gifts, they sacrifice the flesh and eat it. But the LORD has taken no delight in them* (vs 13).

The *sacrifices* were, for the most part, part of a festival that was intended for the enjoyment of the families. It was like a modern barbecue. The people were participating in the eat-and-celebrate part of the festival, as God intended. But they had lost the underlying meaning, which was to remind the people that God was their deliverer and had entered into a covenant with them, in order to bless them.

The people were apparently mainly focusing on the *eat it* part of the ceremony. Perhaps they were also hoping God would do their bidding. But this wasn't God's purpose. His purpose was for the people to understand and follow His ways, that they might be blessed. Therefore *the LORD has taken no delight* in their sacrifices. If they were meant to appease Him, it didn't work.

Sacrifices offered without sincerity of heart are of no benefit. The psalmist David states this truth quite emphatically, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:17). The prophet Samuel stated this to Saul when he disobeyed Samuel's command to wait for him to come and offer a sacrifice, saying:

"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,
And to heed than the fat of rams."
(1 Samuel 15:22)

When Jesus came into the world, He noted that He came because God did not delight in sacrifice, but rather a body for Him, in order "to do Your will oh God" (Hebrews 10:5-7). This gives us the picture of the proper place for sacrifice; it is an integral part of laying aside self in order to serve God with a whole heart, by making a choice to love and serve others (Romans 12:1-2).

Because the Israelites had rejected the law of God, treating it as *a strange thing*, God would reject their hypocritical worship. He *will remember their iniquity and punish them for their sins* (vs 13). God will implement the terms of the covenant He made with Israel, and execute the punishment provisions of the covenant (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). These provisions are quite severe, and are spelled out in vivid detail. But it appears that Israel was oblivious, since God's law had become to them a *strange thing*.

As in Hosea 7:2, the verb *remember* in the phrase *remember their iniquity* is associated with God's covenant relationship with Israel (Deuteronomy 8:18). Such a covenant promised blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28). That means, the Suzerain God would hold Israel accountable for their iniquity.

And as a part of Israel's punishment, *they will return to Egypt* (vs 13). The name *Egypt* is used symbolically to suggest that Israel's future condition in captivity would be similar to that which she experienced in Egypt, where she knew nothing but labor and oppression (Exodus 1). Israel's literal destination for exile in Hosea's days would soon be Assyria, according to 2 Kings 17:6.

Finally, the LORD stated the reason why Israel would return to captivity: *For Israel has forgotten his Maker and built palaces* (vs 14).

We know from other scripture that these *palaces* were being built by the wealthy based on exploitation of the poor (Amos 3:9, 4:1). During the days of Hosea, Israel was preoccupied with building *palaces* while ignoring *his Maker*, the One who redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and chose them as His "own possession among all the peoples" of the earth (Exodus 19:5).

Israel did not follow His precepts, which required the strong to protect the weak, and justice to be meted out without partiality. Rather, the strong exploited the weak (consistent with the pagan culture they had adopted).

God's judgment would also hit the southern kingdom of Judah, because like Israel, *Judah has multiplied fortified cities* (vs 14), relying on her own military strength and power rather than relying on God.

Because of Judah's disobedience, the LORD said, *I will send a fire on its cities that it may consume its palatial dwellings* (vs 14). The term *fire* is used symbolically for God's judgment on Judah (Amos 2:5). Judah's exile would come in 586 BC, when Jerusalem was crushed and fell to the Babylonians.

God would judge Israel as well, "In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and carried Israel away into exile to Assyria" (2 Kings 17:6). This event is dated in 722 BC.

According to the Kings materials, about seven years after the fall of Israel/Samaria to Assyria, "Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them" (2 Kings 18:13). Although Sennacherib seized all the fortified cities of Judah, Jerusalem was miraculously spared. God fought for Judah at that time, and delivered Judah, slaying 185,000 Assyrian soldiers at night (2 Kings 19:35-36). As a result, Sennacherib returned to Assyria, where he was assassinated by his own sons (2 Kings 19:37).

Although the southern kingdom of Judah was not destroyed by the Assyrian empire, as Israel (the northern kingdom) was, God's judgment came to it during that time because of its disobedience to God's laws. Judah would be destroyed and exiled in 586 BC by the Babylonians because it did not learn from Israel's mistakes and defeat, and continued in unfaithfulness (1 Chronicles 9:1).

This passage shows how Israel's desertion of God led to her devaluation and finally to her destruction. It is a reminder that, although God is gracious, long-suffering, and merciful, He is a fair judge who brings judgment at the appropriate time.

The same principles apply for believers today. Just as God will never reject Israel as His people, God will never reject those who become His children by faith (John 3:14-16). However, just as Israel had an inheritance from which they could gain blessing, but could also squander, so it is with New Testament believers. Israel had an ongoing choice whether to follow God's ways, which lead to life, or the pagan ways that lead to death (Deuteronomy 30:15-20).

In the same way, New Testament believers have an ongoing choice whether to follow the Spirit or the flesh. Following the Spirit leads to an experience of life, and the flesh leads to an experience of death:

“For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”
(Galatians 6:8)

Therefore, Paul exhorts New Testament believers to be steadfast and follow God’s statutes, walk in His ways, and love others as we love ourselves. To do so leads to life and benefit in this life, as well as great reward in the age that is to come:

“Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.”
(Galatians 6:9-10)

Biblical Text

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