

The Books of Hosea, Joel, and Amos, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: Return to the Lord; Steadfast Love, Not Sacrifice

Hosea 6:1-8:14

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this lesson sets the heart of true religion against its counterfeit. Hosea 6:6, 'I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings,' is the doctrinal center, made even weightier because Jesus quotes it twice (Matthew 9:13; 12:7). God has never been content with ritual divorced from steadfast love (*hesed*) and genuine knowledge of Him. Hold this together with the call to return in 6:1-3, where the hope of being 'raised up' to 'live in his sight' on 'the third day' anticipates, in the larger sweep of Scripture, the resurrection of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Handle 6:1-3 with care: the resurrection hope is real and gloriously fulfilled in Christ, yet in its own context this confidence was shallow and presumptuous, for God immediately calls their goodness a 'morning cloud' (6:4). Teach both truths at once, the certainty of resurrection hope in Christ and the warning against a glib, presumptuous repentance that says the right words without a changed heart.

Guard the class from two errors. First, do not let the third-day language become a mere proof-text divorced from its summons to return and to know the Lord truly; the genuine hope and the warning against shallow repentance belong together. Second, keep worship grounded in the New Testament: God still desires mercy and knowledge of Him above empty ritual, which presses every Christian toward worship that is in spirit and in truth, offered with a heart of steadfast love, not self-chosen religion (Hosea 8:11-14). Chapters 7 and 8 expose the alternative, a half-baked, divided faith ('a cake not turned'), running to lesser saviors ('a silly dove'), sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind.

The formative aim is to move the student from morning-cloud religion to steadfast love. Because Scripture is written for our instruction (Romans 15:4), press the passage home: help each person see where their devotion has faded like the dew, where they have substituted performance for knowing God, and where they have run to lesser saviors instead of returning to the Lord. The goal is changed hearts that return all the way home, anchored in the resurrection hope secured in Christ and committed to know Him and love Him steadfastly.

Question 1

Student Question:

Hosea 6:1-3 calls the people to return to the Lord, declaring, 'after two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight.' How does this hope of being raised up to live before God point us forward to the resurrection of Christ 'the third day' (1 Corinthians 15:4), and why is this hope so central to returning to the Lord?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Hosea 6:1–3 is a call to return: ‘Come, and let us return unto the Lord: for he hath torn, and he will heal us.’ The same God whose discipline wounded will be the God who heals; there is nowhere else to go for restoration. At the heart of this call stands a remarkable hope: ‘After two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight.’

In its own setting this is the language of restoration after a short season of judgment, the confidence that God will quickly revive His people so they may live before His face. Yet in the larger sweep of Scripture this third-day, raised-up-to-life language reaches toward something greater. The New Testament proclaims that Christ ‘rose again the third day according to the scriptures’ (1 Corinthians 15:4), and in His resurrection the deepest hope of being raised up to live in God’s sight is secured forever.

We should be careful here. Hosea is not consciously predicting the details of Easter morning the way Isaiah 53 unfolds the suffering Servant. But the pattern of God reviving His people, of being raised up on the third day to live in His presence, finds its fullest and surest reality in the risen Christ. Returning to the Lord and resurrection hope belong together: we come home to the God who heals, and our final healing is the resurrection life Christ has won.

For the student, this means that returning to God is never hopeless. The God we return to is the God who raises the dead. Whatever wounds sin and discipline have left, He heals; whatever death we face, He has answered in the resurrection of His Son. The summons to come home rests on the certainty that in Christ we shall indeed ‘live in his sight.’

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The God who wounds in discipline is the God who heals when we return.
- The third-day, raised-up language reaches toward Christ’s resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:4).
- Resurrection hope is the ground of returning to the Lord.
- Hosea anticipates the pattern, fully realized in the risen Christ.
- The God we return to is the God who raises the dead.

Discussion Prompts

- How does the hope of being ‘raised up’ to ‘live in his sight’ point to Christ?
- Why does returning to God rest on resurrection hope?
- What does it mean that the God you return to is the God who raises the dead?

Question 2

Student Question:

Hosea 6:3 urges, 'then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord.' What does it look like in your own life to 'follow on' in knowing God, and where have you been content to coast rather than press forward?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Hosea 6:3 presses the call further: 'then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord.' Knowing God is not a single arrival but a pursuit, a 'following on.' The verse pictures a believer who keeps moving toward God, who refuses to let yesterday's knowledge be the end of the journey.

The imagery that follows is tender: 'his going forth is prepared as the morning; and he shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth.' God is faithful and reliable as the dawn, refreshing as the seasonal rains. The problem is never God's faithfulness; it is whether His people will 'follow on' to know Him.

The student is invited to examine the direction of his or her life with God. Are you pressing forward to know Him more, or quietly coasting on what you learned long ago? Following on means a deliberate, ongoing pursuit, in His word, in prayer, in obedience. The God who comes as the morning and the rain will be found by those who keep seeking Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Knowing God is an ongoing pursuit, not a single arrival.
- God is faithful as the dawn and refreshing as the rain.
- Coasting on old knowledge is not the same as following on.
- Pursuing God deliberately keeps the heart from drifting.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it look like for you to 'follow on' to know the Lord?
- Where have you been coasting rather than pressing forward?
- What concrete pursuit of God will you renew this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

In Hosea 6:4 God laments that Ephraim's 'goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away.' What does this reveal about the difference between shallow, presumptuous repentance and a genuine return to the Lord, and why is God not satisfied with the former?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After the lovely words of returning, God speaks with grief: 'O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the

early dew it goeth away' (6:4). Their repentance was real enough to say, but it evaporated. It looked like devotion at dawn and was gone by mid-morning.

This exposes the difference between genuine returning and a shallow, presumptuous repentance. The people had the language of revival, even the confident hope that God would quickly raise them up. But it was glib, assuming God's blessing while the heart remained unchanged. God will not be managed by the right words. He sees past the dew to the soil beneath, and He grieves over goodness that will not last.

We must hold this together with the genuine hope of 6:1–3. The resurrection hope is real and sure in Christ; the danger Hosea exposes is a presumptuous repentance that claims the hope while refusing the heart-change that true returning requires. God is not satisfied with morning-cloud religion because He loves His people too much to accept a counterfeit that leaves them lost.

For the student, this is a searching mirror. Much of what passes for repentance is emotion that fades by Monday. The call is to a returning that puts down roots, that lasts past the feeling, that actually changes the way we live. God desires not a passing dew of devotion but a steadfast love that endures.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Morning-cloud goodness is real in word but evaporates in practice.
- Presumptuous repentance claims God's blessing without heart-change.
- God is not satisfied with a counterfeit that leaves His people lost.
- True returning puts down roots and lasts past the feeling.
- The genuine hope of 6:1–3 must not become an excuse for shallow repentance.

Discussion Prompts

- How is shallow, presumptuous repentance different from genuine returning?
- Why is God not satisfied with goodness that fades like the dew?
- Where has your repentance been more dew than root?

Question 4

Student Question:

Hosea warns against a religion that fades like the morning dew. When you examine your own returning to God, how do you guard against a glib, presumptuous repentance that says the right words but does not change the heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Hosea's image of the morning cloud turns the warning inward. It is easy to recognize fading devotion in others; harder to see it in ourselves. The student is asked to examine his or her own

returning to God and to guard against a repentance that says the right words on Sunday and is gone by Tuesday.

Scripture distinguishes the godly sorrow that 'worketh repentance to salvation' from the worldly sorrow that merely regrets and fades (2 Corinthians 7:10). Godly sorrow changes course and bears lasting fruit; morning-cloud sorrow feels deeply for a moment and then evaporates without altering the life.

Guarding against glib repentance is practical. It means letting conviction lead to concrete change, confessing specific sin, forsaking it, and building habits that keep the heart soft. It means refusing to presume on God's grace while clinging to the very sin we claim to renounce. The aim is a steady, rooted return that outlasts the feeling that began it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Fading devotion is easier to see in others than in ourselves.
- Godly sorrow changes course; worldly sorrow merely fades.
- Guarding against glib repentance requires concrete change.
- Do not presume on grace while clinging to the sin you renounce.

Discussion Prompts

- How do you guard against a repentance that says the words but fades?
- What lasting fruit shows your returning is real?
- Where might you be presuming on grace without changing?

Question 5

Student Question:

Hosea 6:6 declares, 'I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.' What does it mean that God prefers steadfast love and the knowledge of Him above ritual, and how does this expose the danger of empty religious performance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Hosea 6:6 is the doctrinal heart of the lesson: 'For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.' The word translated mercy is hesed, the steadfast, covenant-keeping love that holds fast to God and to others. God is not abolishing sacrifice; He is exposing the emptiness of ritual offered without steadfast love and true knowledge of Him.

This strikes at the root of all empty religion. It is possible to keep every outward form, to attend, to give, to perform every prescribed act, and to miss God entirely because the heart is far from Him. God has always wanted the worshiper, not just the worship. He desires a people who love

faithfully and know Him truly, and He counts that above the most correct ritual performed by a cold heart.

The danger is perennial because the human heart prefers performance to surrender. It is easier to bring God a sacrifice than to give Him steadfast love; easier to attend a service than to know Him. But God sees through the offering to the heart that offers it. Where there is no mercy and no knowledge of Him, the sacrifice is hollow, however impressive.

For the student, this verse is a standing summons to examine the heart behind the religion. Is our worship the overflow of steadfast love and a genuine pursuit of knowing God, or has it become a performance that lets us feel religious while remaining unchanged? God still desires mercy, not sacrifice.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hesus, steadfast covenant love, is what God desires above ritual.
- God wants the worshiper, not merely the worship.
- Outward forms can be kept while the heart is far from God.
- The human heart prefers performance to surrender.
- True worship overflows from steadfast love and knowing God.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God desires mercy and not sacrifice?
- How can right rituals still be empty before God?
- Where has your worship become performance rather than steadfast love?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus twice sent His critics back to Hosea 6:6 to 'learn what that meaneth' (Matthew 9:13; 12:7). Where do you most need to learn that lesson, choosing mercy and knowing God over outward religious correctness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 twice, and both times He aims it at religious people who were scrupulously correct and yet missing God. In Matthew 9:13, when the Pharisees object to His eating with tax collectors and sinners, He says, 'Go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice.' In Matthew 12:7, defending His hungry disciples, He says that if they had understood this verse, they would not have condemned the guiltless.

Notice that Jesus tells trained religious men to 'go and learn' a verse they could surely recite. They knew the words; they had not learned the meaning. They were experts in sacrifice and

strangers to mercy. The Lord's use of Hosea exposes a religion that is precise about ritual and harsh toward people, the very opposite of the steadfast love God desires.

The student is invited to feel the sharpness of this. We are all prone to value our religious correctness over mercy, to condemn rather than to love, to keep the form while missing the heart. The call is to actually learn what Hosea 6:6 means, to let mercy and the knowledge of God reshape how we treat sinners, how we worship, and how we judge.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus aimed Hosea 6:6 at the religiously correct but merciless.
- Knowing the words is not the same as learning the meaning.
- Ritual precision can coexist with harshness toward people.
- Mercy and knowing God must reshape how we treat others.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you most need to 'learn what that meaneth'?
- How can religious correctness make us harsh toward people?
- What would choosing mercy over mere correctness look like for you?

Question 7

Student Question:

Hosea 7:8 says Ephraim 'is a cake not turned,' and 7:11 calls him 'a silly dove without heart' that flies to Egypt and Assyria for help. What do these images teach about a divided, half-hearted faith that looks everywhere but to God for rescue?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 7 piles up vivid images of a divided, half-hearted people. 'Ephraim is a cake not turned' (7:8), a flat loaf burnt on one side and raw on the other, useless because it was never fully turned to the fire. So Israel was half devoted, mingled with the nations, neither hot nor cold, spoiled by a faith that never gave itself wholly to God.

Then 7:11 calls Ephraim 'a silly dove without heart,' fluttering 'to Egypt' and calling 'to Assyria.' Frightened and foolish, the dove flies to its predators for safety, seeking from foreign powers the help that only God could give. It is a portrait of a people who look everywhere but to the Lord for rescue, and so fly straight into the net.

These images expose the danger of a divided heart. A faith that is half-given is not a smaller version of devotion; it is a spoiled thing, a cake not turned. And a heart that runs to lesser saviors in every crisis reveals that it does not truly trust God. The student should see that God calls for whole-hearted return, not a divided loyalty that hedges its bets between the Lord and the world.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A half-given faith is spoiled, like a cake not turned.
- The 'silly dove' runs to lesser saviors instead of to God.
- A divided heart does not truly trust the Lord.
- God calls for whole-hearted, undivided return.

Discussion Prompts

- What does 'a cake not turned' teach about a half-hearted faith?
- How does the 'silly dove' picture seeking help from the wrong places?
- Where is your loyalty divided between God and the world?

Question 8

Student Question:

Ephraim sought help from foreign powers instead of from the Lord. Where are you tempted to run to lesser saviors, your own resources, other people, or worldly security, instead of returning to God Himself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Ephraim's flight to Egypt and Assyria turns the warning personal. The people sought security from foreign powers rather than from the Lord, and the New Testament reader recognizes the same instinct in every heart. When trouble comes, where do we run first?

We have our own Egypts and Assyrias, the lesser saviors we trust to rescue us: our own resources and cleverness, money, status, other people, the approval of the world. None of these is necessarily evil in itself, but when we run to them instead of to God, they become the foreign powers that cannot save and only entangle us further.

The student is asked to name honestly where he or she flies for refuge. Returning to the Lord means making Him, not our backup plans, the first and true place we run. The dove that flutters to its predators finds the net; the soul that returns to God finds healing. The call is to seek the Lord Himself, not the lesser saviors that fail.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Every heart is tempted to run to lesser saviors in a crisis.
- Money, status, people, and self can become our Egypt and Assyria.
- Lesser saviors cannot rescue and only entangle us.
- Returning means making God, not our backup plans, our refuge.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to run for help instead of to God?
- What lesser saviors have promised you security?
- What would it look like to make the Lord your first refuge?

Question 9

Student Question:

Hosea 8:7 warns, 'they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind,' and 8:11–14 indicts Israel for multiplying altars to sin and forgetting their Maker. Drawing the whole passage together, how do empty worship, self-chosen religion, and forgetting God connect, and how does this passage call us to a worship rooted in steadfast love and true knowledge of God rather than mere sacrifice?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 8 gathers the threads of the whole passage into a sobering indictment. 'They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind' (8:7): a people who plant emptiness will harvest destruction, for sin yields a harvest far larger than its seed. Israel's hollow worship and self-chosen religion were not harmless; they were seeds of ruin.

The charges in 8:11–14 tie the lesson together. 'Because Ephraim hath made many altars to sin, altars shall be unto him to sin' (8:11): they multiplied worship of their own devising, more altars, more religion, but not the worship God commanded. They treated God's law as 'a strange thing' (8:12), kept sacrificing while God took no pleasure in it (8:13), and at last 'Israel hath forgotten his Maker' (8:14). Self-made worship and forgetting God go hand in hand.

Here the great theme of the lesson lands with full weight. Empty worship, self-chosen religion, and forgetting God are not separate problems; they are one tangled sin. When worship is not rooted in steadfast love and true knowledge of God, it multiplies into religion God never asked for and ends in forgetting Him altogether. This is exactly the disease Hosea 6:6 diagnoses: sacrifice without mercy, ritual without the knowledge of God.

The New Testament presses the same truth on the church. God still seeks worshipers who worship 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4:24), offered from hearts of steadfast love according to His revealed will, not according to our own invention. The remedy for sowing the wind is to return to the Lord on His terms, to know Him, to love Him, and to worship Him as He has shown us, not as we prefer.

For the student, the call is clear and weighty. Examine your worship at its root. Is it the overflow of steadfast love and genuine knowledge of God, or has it drifted into self-chosen forms that forget the Maker? Return to the Lord with mercy and knowledge of Him, and let your worship be the fruit of a heart that truly knows and loves Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sowing the wind of empty religion reaps the whirlwind of ruin.
- Self-chosen worship multiplies altars God never commanded.
- Treating God's law as 'a strange thing' leads to forgetting Him.
- Empty worship, self-made religion, and forgetting God are one tangled sin.
- God seeks worship in spirit and truth, rooted in steadfast love (John 4:24).
- The remedy is returning to the Lord on His terms, not our own.
- Hosea 6:6 diagnoses the whole disease: sacrifice without mercy or knowledge of God.

Discussion Prompts

- How do empty worship, self-chosen religion, and forgetting God connect?
- What does it mean to sow the wind and reap the whirlwind?
- How does this passage call us to worship rooted in steadfast love and knowing God?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back across Hosea 6–8 as a whole, where has the Lord most pierced your heart, and name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this call to return to Him with steadfast love rather than morning-cloud religion?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

As the class looks back over Hosea 6–8, gather the strands together. The call to return rests on the hope of being raised up to live in God's sight, a hope secured forever in the risen Christ. Yet God grieves over morning-cloud devotion and exposes the counterfeit: sacrifice without mercy, ritual without the knowledge of God, a half-baked cake, a silly dove, a people sowing the wind. Through it all runs one summons: return to the Lord with steadfast love, not mere sacrifice.

The aim now is to move from understanding to formation. Where has the Lord most pierced the student's heart? Perhaps in the discovery that their repentance has been a fading dew, perhaps in the realization that their worship has become performance, perhaps in the lesser saviors they keep running to, perhaps in the call to follow on and truly know God.

Invite each person to name one specific way Jesus is forming them through these chapters and to take a single concrete step this week. The God who heals those He has wounded, who raises the dead, and who desires mercy above sacrifice is calling His people all the way home. The fitting response is to return with steadfast love, to know Him truly, and to let our worship overflow from hearts that are His.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- These chapters call us to return with steadfast love, not mere sacrifice.
- Resurrection hope in Christ undergirds the whole call to come home.

- Truth is meant to form us, not merely inform us.
- Genuine response is specific and acted upon.
- Christ forms us as we return, know God, and love Him steadfastly.

Discussion Prompts

- Where did the Lord most pierce your heart in Hosea 6–8?
- What one specific way is Jesus forming you through these chapters?
- What single step will you take this week to return with steadfast love?