

The Books of Hosea, Joel, and Amos

Lesson 3: Return to the Lord; Steadfast Love, Not Sacrifice -- Hosea 6:1–8:14

There is a moment in every wandering life when the heart finally turns toward home. You can hear it in Hosea 6: 'Come, and let us return unto the Lord: for he hath torn, and he will heal us; he hath smitten, and he will bind us up.' It is a beautiful sentence, the kind you would underline. And then comes a promise that takes your breath away: 'After two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight.' Long before an empty tomb, the people of God were reaching, however dimly, for a hope of being raised up to live before His face.

But here is where Hosea makes us uneasy, and where he means to. The very next verses turn, and God speaks almost with a sigh: 'O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away.' Their repentance, it turns out, was lovely and shallow, a fog that burns off by nine in the morning. They had learned the words of returning without the heart of it. And the Lord, who longs for His people more than they long for Him, will not be satisfied with a morning-cloud religion.

So God tells them what He actually wants, and it is not what they kept bringing to the altar: 'For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.' Steadfast love, not ritual. Knowing Him, not just performing for Him. Centuries later, when religious men sneered at Jesus for eating with sinners, He sent them back to this very verse twice over, 'Go ye and learn what that meaneth.' Apparently we are still slow learners. We would so much rather offer God our performance than our hearts.

Chapters 7 and 8 show us what a heart that drifts from God really looks like, and it is painfully honest. A cake not turned, half-baked and burnt on the bottom. A silly dove, fluttering to Egypt and Assyria for help instead of to God. People who 'sow the wind' and 'reap the whirlwind.' This lesson invites you to stop offering God your morning-cloud devotion and bring Him the one thing He has always wanted: your steadfast love and your true knowledge of Him. Come and return to the Lord, all the way home.

Group Discussion: Hosea 6:6 says, 'I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings,' and Jesus quoted it twice (Matthew 9:13; 12:7) to confront religious people who kept the rituals but missed the heart. As a group, talk through what 'morning cloud' religion looks like in our own day. How can we tell the difference between worship that is full of steadfast love and knowledge of God, and worship that is merely going through the motions?

Personal Reflection: Hosea calls God's people to 'follow on to know the Lord' (6:3), yet warns that their goodness was 'as a morning cloud' that quickly faded. Where in your own walk has

your devotion been more like a morning cloud than a settled, steadfast love, and what would it look like this week to pursue knowing the Lord rather than simply performing for Him?

Read Hosea 6:1–8:14

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, Christ died for our sins and rose again ‘the third day’ according to the Scriptures; Matthew 9:13, Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 to defend eating with sinners, ‘I will have mercy, and not sacrifice’; Matthew 12:7, Jesus again cites Hosea 6:6 against condemning the guiltless; 1 Samuel 15:22, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams; Micah 6:6–8, what the Lord requires is to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God

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