

Lesson 16

So far in Hosea 4:1 we have seen a defendant and we have seen a jury. What's next? It is time to read the charges!

Verse 1b – The Charges are Read

There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land.

Before we look at each of these charges, let's start by counting them – no faithfulness, no steadfast love, and no knowledge. This a three-fold accusation, and it is not the only three-fold accusation we will see in Hosea.

Why three? One possibility is that these three accusations are intended to parallel in some way the three children we met in chapter 1 – Jezreel, Not Loved, and Not Mine. Let's keep that possibility in mind as we proceed.

The first charge is that the people lacked faithfulness.

Here is how one commentary describes the underlying Hebrew word (*emet*):

This word [translated "faithfulness"], which also means "truth," is perhaps best translated here as "integrity." It is not merely loyalty, although it often includes that, but it is instead the wholesomeness of soul that comes from a life that follows principle rather than expediency. It is a determination to know the truth and live by it.

The Hebrew word means “faithfulness, reliability, trustworthiness; truth, what conforms to reality in contrast to what is false.”

The person with this quality is to the person without this quality as a genuine diamond is to paste. To say that a person lacks this quality is to say that he is living a lie. He lacks moral integrity. A person lacking this quality is untrustworthy, uncommitted, deceptive, and undecided. A person lacking this quality is a completely different person depending on his current situation.

The second charge is that the people lacked steadfast love.

The Hebrew word (*hesed*) means love or compassion. It can also be translated as mercy or grace. It describes someone who does his duty to someone and then goes beyond that duty to freely give mercy and compassion. It describes someone whose love is deep and consistent and is shown both by their actions and by their words.

A person who lacks this quality is a cruel and self-centered person.

The third charge is that the people lacked knowledge of God.

If you look back at the handout from Lesson 11, you will see that the Hebrew word translated *knowledge* in verse 1 is the word *da'at*. That Hebrew noun is based on the Hebrew verb *yada* that we first saw back in Hosea 2:8. As we noted then, knowledge is a major theme in Hosea, and the word

yada is the same word that is applied to the knowledge between a husband and a wife.

This knowledge of God includes both objective knowledge and subjective knowledge.

Objectively, the people lacked knowledge about the nature of God, the law of God, and the doctrine of God. Why did the people lack this knowledge? We will be given one answer to that question later in this chapter – their priests had failed to teach them the truth about God. Later we will see that the priests had rejected knowledge and had forgotten the law.

Subjectively, the people lacked knowledge of God because they did not have a personal relationship with God. They could not say, “You are my God” (Hosea 2:23). We will see this subjective knowledge later in chapter 6.

Hosea 6:3 – Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth

A people without knowledge of God is a people who have believed false teaching about God or a people who have no personal connection with God. If either of those things is true about me, then I have no knowledge of God.

What that means is that I could have an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible, but if I do not have a personal relationship with God, then I have no knowledge of God.

Or I could think about God every waking moment, praying without ceasing, but if I have embraced false teachings about God that are not consistent with God's word, then I have no knowledge of God.

The book of Hosea tells us that God wants his people to have knowledge of him – both objectively and subjectively. And, as we have seen, a prophecy about the church in the Old Testament is that in the church all would know God, from the least to the greatest.

So, what then was lacking in the accused?

Faithfulness, love, and knowledge of God. Israel had been weighed in the balance and found wanting. It reminds us of Jesus' stern message to the Pharisees:

Matthew 23:23 – Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: **justice and mercy and faithfulness**. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

The very last thing the Pharisees would have believed about themselves is that they did not know God – and yet that was the truth – they did not know God.

In fact, when God came down and stood right in front of the Pharisees, they did not recognize him. The Pharisees knew the most intricate details of the law, and yet they did not know God. There is a lesson there for us!

If the Christian life is a three-legged stool, then those three legs are faithfulness, love, and

knowledge of God. If we lack any one of those things, our stool will topple and we will fall.

And that is not just true of God's people in Hosea's day or of God's people in the first century, or of God's people today. That has always been true of the people of God – they have always been a people of faithfulness, love, and the knowledge of God.

And how do we learn to live this way? The Psalmist answers that question.

Psalm 25:8-10 – Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

And what would the evidence be that faithfulness, love, or the knowledge of God was missing in my life? How could I tell? I would need to look at the evidence – and that is what God gives us in verse 2.

Hosea 4:2

2 there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.

Verse 2 is the evidence behind the charges in verse 1.

What is the evidence that the people lacked faithfulness? Swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery.

What is the evidence that the people lacked love? Swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery.

What is the evidence that the people did not know God? Swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery.

As for the phrase “they break all bounds,” a better translation is likely that the previous five crimes are the collective subject of this verb. That is, swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery break out in the land. That these sins appear in the land is evidence that the people lack faithfulness, love, and knowledge of God.

Why these five sins?

Well, where have we seen them before? Remember what we said in the introduction – Hosea expects his readers to know the law, and Hosea expects his readers to keep up with him! Hosea places great demands on the readers of his book.

So, with that said, let’s ask again – where have we seen these five sins?

Swearing? The third commandment.

Exodus 20:7 – You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

Lying? The ninth commandment.

Exodus 20:16 – You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Murder? The sixth commandment.

Exodus 20:13 – You shall not murder.

Stealing? The eighth commandment.

Exodus 20:15 – You shall not steal.

Adultery? The seventh commandment.

Exodus 20:14 – You shall not commit adultery.

We don't need to look at each of these words because we all already know exactly what they mean.

A more interesting question for us to consider is why this verse repeats half of the Decalogue! And why does it leave out the other half?

I think when we answer the first question we will also answer the second question. That is, when we figure out why these five commands are included, we will also see why the other five commandments are not included.

To help us with this question, let's list the other five commandments. So far, we have seen commands 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9. What are commands 1, 2, 4, 5, and 10?

- **Command #1:** No other gods before me.
- **Command #2:** No graven images.
- **Command #4:** Remember the Sabbath day.
- **Command #5:** Honor your father and your mother.

- **Command #10:** Do not covet.

What do we see in that list? We see theological sins (no other gods, no graven images, Sabbath day), and we see domestic or private sins (honor my parents, don't covet what belongs to others).

So what sort of commands don't we see in that list? Or, asked differently, what sort of commands do we see in verse 2?

The answer is that verse 2 lists the more socially oriented crimes – swearing, lying, killing, stealing, committing adultery. Although I suppose I can swear all by myself, most swearing occurs as part of a conversation with someone else. And the other sins on that list – lying, murder, theft, and adultery – all require at least two people. These are the sins that are open and visible to everyone in the society, and they are the types of sins that, when unchallenged and unpunished, lead to the demise and eventual collapse of a society.

I think that is why we see these five commands in verse 2 and not the other five commands. It is not that the other five are less important or were not being broken, but rather it is because these five sins were the clear and open **evidence** of the allegations that we saw in verse 1. As before, we are seeing the evidence here, and this evidence was visible and audible to all.

In effect, God is saying that the people were faithless, loveless, and ignorant – and if anyone wanted proof, all they had to do was look around! And when they looked around, what would they see

and hear? They would hear people swearing to each other, they would hear people lying to each other, they would see people murdering other people, they would see people stealing from other people, and they would see people committing adultery with other people. In short, if they looked around they would see the complete breakdown in society that always results when people turn their back on God.

And, perhaps we can also look around today and see the same evidence of the same allegations. If our society is disintegrating today, then that disintegration is evidence of something that is lacking in our society – integrity, compassion, and knowledge of God. That was true in the days of Hosea, and it is still true today.

What about the final phrase in verse 2?
“Bloodshed follows bloodshed.” What does that mean?

Again, I think we know what that means. It means that the people lived in a society that celebrated violence and recrimination – and that violence and that recrimination just led to more and more of the same. We, too, live in a world in which bloodshed follows bloodshed.

But let’s dig a little deeper. Why, after all, is bloodshed mentioned twice at the end of a verse that already mentions murder?

I think an answer to that question appears once we think back over the verses we have already

studied. Remember what God said after the birth of Jezreel:

Hosea 1:4 – And the LORD said to him, “Call his name Jezreel, for in just a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the **blood** of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel.”

The Hebrew word translated “bloodshed” twice in Hosea 4:2 is the same Hebrew word translated “blood” back in Hosea 1:4.

The condemnation here in Hosea 4 about the violence and bloodshed in Israel is linked with the name of Hosea’s first child, Jezreel, and the meaning of that name – that God would punish the house of Jehu for the bloodshed of Jezreel.

As we saw back in chapter 1, the name Jezreel referred to a place where much violence had occurred – so much, in fact, that the word Jezreel had become synonymous with violence. That was the original meaning of the symbol, but we have also seen two others – a threat that God scatters, and a blessing that God sows. But here, the link is back to the first meaning – bloodshed.

I think the final phrase here in verse 2 is intended to bring us back to the birth of Gomer’s first child and the meaning behind the name given to that child. Let’s keep our eyes open for similar links back to the other two children.

Before we leave verse 2, let’s look at an issue that we discussed in our study of the book of Ezra. When we studied that book we talked about

the false idea that the law of Moses largely originated during the Babylonian exile. As we saw, the book of Ezra itself was enough for us to know that the Law of Moses did not originate with Ezra.

Ezra 7:10 – For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

Ezra did not write the law – he studied it, he did it, and he taught it. And it was not the law of Ezra, it was the Law of the Lord. We see that in the book of Ezra.

But, we also see that fact here in Hosea. How? Because Hosea was written long before the days of Ezra and the days of the Babylonian exile – and we see many references to the Law of Moses in the book of Hosea (including the ones we see here in verse 2). How could that Law have been written during the Babylonian exile when Hosea is quoting it almost 200 years earlier?

Later in verse 6 of this same chapter God will tell the priests that they had forgotten the law. How could they have forgotten the law if the law had not yet been written?

We know, of course, that the law of Moses originated during the days of Moses, and we know that it was the Law of God, not the law of any man. And we know that from Ezra, from Hosea, and from many other books of the Bible.

So far we have seen the defendant, we have seen the jury, we have heard the charges, and we have

seen the evidence. What's next? We hear the judgment in verse 3.

Hosea 4:3

3 Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away.

As expected from the severity of the charges, the judgment in verse 3 is also severe. The land mourns; the people, the animals, and the birds languish; and even the fish are taken away.

But what does that mean? What is happening here? To answer that question, we need to focus on the verbs – the land mourns, the people languish.

Elsewhere these words are used to describe the effects of a drought.

Joel 1:12 – The vine dries up; the fig tree languishes. Pomegranate, palm, and apple, all the trees of the field are dried up, and gladness dries up from the children of man.

Jeremiah 12:4 – How long will the land mourn and the grass of every field wither?

But I think we see more evidence of a drought here than just those two verbs.

First, I think we have evidence of a drought from the context of this judgment. What false god had the people put in place of God? Baal – the false god of fertility – the storm god!

The best way to show the impotence of Baal was to turn off the water. That is exactly what Elijah announced in 1 Kings 17:1, and I think we see the same thing here in Hosea 4:3. Rain and fertility are gifts from God – not from Baal!

And I think we see one more piece of evidence in the text of verse 3 itself. Notice that last phrase – “and even the fish of the sea are taken away.” Not that the fish of the sea disappear, but that “even” the fish disappear.

There is something surprising about the fish of the sea being taken away. A judgment of drought would explain why the word “even” appears in verse 3. Why would a drought cause the fish of the sea to disappear? Most likely the shortage of food would cause overfishing of the coastline or changes in weather patterns could cause the fish to move further out to sea. But either way, the shortage of fish would have been a surprising outcome of a drought, as verse 3 suggests.

So, I think we see a judgment of drought in verse 3, but is this a literal drought or is something else going on here?

I do **not** think this is a literal drought. Why?

First, as we have said, a judgment of drought had a very specific meaning when it came to the false god Baal. Yes, Elijah’s drought was literal, but I think this drought is not. Instead, I think this judgment of drought is intended to make us recall Elijah’s drought in 1 King 17 and the

demonstration of God's power on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18.

Second, we know from elsewhere in the Bible that the coming judgment against Israel was an invasion by Assyria – which, much like a drought, would cause the land to mourn and the people to languish.

Third, (and maybe this should have been first) the text does not use the word “drought.” All we have in verse 3 are some strong hints of a drought.

But fourth, I think we need to step back and look at the bigger picture here. What was at stake with Israel's faithlessness? What was at stake was God's promise to bless the entire world through the seed of Abraham.

Genesis 12:3 – in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.

There is a crucial lesson here for us. If we are disobedient to God, our disobedience does not just affect us. Our disobedience has ripples that extend out far beyond us. Think, for example, about once faithful congregations that have gone astray – and think about the people they could have taught had they remained true and faithful to God. If we turn away from God, we create a hole in God's plan. Yes, God can fill that hole with someone else, but while that hole remains, much good that could have been accomplished is not being accomplished.

We cannot see all of the ripples that are caused by disobedience, but God can. And here the potential ripples were tremendous. God was planning to use these people to bring Christ into the world! Yes, Judah was still there, but (as we know) Judah had its own problems.

So what do we see in verse 3? What we see in verse 3 is that the entire world is suffering because of this judgment. Not only are the people suffering, but the land, the animals, the birds, and the fish are suffering as well. All creation – earth, sky, and sea – is suffering because of their disobedience.

Why does verse 3 give the judgment a cosmic dimension? Because the disobedience had a cosmic dimension. God had promised to bless the entire world through the promised descendant of Abraham and King David, and these people were seemingly doing all that they could to thwart those plans. And if they succeeded, God's promise would have failed. Of course, we know that would never have happened, but that was what was at stake – the faithfulness of God to his promises. And that is why the judgment in verse 3 affects not only the disobedient people, but the land, the sky, and the sea.

And this was not just a problem with Israel. We see the same thing elsewhere with regard to Judah.

Zephaniah 1:2-3 – I will utterly consume all things from off the land, saith the LORD. I will consume man and beast; I will consume the fowls of the heaven, and the fishes of the sea, and

the stumblingblocks with the wicked; and I will cut off man from off the land, saith the LORD.

For God's promises to be fulfilled, there had to be faithful Jews living in Jerusalem in the first century, and much of what we are studying here (and earlier in Ezra and Esther) was focused on ensuring that such would be true.

And those here in Hosea who were working against God needed to understand the cosmic significance of what they were doing. That is why we have verse 3.

But why? What had caused the people to sin in this way? What had caused the people to stumble as they had? What was the cause of the judgment that was coming upon them?

God turns to that question next – and in verse 4 we find an answer to those questions.

Hosea 4:4

4 Yet let no one contend, and let none accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest.

So far in chapter 4, God's complaint has been focused on the people as a whole (or perhaps more precisely the people as a whole minus the small faithful remnant). But here in verse 4, the focus of God's complaint narrows down to a much smaller group – the religious leadership.

In our introduction, we said that the book of Hosea makes great demands on his readers. And one big reason is that Hosea very often makes very

abrupt and unexpected turns in the argument. And if we don't turn with him, we will very quickly lose his argument.

We see such a turn here in verse 4. Part of the problem is that (again) I don't think the ESV translation of the second half of verse 4 is particularly good. I think the KJV is better.

Hosea 4:4 (KJV) – Yet let no man strive, nor reprove another: for thy people are as they that strive with the priest.

Yes, the ESV is easier to understand than the KJV, but remember that ease of understanding is not the test of a good translation. If the original Hebrew is hard to understand, then the English translation should be as well. And here, as one commentary explains, “although the significance of the verse is debatable, the Hebrew itself is quite clear.”

So what then do we have in verse 4? The people are told not to strive against each other or reprove each other. Why? Because “thy people are as they that strive with the priest.”

And what does that answer mean? That's both a very good question and a very difficult question! Let's proceed carefully.