

Lesson 35

Hosea 10:7

7 Samaria's king shall perish like a twig on the face of the waters.

The metaphor in verse 7 is difficult to understand.

In the ESV translation, we are told that the king will perish like a twig on the water. Other translations say that the city of Samaria is destroyed like a twig on the water. But, whether the subject is the city or the king, it is difficult to see how anything could be said to **perish** like a twig or be **destroyed** like a twig. After all, how has such a twig perished? How has it been destroyed? Isn't that twig still a twig?

I think a better translation of verse 7 is this:

"Samaria is being destroyed. Her king is like a twig on the surface of water."

That is, I don't think the twig is describing the destruction, but instead I think the twig is describing the king.

If that is correct, then what is the point of this strange metaphor?

Let's start with this question: What can we say about a twig floating on the water? I think we

can say two things about that twig – one, it is **insignificant**, and two, it is **powerless**.

No one cares what happens to that twig. Big things may be happening all around it, but that twig is not itself a big thing, and that twig is not a part of any of the big things that are happening around it. Who would even notice such a twig?

And, another thing about such a twig, it is not in control of where it goes. Instead, that twig is entirely subject to the movements of the water over which it has no control. That twig is not going where it wants to go; it is going where the water wants it to go.

So this twig on the water is describing something that no one cares about and that is being carried along by forces over which it has no control. And that description suddenly sounds a lot like Samaria and Samaria's king!

I think the point of this metaphor is that the city of Samaria would fall, and there was nothing the king could do to prevent it. The king was insignificant, powerless, and not in control – just like that twig!

Both the city and the king were being carried along just like a twig floating on the water. And neither Assyria nor Egypt would care what happened to them. And, of course, historically that is precisely how events transpired.

Hosea 10:8

8 The high places of Aven, the sin of Israel, shall be destroyed. Thorn and thistle shall grow up on their altars, and they shall say to the mountains, "Cover us," and to the hills, "Fall on us."

The high places of Aven are the high places of Bethel where the people worshiped their golden calf.

At first, Hosea referred to Bethel (House of God) as Beth-Aven (House of Emptiness or Wickedness), but now Hosea has shortened it further to just Aven. (I think Hosea's motto is never use two words when one will do!)

The promise here is that those high places would be destroyed, and that thorns and thistles would grow on the altars where the people had worshiped their so-called fertility god. Not only was Baal powerless to prevent drought and famine, but Baal was powerless to prevent weeds from growing on his own altars.

The phrase "sin of Israel" in verse 8 is a common description in the Bible for the false shrines in Bethel and Dan and for Jeroboam I, the king who first set them up. In fact, if we do a search for the words "Jeroboam," "sin," and "Israel," we will find 21 verses from 1st and 2nd Kings.

2 Kings 3:3 – Nevertheless, he clung to the sin of **Jeroboam** the son of Nebat, which he made **Israel** to **sin**; he did not depart from it.

Verse 8 ends with the people saying to the mountains, "Cover us," and to the hills, "Fall on us." We know that things are really bad when the best option we can find is that a mountain would fall on us!

But, we need to pause and say something about this final phrase because it is a phrase that we also find in the New Testament.

Luke 23:26–31 – And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Revelation 6:15–17 – Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

When people find such language in the New Testament, we often hear the argument that such language must be describing the end of the world because no other event could ever be described with such language. Only at the end of the world

could it ever be said that mountains are falling, they say.

And whether that language in the New Testament is in fact describing the end of the world we will leave to another day. But we can say something now about the argument that such language can **only** be describing the end of the world.

We know that argument is wrong. Why? Because that same language is being used right here in Hosea to describe something that is most certainly **not** the end of the world. Here in verse 8 that same language is describing the end of Israel in the 8th century BC.

And so here is a Bible study tip for understanding such language in the Bible – and especially in the book of Revelation where we most often hear such argument used. Before we ever say that certain language can **only** describe the end of the world, we should look for whether and how that same language is used elsewhere in the Bible. Very often we will find that the same language is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe something that is **not** the end of the world.

That fact will not answer our question about what is being described in the New Testament, but it will tell us that we need to dig a little deeper to figure that out – and that is never a bad thing! It is amazing how many bad arguments about the Bible can be refuted with just a concordance!

Hosea 10:9

9 From the days of Gibeah, you have sinned, O Israel; there they have continued. Shall not the war against the unjust overtake them in Gibeah?

This is our third time to see Gibeah in the book of Hosea, and we are now quite familiar with that evil city.

As we recall, Gibeah was the city in Judges 19 where a Levite's concubine was assaulted, killed, and chopped up into twelve pieces. And we recall that Gibeah was mentioned earlier in Hosea 5:8 and in Hosea 9:9.

In addition to the depravity of Gibeah that we saw in Hosea 5 and Hosea 9, there may be an additional reason why we see Gibeah again here in Hosea 10. By the time of Hosea, there was a ruined fortress in Gibeah that had once been the home of King Saul. You can see the location of that fortress on the Handout for Lesson 35.

Gibeah was first excavated in 1922, and that Handout also shows a sketch of what was uncovered.

The fortress had a wall some 4 feet thick, ... and a tower. The fortress fell into decay after the reign of David, and it does not seem to have had great military significance during Hosea's lifetime.

Based on that excavation, it seems that the city of Gibeah was destroyed after the events in Judges 19–20, but was then later rebuilt by King Saul to serve as his palace.

1 Samuel 10:26 – Saul also went to his home at Gibeah, and with him went men of valor whose hearts God had touched.

Isaiah refers to the city as “Gibeah of Saul.”

Isaiah 10:29 – They have crossed over the pass; at Geba they lodge for the night; Ramah trembles; Gibeah of Saul has fled.

Why then is Gibeah mentioned here in Hosea 10?

One reason is the same reason that we saw twice before in Hosea – Gibeah was a place of great depravity. But I think there is a second reason. Gibeah was also a reminder of the folly of trusting in your own military power instead of trusting in God.

Saul built a great fort in Gibeah. And now where was Saul? And where was that great fort? King Saul had been replaced by the house of David, and King Saul’s fort in Gibeah was just a ruin. And the same things were about to happen to Israel.

“From the days of Gibeah, you have sinned, O Israel; there they have continued.”

That phrase looks back at the sordid history of Gibeah, and then it confirms what we already know – that sordid history was not just history. The people were still just as sordid and just as depraved. They were still trusting in themselves rather than in God.

That is what verse 9 means when it says “there they have continued.” That might be better translated as “there you remain.” Just as it was in the early days of Gibeah, Israel was still

relying on violence and military power rather than relying on God.

“Shall not the war against the unjust overtake them in Gibeah?”

Israel thought it was safe. Israel thought their military might would save them. Israel thought that Egypt would save them. They were just like King Saul in Gibeah – nothing can touch me here!

But their own version of Gibeah would fare no better than did the actual city of Gibeah. That is the point of the rhetorical question at the end of verse 9.

Hosea 10:10

10 When I please, I will discipline them, and nations shall be gathered against them when they are bound up for their double iniquity.

Like Saul behind the walls of his fortress at Gibeah, Israel thought it going to be safe behind the walls of Samaria, but Israel was not safe. God was going to discipline them, and God was going to discipline them at whatever time pleased him.

That is what verse 10 tells us. But verse 10 does have some difficulties.

First, what are the nations (plural) that would be gathered against them?

Although Israel was eventually conquered by the *single* nation of Assyria, this is not the first time we have seen *plural* nations in Hosea.

Hosea 8:8 – Israel is swallowed up; already they are among the nations as a useless vessel.

Hosea 9:17 – My God will reject them because they have not listened to him; they shall be wanderers among the nations.

And we know from our historical review that multiple nations were involved in Israel's fall. In fact, the fall of Samaria occurred after the final king of Israel, Hoshea, rejected Assyria and turned instead to Egypt for help in 2 Kings 17. So that nations in verse 10 may include both Assyria and Egypt.

Another possibility is that the "nations" or "peoples" in verse 10 is describing the nations and the peoples in the Assyrian army. As would later be true of both Babylon and Rome, the Assyrian army was composed of soldiers from the many nations that it had conquered.

However we interpret the word "nations" in verse 10, the point is clear – these nations would all be gathered by God to punish Israel.

Isaiah paints a very vivid picture for us, not with regard to Israel but rather with regard to Judah. He describes a gathering against Judah by showing Assyria and Egypt coming when God whistles for them!

Isaiah 7:17-18 – The LORD will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's

house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah – the king of Assyria! In that day the LORD will whistle for the fly that is at the end of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria.

Yes, the nations were gathering against Israel, but that was not happening because God was powerless to prevent it – that was happening because God was commanding it to happen! Assyria was the dog, and God was using a dog whistle to call that dog!

The second difficult question about verse 10 is what is meant by the end of the verse: “when they are bound up for their double iniquity.”

There have been many suggested meanings for this “double iniquity,” but I think we can use the context to figure out the most likely meaning.

What is the central image in the book of Hosea? Spiritual adultery.

We saw that image in the opening verses of the book when Hosea was commanded to marry a prostitute, and we have been seeing that same image over and over again in the verses that followed.

And how had Israel been guilty of spiritual adultery? In two ways.

First, they had rejected God, their husband, to instead run after Baal, their false fertility god. And second, they had rejected God, their husband, to instead seek help from the surrounding nations, Assyria and Egypt.

I think those two sins are the two iniquities in verse 10 – the sin of rejecting God in favor of Baal, and the sin of rejecting God in favor of Assyria and Egypt. Both of those sins are examples of spiritual adultery.

Hosea 10:11

11 Ephraim was a trained calf that loved to thresh, and I spared her fair neck; but I will put Ephraim to the yoke; Judah must plow; Jacob must harrow for himself.

As one commentary says about Hosea, “there is never a lack of lively imagery in this book.”

To understand verse 11, we first need to look at the wide range of subjects that we find in this verse. We are not at all surprised to see Ephraim, but we also see Judah, and we also see Jacob. Why?

Ephraim, as we know, was what was left of the northern kingdom of Israel at this time. The others tribes had either disappeared long ago or had been carried off by the Assyrians during the reign of Pekah. And Ephraim would soon be carried off itself when the Assyrians came back during the reign of Hoshea to finish what they had started.

Judah, of course, was the southern kingdom. Judah has not been the focus of the book of Hosea, but Judah has been mentioned in passing quite a bit.

What Judah needed to do was learn a lesson from what was happening to Israel. What was happening

to Israel could happen to Judah – and, in fact, it did happen to Judah when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon showed up in 586 BC. But the difference was that Judah returned from their exile, while Israel did not.

But isn't that everyone? Why do we also see Jacob mentioned in verse 11?

When we see the name Jacob, we think of the twelve tribes of Israel named after the twelve sons of Jacob. I think what that tells us is that there is a historical perspective at play in verse 11.

We see the current time of Hosea in which the kingdom was divided, and Ephraim and Judah was all that was left of the twelve tribes. And we also see Jacob, which points us back to the days when all twelve tribes still existed.

I think Jacob is mentioned here as a subtle reminder of just how far the people had fallen. They were now down to only two tribes – and really only one and a half tribes because Ephraim, as one of the two sons of Joseph, was only a half-tribe.

Now, with that background, let's go back to the text of verse 11 and see what is being said here about Ephraim, Judah, and Jacob.

Ephraim was a trained calf that loved to thresh, and I spared her fair neck.

As we have seen, the people had made calves and worshiped them as their gods. But here God turns

that around on them – **God is not the calf, but they are!**

A heifer or a calf performed two kinds of work.

First, they performed **threshing** in which the animal would walk on the harvested stalks to separate the grain from the ear.

And second, they performed **plowing**, in which the animal would be harnessed to a sledge or a plow.

And why did Ephraim love to thresh? Because threshing was much easier than plowing. Unlike threshing, plowing was very hard work.

And so the first thing we learn about Ephraim in verse 11 is that Ephraim had been trained to do the easy work, and Ephraim loved it! Nothing difficult was asked of this trained calf, and the calf did not disappoint.

And, in fact, its ability to do this easy job had another advantage for the calf, perhaps an advantage of which it was not aware – God spared her fair neck! This calf was still alive because it had been trained to thresh, and it was good at that job.

But God had more in mind for this calf than just threshing. God was planning to assign this calf a much harder job. We see that in the phrase “fair neck,” which indicates the strength of the animal rather than its appearance. Something was coming for this calf that would require a strong neck.

And what was that harder job? We see it next in verse 11.

But I will put Ephraim to the yoke.

Ephraim loved threshing, but how would Ephraim feel about plowing? How would Ephraim react when it suddenly found a yoke around its neck?

What is this yoke that God had in mind for Ephraim? And what is the easier job that they started off doing? Let's start with that second question first.

The easy job that Ephraim loved was to be blessed by God! That was what came from threshing, not only figuratively for the people but also literally for the animal.

Deuteronomy 25:4 – You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.

The ox loved threshing because the ox was fed in the process. And likewise Ephraim loved threshing because Ephraim was blessed in the process. Just like that ox!

But Ephraim forgot where those blessings came from – which was most likely **not** like that dumb ox! I suspect that ox knew where its blessings came from, but Ephraim did not. Rather than thanking God, Ephraim was thanking Baal.

And so what was going to happen next? They had failed God with the easy job of threshing – how would they do with the hard job of plowing? And

there is a question that answers itself! We know how they would do!

As we have already been told, God was going to withdraw those blessings. And, in fact, that was already happening with the drought and the famine, and it would happen with finality when the Assyrians showed up.

Israel had enjoyed a preferred position as part of the chosen people of God, but now God had renamed them "Not Mine" and "Not Loved." As we have repeatedly seen, God was effectively putting them back where he found them. They were figuratively headed back to Egypt!

The days of threshing were over. The days of plowing had arrived.

But the coming hard times were not for Ephraim only.

Judah must plow.

Yes, it was the north and not the south that was carried off into Assyrian exile, but both the north and the south were attacked by Assyria.

The Bible tells us that the Assyrian king Sennacherib attacked Judah in the 14th year of Hezekiah's reign.

2 Kings 18:13 – In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them.

And, as he had done with Ahaz, the prophet Isaiah came to deliver God's word to Hezekiah. But,

unlike Ahaz, Hezekiah listened to that word, and Hezekiah prayed to God for deliverance.

2 Kings 19:19 – So now, O LORD our God, save us, please, from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O LORD, are God alone.

And, as a result, one of the most amazing things, not just in the Bible, but in all recorded history, happened.

2 Kings 19:35–36 – And that night the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went home and lived at Nineveh.

God did not allow Assyria to do to Judah what Assyria had done to Israel.

But even so, hard times were in store for Judah just as they were for Israel. “Judah must plow!”

Jacob must harrow for himself.

As for that phrase “for himself” at the end of verse 11 in the ESV, I think the ASV translation is better: “Jacob shall break his clods.”

As we said, this reference to Jacob points us all the way back to the beginning of the people’s history – back when they still had all twelve tribes.

Why is Jacob mentioned here?

We have already seen one reason – it is a subtle reminder of how far the people had fallen. They

had fallen from twelve tribes to only one and half tribes!

But I think there is another reason as well – Jacob means everybody else! Ephraim would plow. Judah would plow. And everyone else would plow.

Any Jew who was not from the tribe of Ephraim or from the tribe of Judah would still be included in verse 11 because all of the Jews were from the line of Jacob.

Hosea 10:12

12 Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the LORD, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.

Verse 12 is not just one of the most beautiful verses in the book of Hosea, but verse 12 is one of the most beautiful verses in the entire Bible.

And one reason verse 12 is so beautiful is because of its contrast with the verses that surround it.

If there was any point in history where the days of repentance were over, it would be right here. The people had fallen about as far as they could possibly fall, and the Assyrians were knocking at the door. God had given them up as his people, calling them “Not Loved” and “Not Mine,” and God had evicted them from their promised land.

Surely it was now too late for them to ever turn things around! No. It was not too late. That is

what verse 12 tells us. Even now, the door was open for them to return to God and once again be blessed by God.

I think we would have closed the door on this people long before, but I think we often close the door on people a lot quicker than God does.

Yes, God is closing a door here in Hosea, but I think God is closing that door very slowly. God is not slamming it shut as we might do, but rather God is inching that door shut bit by bit, hoping that some will rush through the ever narrowing gap.

I think we see all of that here in verse 12.

“Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the LORD, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.”

And if ever there was a time to seek the Lord, this was it. That door was about to close for Israel.

But even then it would not remain closed forever. When Jesus came he would proclaim the good news to a descendant of this very people when he met the woman at the well in John 4.

And what did the people need to do to return to God? They needed to plant righteousness. They needed to reap love. And they needed to break up the hardened ground that their hearts had become.

If they did those things, God would rain righteousness upon them. Yes, there was a drought

and a famine, but God promised them rain. And yes, they thought Baal was the storm god, but if they wanted rain, they had to turn to God and only to God. And the door remained open for them to do that.

That is why verse 12 is so beautiful. But that is also why verse 12 is so sad.

Verse 12 is sad because we know that the people did not turn to God even as their entire world was crumbling all around them. Even then, they remained rebellious and disobedient.

Both Isaiah and Paul describe such people.

Isaiah 65:1-5 – I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, “Here I am, here I am,” to a nation that was not called by my name. I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and making offerings on bricks; who sit in tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat pig's flesh, and broth of tainted meat is in their vessels; who say, “Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you.” These are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all the day.

Romans 10:20-21 – Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, “I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.” But of Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.”