

Lesson 37

Hosea 11:4

4 I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them.

Once again we have a change of metaphor. Rather than being a wife or a child, Ephraim is now an ox whose yoke is loosened by God and who is then hand-fed by God.

Verse 4 opens with the phrase, "I led them with cords of kindness," but that translation is really a paraphrase. The Hebrew literally reads, "I led them with cords of a human." What does that mean?

One possibility is that the intent of the phrase is not the kindness of God but instead is the gentleness of God. Rather than leading this ox with an all-powerful rope made by God, God instead uses a much less powerful rope made by man.

Another possibility is that this human rope is none other than Moses.

Yes, God led Israel out of Egypt, but God used a particular human to do that. And rather than talk to the people directly, God talked to them through that human.

I think this possibility also suggests gentleness, but it does so in a much more specific way. God dealt gently with the people through his use of an intermediary, Moses.

That view also explains the next phrase, “with the bands of love,” or “ropes of love.” God was doing things this way because he loved them.

And God eased the burden of their yoke. He did not remove the yoke entirely so as to make them a wild ox, but rather God adjusted their yoke so that it was easier for them to bear. The harshness of Pharaoh was replaced by the gentleness of God.

And finally, God fed this ox by hand, which, of course, also reminds us of the exodus and the manna that God provided for his people.

Hosea 11:5

5 They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me.

Earlier in Hosea, God said that he would return them to Egypt.

Hosea 8:13 – Now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins; they shall return to Egypt.

But now God says that they shall **not** return to Egypt. How do we explain that? We have already answered that question.

When God said that they would return to Egypt, God was telling the people that once again they would find themselves under the power of a foreign government. Once again they would be in bondage, just as they had been in bondage when they were slaves in Egypt. In effect, God was telling the people that he was going to put them back where he found them – put them back in the same state they had been in before God rescued them.

The reference to Egypt back in Hosea 8:13 was not literal, but instead was figurative. How do we know that?

First, we know that because of the **first** half of Hosea 11:5. It cannot be true that the people would both literally return to Egypt and not literally return to Egypt. Something has to give!

Second, we know that the reference to Egypt in Hosea 8:13 is not literal because of the history recounted elsewhere in the Bible.

Although a few people may have fled to Egypt, the great majority of them went to Assyria rather than to Egypt. Israel was conquered by Assyria rather than by Egypt. Hosea has already told us what would happen: Assyria would invade while Egypt laughed.

And third, we know that the reference to Egypt in Hosea 8:13 is not literal because of the **second** half of Hosea 11:5. We are told here precisely where the people were going – not to Egypt, but rather to Assyria.

And why was this happening? Verse 5 tells us – again! “Because they have refused to return to me.” That was the same reason we saw at the end of Chapter 9.

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

The first step in knowing God is to listen to God. The people here did not know God because they had not listened to God.

And, as a result, they were going to once again find themselves in bondage – this time in Assyria rather than in Egypt – but bondage is bondage no matter who holds the key to that jail cell.

Hosea 11:6

6 The sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates, and devour them because of their own counsels.

The raging sword in verse 6 was the sword of Assyria, and that raging sword would soon be used against the cities of Israel.

The Handout for Lesson 37 shows what one book has to say about Assyria’s army and Assyrian tactics. Here is how another recent book describes the Assyrian strategy.

Three primary strategies of warfare existed for the Assyrians: pitched battles, siege warfare, and psychological warfare. A pitched battle occurred between two armies in open country. These typically were avoided if possible; they

did not last long, and casualties were often high for both sides. ... Siege warfare also included tactics designed to break through the city walls: ramps, battering rams, digging of tunnels, flaming arrows, or ladders to scale the walls.

To avoid both pitched battles and siege warfare, Assyrians frequently employed tactics of psychological warfare. This involved instilling an “awesome fear” in their opponents – a calculated intimidation meant to convince opponents that the cost of war with Assyria was too great to bear. For example, the army might first surround the city walls and simply shout over to the inhabitants, trying to persuade them to surrender. [This is what happened when Assyria invaded Judah.]

If this method was unsuccessful, the army would target a weaker, nearby city and destroy it instead. The inhabitants would be punished as examples. This often involved torture, rape, bodily mutilation, eye gouging, skinning alive, etc. Towns would be burned, orchards cut down, fields would be salted so they could no longer be used, and so on. Skins, heads, body parts, and mutilated bodies – living or dead – could be gathered and displayed to further convince stubborn inhabitants that submission was the most sensible option. This was an effective way of instilling fear and establishing respect throughout the empire, and the Assyrian reputation was in itself an effective means of control.

That is the raging sword in verse 6.

The second phrase in verse 6 is “consume the bars of their gates,” and there is a translation issue with that phrase.

The Hebrew word translated “bars” in verse 6 has five possible meanings: pole, priest, boast, solitude, and linen. Apparently, because a bar in

a gate looks like a pole, most translations agree with the ESV – “bars of their gates.”

But I think either “priest” or “boast” may be correct instead. The sword would consume all of the false priests of Baal, and the sword would put an end to all of their boasting.

We can’t say for sure which is correct, and perhaps that particular word was chosen to convey all of those possibilities, each of which certainly came true when the Assyrians arrived.

Finally, verse 6 says that the Assyrians would “devour them because of their own counsels.”

First, the focus on their “counsels” in this phrase may suggest that “boasts” (rather than “bars” or “priests”) was the intended meaning of the prior phrase.

But second, we already know what these counsels were. King Hoshea switched his allegiance to Egypt at the last minute, which caused Assyria to invade. And, no doubt, Hoshea listened to many so-called wise counsellors before making that tremendously dumb decision! Ephraim was devoured because of those counsels!

Hosea 11:7

7 My people are bent on turning away from me,
and though they call out to the Most High, he
shall not raise them up at all.

“My people **are bent** on turning away from me.”

That translation suggests that the people are determined to turn away from God, and perhaps that is the correct meaning – but the Hebrew word translated “bent” by the ESV literally means “hang.” And that is how the same word is used elsewhere in the Bible the few times it is used.

Deuteronomy 28:66 – Your life shall hang in doubt before you.

2 Samuel 21:12 – David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan ... where the Philistines had hanged them...

In neither case does the verb mean “bent upon” or “determined to” as verse 7 is translated here by the ESV. Instead, in each of those two other verses, the verb means “hang.”

And that verse from Deuteronomy 28 is particularly important because we know that Hosea has been referring us back to that chapter in Deuteronomy all throughout the book.

So, if the verb means here in verse 7 what it means elsewhere in the Bible, what then is verse 7 saying?

“My people are hanging on turning away from me.” That is, “my people are depending on turning away from me.”

In short, the people had chosen Baal over God – and they thought they had made the right choice! In fact, they were depending on having made the right choice. They were hanging all their hopes on having made the right choice.

But by now I suspect they were having some serious doubts about that choice. And what was it we read just a moment ago from Deuteronomy 28?

Deuteronomy 28:66 – Your life shall hang in doubt before you.

I think verse 7 is once again pointing us back to Deuteronomy 28.

The people had been **hanging** everything on their choice of Baal over God – but now they were **hanging** in doubt instead!

And that doubt might very well cause them to switch back to God – as if loyalty is something that can be switched on and off.

If the people had been loyal to God they would never have switched to Baal in the first place. That they are now trying to switch back to God is not a sign of loyalty but instead is a sign of desperation.

And that is how God sees it: “he shall not raise them up at all.”

Yes, they call out to God in their doubt about Baal, but God will not save them from what is to come.

God told them in Hosea 10:12 what they needed to do if they wanted to return to him, and they are not doing those things here. Instead, when they realize Baal has failed them, they are suddenly just trying to switch horses once again.

That is not repentance. That is not sowing righteousness. That is not reaping steadfast love. That is not breaking up fallow ground. That is not seeking the Lord. The people are not doing what God told them to do in Hosea 10:12.

Hosea 11:8

8 How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

We have asked it before, but let's ask it again: Was God happy about what was happening to Israel? Was God saying with grim satisfaction, "I told you so!"? Was God pleased that Israel was finally getting what it deserved?

I think verse 8 answers those questions with a resounding no. Here is how one commentary describes this verse:

Abruptly, God enters what can only be described as distraught self-questioning. Like a father who is at wit's end over what to do with a wayward child, God is here at a loss as he tries to resolve his compassion for Israel and the punishment demanded by their sin. One may of course regard this as metaphor, as language that somehow puts divine love into terms that a human can understand, even though God himself does not really experience self-doubt and anxiety over issues of justice and mercy. ... While accepting the fact that God transcends our metaphors ..., texts such as this should be allowed to speak to us in the power of their raw emotion. It is precisely in texts such as this that the love of

God becomes a vivid reality and not a barren abstraction.

And that is the picture we see here in verse 8: raw emotion.

This is God speaking! *How can I give you up? How can I hand you over? My heart recoils within me.*

Again, in a single verse, we see both the great beauty of this book and the great sadness of this book. We see both the great depth of God's love and the great depravity of those who had rejected God.

And God is giving them up. God is handing them over.

Is God happy about that? Not at all! "My heart recoils within me," he says.

How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

Who or what was Admah? Who or what was Zeboiim?

Zeboiim and Admah, together with Bela, were the **other** cities of the plain along with Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 14.

Genesis 14:2 – These kings made war with Bera king of **Sodom**, Birsha king of **Gomorrah**, Shinab king of **Admah**, Shemeber king of **Zeboiim**, and the king of **Bela** (that is, Zoar).

And Admah and Zeboiim were destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah.

Genesis 19:24–25 – Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out

of heaven. And he overthrew those cities, **and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities,** and what grew on the ground.

Deuteronomy 29:23 – The whole land burned out with brimstone and salt, nothing sown and nothing growing, where no plant can sprout, an overthrow like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, **Admah, and Zeboiim,** which the LORD overthrew in his anger and wrath.

Jeremiah 49:18 – As when Sodom and Gomorrah **and their neighboring cities** were overthrown, says the LORD, no man shall dwell there, no man shall sojourn in her.

So that answers our first question – when God asks, “How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?,” God is asking, “How can I do to you what I did to Sodom and Gomorrah?”

But we now have a second question – why didn’t God say that? Why didn’t God refer to the two famous cities everyone knows about? Why instead do we see Admah and Zeboiim?

We know that Sodom and Gomorrah are frequently mentioned by other prophets.

Isaiah 1:9 – If the LORD of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.

Amos 4:11 – I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were as a brand plucked out of the burning; yet you did not return to me,” declares the LORD.

Why don’t we see that here in Hosea? Why do we instead see Admah and Zeboiim?

Here is what one commentator says:

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Hosea is at times deliberately obscure, elusive, and demanding of his reader. ... This book is highly elliptical and allusive, and in this case it requires the reader to recognize the allusion to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by mentioning their far less famous sister cities.

And by "Hosea," I think he must mean the book rather than the person. Why? Because God is the one speaking here in verse 8. If someone is being deliberately obscure here, it is God.

And, yes, God is being obscure here, but I do not think God is being obscure just for the sake of being obscure. Instead, I think God chose these two obscure cities to give the people a **reminder**.

Admah and Zeboiim are mentioned in three places in the Bible. Hosea is one place, and Genesis is another place. And where is the third place? We saw that verse just a moment ago – Deuteronomy 29:23.

And where is Deuteronomy 29? Right after Deuteronomy 28!

God is once again pointing the people back to that chapter full of the curses they had been told to expect if they ever did the things that they had now done. Admah and Zeboiim take us straight back to Deuteronomy 28 and 29.

My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

We have already talked about the first half of that sentence. Far from being happy about what was happening, God says that it is causing his heart to recoil within him.

And God also says here that his compassion grows warm and tender. I think we know what that means – but what does it mean in this context? How could God still send the Assyrians to destroy Ephraim if his compassion had grown warm and tender?

I think we will find the answer to that question in the next verse.

Hosea 11:9

9 I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

This book never gets any easier! We have a lot of very hard questions about verse 9!

- Why in verse 9 does God say that he will **not** execute his anger and will **not** destroy Ephraim even though God has seemingly been saying all throughout the book that he will in fact do both of those things and even though the Bible elsewhere seemingly confirms that God, in fact, did both of those things when the Assyrians invaded?
- And why in verse 9 does God say that he will not **again** destroy Ephraim? When had God destroyed Ephraim the first time?
- And we still have our question left over from verse 8 – how was the Assyrian invasion

of Ephraim an example of God's warm and tender compassion?

We are going to look at those questions in some detail, but here is the short answer to all three questions: **things could have been worse!**

We cannot understand verse 9 apart from its context in verse 8, which is Sodom and Gomorrah (and the neighboring cities). God was **not** going to do to Ephraim what he had done to those other cities. And what had God done to those other cities?

Genesis 19:24 – Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven.

That was not going to happen to Ephraim, and that was an example of God's warm and tender compassion. Why?

Because by not doing to Ephraim what he had done to Sodom and Gomorrah, some might have said that God owed those other cities an apology! In fact, I think that same point is made elsewhere in other contexts.

Ezekiel 16:48 – As I live, declares the Lord GOD, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done.

Matthew 11:24 – But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.

If God had rained fire and brimstone down on Ephraim, no one could have called it unjust. Why not? Because Ephraim was worse than Sodom and

Gomorrah had ever been! Ephraim had started higher and had fallen further.

But God did not do to Ephraim what Ephraim deserved. And I think that is the point of verse 9.

The “burning anger” not executed in verse 9 is the burning anger that turned the cities of the plain into just a plain in Genesis 19.

That leaves only one remaining question: why in verse 9 does God say that he will not **again** destroy Ephraim? When had God destroyed Ephraim the first time?

In these verses, Ephraim is described as a second Sodom. What that means is that Sodom was the first Ephraim. And so, I think the word “again” in verse 9 is referring us back to the destruction of Sodom, the first Ephraim.

“And I will not come in wrath.”

There is a translation issue here, and I prefer the KJV (“I will not enter into the city”) over the ESV (“I will not come in wrath”).

Why? Because entering the city has a particularly important meaning when it comes to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Genesis 18:22-26 – So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD. Then Abraham drew near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to

do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

And we recall that Abraham eventually got the number down to 10 – but even that was not enough to spare those cities.

But notice that phrase in verse 26 – “If I find at Sodom...” That is God speaking. And the picture that phrase shows us is God entering the city of Sodom and looking for righteous people.

And what does God then say here in verse 9? “I will not enter into the city.”

And why not? Because God had already decided not to do to Ephraim what he had done to Sodom. There was no need for God to enter the city and count the righteous. The decision had already been made.

“For I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst.”

I think we know what that means, but why does God say it here?

To answer that question, I think we need to once again turn back to Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 23:14 – Because the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may

not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.

Earlier we said that God did not enter the city because there was no need for him to do so. But here I think we see another reason why God did not enter the city – because had God done so, he would surely have destroyed it!

Verse 7 shows the people crying out to God after Baal had failed them. I think here in verse 9 what we see is that the people should have been very thankful that God did not show up to see what they had been doing!

These verses are speaking of God in terms of a man – someone who walks in their camp and someone who visits or does not visit a city. But those *anthropomorphic* descriptions of God are simply describing the nature of God to us in terms that we can understand.

We know that God is not a man – as this verse reminds us. We know that God is omnipresent and omniscient. God was in that city, and God knew everything that was going on there. And we also know that God knew how many righteous people were in Sodom the entire time he was bargaining with Abraham.

But, with all of that said, I think we see some very interesting foreshadowing in verse 9. Why?

Because the great blessings that we see in this book of Hosea about Israel's future are possible only because God did, in fact, become a man and did, in fact, literally enter a city.

Philippians 2:5-7 – Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

God the Father says here, “I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst.”

But God the Son could later say, “I am God and a man, the Holy One in your midst.”

Hosea 11:10-11

10 They shall go after the LORD; he will roar like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west; 11 they shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria, and I will return them to their homes, declares the LORD.

In verse 8, we saw the compassion of God.

In verse 9, we saw one way that God showed that compassion to Ephraim – he did not destroy them as he had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah even though Ephraim deserved a worse punishment than God had inflicted upon Sodom and Gomorrah.

Now, in verses 10-11, we see another way that God showed his compassion to Ephraim – he was planning to bless Ephraim at a future time.

And, yes, these verses are jumping quickly from one topic to another – but that should not surprise us now that we have seen 11 chapters of Hosea! While Isaiah might take a chapter or two

for each of these topics, Hosea takes only a verse or two!

But how do we know that verses 10–11 have shifted to the future? How do we know that these verses are describing a future blessing? Because of several reasons.

First, we have the verb tense: “They **shall go** after the LORD. ... I **will return** them to their home.”

Second, we have the promise of a **return**.

We know that the people listening to Hosea did not return from exile. The remaining northern tribes were scattered and never returned. By the time Jesus came, those tribes had become Samaritans and were treated as Gentiles.

Third, we have **repentance**. “They shall **go after the LORD**; he will roar like a lion; when he roars, his children shall **come trembling** from the west.”

We know that, at this time, Ephraim did not repent. And how do we know that? We know that because even at this late date God promised in Hosea 10:12 to restore them if they repented – and we know they were not restored. We know that Assyria invaded and carried them all off.