

Perhaps you've seen one of the memes shared on social media as warnings about coronavirus began to circulate. They say something like, "I survived bird flu, mad cow disease, MERS, SARS, and the swine flu..." and then something to imply they'll live through COVID-19. The thrust of the joke is that "yeah, yeah, yeah...they made a big hype out of all those other things, but they never touched me. This will be nothing too."

As Americans, we are trained to think this way. We believe that we are the greatest nation ever—and therefore, we are indestructible. We cannot fathom that God could snap his fingers and, in an instant, bring this republic to an end. And such hubris leads to foolishness, and such foolishness can lead to death.

That's how God's people—represented by the kingdoms of Ephraim and Judah—were in Hosea's day. "Yeah, yeah, yeah...Hosea's been preaching for a decade about this coming judgment. I don't know about you, but I haven't seen any judgment!"

And that's how we are in our sin. We continue in it, thinking it will satisfy us. We disregard warnings about God's wrath because "Hey...I've been doing these things all my life! It's working out! I haven't died! I don't see any judgment!"

In our text, in three points, we'll see why this is dangerous and what we should do instead.

### 1) Sin is a dangerous deception. (11:12-12:2)

Our passage with a description of Ephraim (Israel), the northern kingdom: "**Ephraim has surrounded me with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit.**" The Lord pictures himself standing in the middle of his people. As he looks around, he finds that those who surround him are characterized by lies and deception.

Then his attention shifts to Judah in the south. The ESV reads, "**but Judah still walks with God and is faithful to the Holy One.**" Judah, in contrast, is still faithful to God. This may be because the Temple was in Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. And Judah had an occasional good king, whereas Ephraim had none.

An alternate translation takes this sentence as a negative: 'god' here as "El," the high-god of the Canaanites and "Holy Ones" as holy ones, meaning El's court of lesser gods. Given its context and the following indictment of Judah (in 12:2), I lean towards this interpretation—an indication that Judah is soiled with idol worship.

In **12:1**, the Lord returns his attention to the northern kingdom: "**...they multiply falsehood and violence; they make a covenant with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt.**" From north to south, God's people are characterized by evils we have seen throughout Hosea. They multiply lies and deception. They multiply violence through assassination, murder, and mistreatment of the poor. They entered a covenant with Assyria and pay a tribute of oil to Egypt.

Notice how the Lord describes this. "**Ephraim feeds...and pursues...**" They are depicted as feeding on and harvesting food.

**Why do we eat and pursue food?** Because we have a need! If we don't eat, we won't live. We seek and eat food, believing it will satisfy and sustain us. That is why Israel and Judah were lying, murdering, making covenants with neighboring superpowers, and worshiping idols. They had some need—perhaps it was a famine, an epidemic, or a foreign power that threatened their livelihood, wealth, or dreams. They believed that such evils were means by which they could satisfy and sustain them. **Notice what they are actually eating.**

Ephraim "**feeds on the wind and pursues the east wind all day long.**" That's a silly thought, isn't it? Picture a hungry man standing outside trying to take bites out of the wind. Picture a woman who tells her roommate, "Hey, I'm heading out to get groceries." Her roommate looks out the window to see her with plastic Wal-Mart sacks trying to catch the wind and bring it inside to eat.

**Why is that picture silly?** Because wind is essentially nothing! You can't eat wind—it won't sustain or satisfy you. Eating wind is futile. Only a deceived person would try.

**That's what sin is, a dangerous deception.** Sin brings the wrath of God. Hosea gets to the point in **verse 2**. "**The LORD has an indictment against Judah and will punish Jacob according to his ways; he will repay him according to his deeds.**" They deceived and murdered and took refuge in foreign nations. Now, those foreign nations will deceive them, kill them and drag them off into foreign lands.

**Do not be deceived. You are not safe in your sin.** The author of Hebrews (9:27) says, "it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment." **You are going to die, and judgment will follow.**

**You might ask yourself today:** Where am I deceived? Where do my actions (or inactions) betray faith in my schemes to sustain and satisfy? Hosea shows us a better way.

## **2) We are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone.**

In the previous verse, Hosea called the nation "Jacob." Jacob is the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. He is the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Hosea offers Jacob as an illustration of what must happen with Israel and Judah.

He begins (3), "**In the womb he took his brother by the heel.**" Jacob was a twin to Esau. Esau was born first, but Jacob followed with "his hand holding Esau's heel."<sup>1</sup> This would symbolize the relationship between the two brothers. Jacob would seek to overcome his firstborn brother.

Hosea continues, "**and in his manhood he strove with God.**" Hosea does not mention any specific striving here because that's not his point. His point is that Jacob's whole life—from the womb unto mature manhood—was characterized by an eagerness to overcome. Hosea's hearer were similarly eager to overcome what afflicted them—but in the wrong way, through sin and self-sufficiency. They have a lesson to learn from Jacob's life.

**Verse 4** highlights two famous incidents. In the first, "**[Jacob] strove with the angel and prevailed.**" This strange event is recorded in **Genesis 32**. A mysterious figure met Jacob and wrestled with him all night, finally striking Jacob in the hip and putting it out of joint. Nevertheless, Jacob refused to let go until he received a blessing. He receives a blessing and a new name, "Israel." Jacob then realized that he wrestled with God.

Notice how Hosea describes Jacob's prevailing. He offers a detail not given in Genesis 32—"**he wept and sought his favor.**" Jacob wept—likely from the pain of the dislocated hip. The picture we have is Jacob humbled, crying out in desperation. He knew he was beaten, and so he sought **grace**.

The second incident is when "**[Jacob] met God at Bethel.**" This happened earlier in Jacob's life, just after he had cheated Esau out of his birthright and his blessing.<sup>2</sup> While was traveling, he stopped for the night. In his dream, he saw a ladder reaching from heaven to earth. The Lord appeared to Jacob to confirm that the blessing promised to Abraham would be his.

Notice how Hosea describes the Lord's speech to Jacob—"**and there God spoke with us.**" "**With us.**" The Lord's promise was not merely to Jacob, but to the whole nation. And notice how that promise came to Jacob—in the same way the Lord made the covenant with Abraham. The Lord enacted and reconfirmed the covenant with each while they were *asleep*. The Lord initiated. The Lord spoke. Neither Abraham nor Jacob did a thing. It was all of grace.

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 25:26

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 28

**We learn that God's covenant blessings come by God's initiative, they come by grace, and they come to the one who weeps and seeks God's favor.** Those who are humbled, confessing their inability to save themselves, and ask God for mercy will find that God has pursued them and is running to meet them with unmerited favor.

Hosea told us Jacob strove with "God" and met "God" and "God" spoke. But now, in **verse 5**, he tells us who this God is. He is "**Yahweh, the God of hosts, Yahweh is his memorial name.**" "Yahweh" is the personal, covenant name of God, by which he was known to Israel. This God, the God of armies, is *their* God.

Hosea is not pointing Israel to the terrifying covenant made at Sinai, which offered curses for disobedience and blessings for obedience. Instead, he reminds them of the covenant with Abraham, passed down through Jacob—a covenant of grace, received by faith.

**Hosea speaks to us because the blessing promised to Abraham is fulfilled in Jesus.**

Jesus is the one who was humbled unto death, cried out to God, and received a name which is above every name. Jesus is the ladder to heaven; he descends from heaven and ascends again. Jesus is the voice of God, extending covenant promises to his people.

In his life, Jesus kept the demands of the Law. In his death, Jesus satisfied the curse of the Law. In his resurrection, Jesus is the promised offspring of Abraham, who inherits the land in the New Heavens and New Earth, which he will populate with a resurrected people as numerous as the sand on the seashore and the stars in the night sky.

**And Jesus did all of this while we slept.** When we were dead in the trespasses and sins in which we once walked, following the course of the world, following the prince of the power of the air—God made us alive in Christ and brought us into his kingdom. We are saved by grace, through faith, and not as a result of our works.<sup>3</sup>

**So, what's the lesson from this story? What should Israel (and we) do?**

**3) With God's help: repent, love your neighbor, and trust your God.**

Hosea gives us his application in **verse 6**: "**So you, by the help of your God, return, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.**"

"**So you...**" this is his application for his hearers (including us).

"**By the help of your God.**" "You've done all that your strength and wisdom can do. But what you must do, you cannot do. God must help you. Salvation is of the Lord alone."

"**Return.**" Put away from your idols. Stop hoping in superpowers. Forsake your lies, deception, murder, and violence. Return to the Lord—the God of grace and mercy.

"**Hold fast to love and justice.**" The Law taught Israel how to "love your neighbor as yourself." They abused the vulnerable in their wickedness. Now, they should do justice—treating others fairly, protecting the vulnerable. They should love, humbling themselves for the good of their neighbor. This is how God treated them when they were in slavery. Faith in such a Redeemer works itself out in the same love for its neighbor.

"**Wait continually for your God.**" This means waiting for God to act. It is *faith*. Failing to wait for God is what got them in trouble in the first place. Life was not giving them what they wanted. Enemies threatened. The crops weren't growing. No relief was in sight. Instead of believing that Yahweh would keep his promises, they took matters into their own hands.

Yet, despite the mess they made and the consequences it would bring, the path to God remained the same. They must trust Yahweh to save them, and they must wait in faith.

So it is with us. We purify ourselves in this world because we believe that Jesus not only died and rose and ascended into heaven, but that he is reigning and returning. We refuse to

secure comfort, health, wealth, and status for ourselves through deceit and lies, hoarding and greed, violence and murder, idol worship or hope in governments. We are *waiting* for our blessed hope—the appearance of Christ Jesus in glory.

### **So, what does this look like in a pandemic?**

#### **Thinking of returning to God, you might ask how the pandemic is tempting you to sin.**

Perhaps, as the stresses of restrictions, isolation, financial loss, and uncertainty grow, you are trying to control others and your surroundings. This manifests itself in impatience and fits of anger, strife and division, or idolatry and occult practices. Domestic violence statistics will rise as abusive victims are stuck at home with their abusers.

**Perhaps, you are trying to escape by pleasing your flesh.** You are getting drunk or high. You are engaging in sexual immorality. As these precautions began and people were staying at home, the internet traffic to pornography providers skyrocketed. Isolation plus stress leads us to destructive behaviors.

**Perhaps you are cultivating bitterness, self-pity, division, and envy in your heart and mind (and community).** "It's not fair!" You worked so hard to store up all this wealth, to build that stock portfolio, to make this business successful, to plan that trip—and now it may all be wiped away! You're envious of those who got to enjoy the success, the comfort, the circumstances that may now be withheld or taken from you.

**Perhaps, you are controlled by greed and selfishness.** Jesus commanded us *not* to store up wealth on earth. You had stored it up—and now your most significant dilemma is how to protect what's left and build it up again. People depend on you for their livelihood, but providing for them would require parting with cherished excess.

**Perhaps, you are walking in apathy and carelessness.** This COVID thing is no big deal (after all, your favorite cultural commentator with zero medical expertise told you so!). So you aren't following the precautions of medical experts. It's no big deal. Besides, you're not at risk. But apathy and carelessness lead to negligence, which can bring death to our neighbor.

### **So, what does it mean to hold fast to love and justice in a pandemic?**

We share, selflessly.

We take precautions.

We bear one another's burdens.

We provide for those who depend upon us.

We forgive each other as the Lord has forgiven us.

We show mercy (and not mocking) to those who doubt.

We put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

We remind one another of Jesus Christ, crucified for sins and raised from the dead.

### **What does it look like to wait for God in a pandemic?**

It means we believe that we are not our own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all our sins with his precious blood, and has set us free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over us in such a way that not a hair can fall from our heads without the will of our Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for our salvation.

Because we belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures us of eternal life and makes us wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 1