

God speaks through Hosea the prophet.

This is the transcript of the message given on 5th January 2014.

At the beginning of each year it is usual to wish one another a prosperous new year, and today's message certainly seeks to set the church on a path of Godly prosperity for the future. This word is one which has been developing in me over the past six months and I am grateful to the church leadership for giving me the opportunity to share it today.

Our text will be from Hosea 10 v 12, but, before getting to the heart of the message, let's consider the context.

Hosea lived among the northern tribes of Israel in the 8th century BC. Following the death of Solomon the kingdom of Israel divided in two with Rehoboam ruling over Judah and Benjamin in Jerusalem and Jeroboam acting as king over the northern 10 tribes, sometimes referred to as Ephraim. Probably Jeroboam knew the divided kingdom was not God's will but, if he encouraged re-union with the southern tribes, he would lose power to Rehoboam, so he arranged for a rival centre of worship in Samaria. Inevitably the people turned from the Lord and began to incorporate pagan forms of worship from the surrounding peoples. Accordingly, the Lord likened them to an unfaithful wife who had broken the marriage covenant with her husband.

God chose Hosea to confront this situation prophetically in two ways. Firstly, by instructing Hosea to marry a woman who was (or became) a prostitute, and, by her, to bear children of unfaithfulness. Old Testament prophets were sometimes instructed to do very difficult things as a means of making God's message clear and unmistakable. So Hosea married Gomer and in due course three children were born each of whom were given a name by the Lord.

The first was called Jezreel which was to serve as notice that God was about to punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and would put an end to the kingdom of Israel. Jehu had been anointed by Elisha to judge the house of Ahab but had gone way beyond his remit by massacring many others. But Jezreel also means 'God plants' and we shall see the relevance of this in a moment. The Lord told Hosea to name the second child Lo-Ruhamah, meaning 'not loved', for 'I will no longer show love to the house of Israel'. The third was called Lo-Ammi meaning 'not my people', for 'you are not my people and I am not your God'. These names indicate that Hosea was not the father of these children, and it must have been very difficult for the family to live with the constant reminder of Gomer's sin, but this was God's way of drawing attention to Israel's unfaithfulness towards Him. Hosea was in a difficult position but Jeremiah's call, in chapter 1 of that book, reminds us that the prophets were called to 'uproot, tear down, overthrow, then to build and plant. Before building and planting can begin the ground has first to be prepared.

Hosea chapter 2 shows the stages of this process as God makes these 4 declarations:

- I will not have mercy (2:1-8).
- I will punish her (2:9-13).
- I will allure her (2:14-20).
- I will sow her (2:21-3:5).

The process is not without hope for the Lord refers back to names of the children and signals a different future for them. Remember, Jezreel also means 'God will sow' and shows his intent to plant his people again in their land where He will love and bless them. Lo-Ruhammah is no longer to be 'not loved' but 'I will show love', and Lo-Ammi will become 'you are my people'. Even Gomer says, 'I will go and return to my first husband'. (See Warren Wiersbe, *With the Word Bible Commentary*, Thomas Nelson 1997.

In chapter 3 Hosea goes out to find and restore his wife Gomer who has abandoned him for other lovers, just as Israel turned from the Lord to other lovers. He finds her in the slave market and buys her back with 15 shekels of silver and a homer of barley, and tells her to come home and live with him again. The analogies are clear. Like Gomer Israel paid a heavy price for her unfaithfulness to God. Like Hosea, God paid a heavy price to redeem his people, not just for Israel but foreshadowing the cross where Jesus paid the price for the redemption all of mankind.

That is the setting for the message the Lord has given me to bring today. I am not, of course, saying that this church is in the exact same position as the Israel of Hosea's time, but God still speaks to us from his Word. These things are written for our edification and encouragement.

Six months ago the Lord brought back to me a message He had first spoken to me in the late 1980s. I had been earnestly seeking the Lord for a word for the church I was pastoring at the time but nothing would come. Then the Lord revealed to me through one of the members that He would give me the word on the Sunday morning – the morning I was scheduled to preach. When I woke from my sleep his word was in my heart and mind. It is our text for today. Hosea 10:12, **'Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love (mercy); Break up your unploughed ground, for it is time to seek the Lord, until He comes and showers righteousness upon you'**. On that occasion I simply shared that scripture then allowed it to speak to our hearts without further explanation

That the Lord has brought it back to me with such conviction indicates, to me at least, that God really wants to do a work through this church, but there is preparation that needs to be done.

Do we want to see his mercy poured out in and around us? Then let us earnestly seek after righteousness.

Have we a real desire for righteousness? If so we will see the outworking of his mercy again and again.

But the third part of the text holds the key to unlocking these blessings. **Break up your unploughed ground**. This was not a directive to the farming community to get to work on the land, though of course no farmer would attempt to plant or reap on unploughed land. It is rather a metaphor for the condition of our hearts. If we do not take care to guard our hearts then it is all too easy to become hardened and unresponsive to what the Lord wants to do. There are four areas I believe the Lord would have us give attention to;

1. Concerning the world around us. We can become dulled by events that should shock us and galvanise us into action. We can also become indifferent to needs that we feel unable to do anything about because they are overwhelming, so we shrug our shoulders and think there is nothing we can do to change them. Of course we can't meet every need, but we can ask God which, of the many needs we see, He would have us do something about.
2. In regards to our relationships with other believers in the church. When difficulties arise, as they inevitably will, we need to seek Godly resolution rather than avoidance. God allows these difficulties to teach us how to receive grace and grow through them, but it is all too easy to sweep things under the carpet, or even to leave the church, rather than do what Jesus commands us to do, which is to ask for grace to restore one another. Failure to do so will cause us to harden our hearts.
3. In the home. Familiarity, or taking things for granted, can lead us to neglect the injunction to honour and build one another up in tenderness and love for one another.
4. Towards God himself. Failure to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, or to hear his word and neglect to respond to it, will not only harden our hearts towards him but create the conditions for three areas above. Today if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts (Hebrews chapters 3 and 4).

Reflecting on the text above it is obvious that if we neglect to break up our unploughed ground, it will not be possible to sow and reap. Nor, when they do come, will the showers poured out by the Holy Spirit be able to penetrate the hardened ground. Instead they will quickly drain away without beneficial effect.

What are we to do then? The text today points us to genuine Godly prosperity, not the popular 'prosperity gospel' which majors on temporal symbols of material wealth. Note of the conditional word, 'until'. We are urged to seek the Lord 'until' He comes and showers righteousness upon us. This points us towards faithful pursuit of God by prayer and listening to his voice. Jeremiah confirms this in the oft quoted passage from chapter 29:13, you will seek me and you will find me when you seek me with all your heart.

I commend this message to us all that we may seek God for a new season in the life of the church, and to the elders that they may help us determine our response to God's word.

In the love of Christ Jesus,

Gordon Shewan