

Lesson 18

Hosea 4:9–11

9 And it shall be like people, like priest; I will punish them for their ways and repay them for their deeds. 10 They shall eat, but not be satisfied; they shall play the whore, but not multiply, because they have forsaken the LORD to cherish 11 whoredom, wine, and new wine, which take away the understanding.

Let me start today with something that I have not said before in these classes – I want to give a compliment to the New International Version of the Bible!

Hosea 2:8–9 (NIV) – She has not acknowledged that I was the one who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold – which they used for Baal. Therefore I will take away my grain when it ripens, and my new wine when it is ready. I will take back my wool and my linen, intended to cover her naked body.

Hosea 4:10–11 (NIV) – They will eat but not have enough; they will engage in prostitution but not flourish, because they have deserted the LORD to give themselves to prostitution; old wine and new wine take away their understanding.

I both like and dislike what the NIV has done with these verses. Let's start with what I like.

What I like about the NIV here is that it does a good job of letting us know that the underlying Hebrew words used in these verses for “wine” are different, and the NIV does a better job than the

ESV (here, at least) of letting us know which word is used where.

As we said when we looked at chapter 2, the Hebrew word translated “wine” in Hosea 2:8–9 refers to freshly squeezed grape juice. And the NIV translation of those verses properly translates that word as “new wine,” where by “new” it means that fermentation has not yet had an opportunity to occur. That same word for “wine” appears here in Hosea 4:11, where again the NIV translates it as “new wine.”

The ESV translates the word in chapter 2 as “wine,” but the ESV translates the same word here in verse 11 as “new wine,” which leaves the **incorrect** impression that different Hebrew words are used.

So, for this one word in Hosea 2:8–9 and Hosea 4:11, I like the NIV better than the ESV – but the NIV should not let that go to its head! Overall, the ESV is vastly superior to the NIV.

If we are looking for consistency in the choice of English words for Greek or Hebrew words, the best English translation for that purpose is the ASV of 1901. But, in providing that consistency, the ASV suffers a bit in its readability. If you want the best combination of accuracy and beauty, then the King James Version is the best choice.

I know that I have been pretty hard on the NIV (“Nearly Inspired Version!”) – and, I would say, deservedly so! But, with that said, the problem of which version of the Bible to use is dwarfed by the bigger problem of not using any version of

the Bible at all! If I never open my Bible, then it doesn't really matter which version I have!

And even the NIV can be helpful if we read it with our eyes open – that is, if we treat it for what it really is – a commentary in which the opinions of men have been freely sown among the words of God.

Another such version is the *Living Bible*, which does not even call itself a translation but rather rightly calls itself a paraphrase. I have read the *Living Bible* cover to cover – why? Because it very often gives me a different way of looking at a verse. And yes, very often that different way turns out to be the wrong way, but sometimes that different turns out to be the right way!

Why do I bring that up here? Because the *Living Bible* really shows its colors when it comes to Hosea 4:11.

Hosea 4:11 (TLB) – Wine, women, and song have robbed my people of their brains.

And another version called *The Message* is even stranger! “Wine and **whiskey** leave my people in a stupor.” I’ll just say that someone has to really be looking hard for some whiskey to find it in Hosea 4:11!

As is often the case, we should likely just stick with the KJV (“Whoredom and wine and new wine take away the heart.”)

You can see some different translations and paraphrases of these verses on the handout for

today, and we'll have some more to say on that topic and on the topic of wine in verse 11, after we look at verses 9-10.

In verse 9, we read: "And it shall be like people, like priest; I will punish them for their ways and repay them for their deeds."

Verse 9 is teaching us about the justice of God. Yes, the people had been led astray by the priests, but the people would still be punished for their ways and repaid for their deeds.

And, yes, the priests were religious leaders who may have thought that because of their job title they would get leniency or favoritism from God, but we see here that that was not correct. The priests would still be punished for their ways and repaid for their deeds.

As verse 9 says, it would be like people, like priest. We see the same phrase about God's judgment in Isaiah.

Isaiah 24:1-3 – Behold, the LORD will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered; for the LORD has spoken this word.

Or, as Paul would later write:

Romans 2:11 – For God shows no partiality.

Colossians 3:25 – For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

And, as Peter would later say:

Acts 10:34 – So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality.”

That is the same message that we see here in verse 9. God does not show partiality.

In verses 10–11, we read: “They shall eat, but not be satisfied; they shall play the whore, but not multiply, because they have forsaken the LORD to cherish whoredom, wine, and new wine, which take away the understanding.”

In verse 10, we see the sad state experienced by anyone who seeks meaning from someone or something other than God – they all experience disappointment. They eat, but they are not satisfied.

Pascal: “There is a God-shaped hole in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ.”

But the problem is that people try to fill that giant hole in their heart with something or someone else – and that will always end in disappointment. And that is why the dominant emotion of our own day is disappointment. The Bible has a lot to say on this topic.

Proverbs 13:25 – The righteous has enough to satisfy his appetite, but the belly of the wicked suffers want.

Haggai 1:6 – You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.

Jeremiah 2:13 – For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

And verse 10 continues on this same topic of disappointment: “they shall play the whore, but not multiply.”

In that phrase from verse 10, we see a major theme in the book of Hosea – whoredom. And that should not surprise us at all given the events from Hosea’s own life that we saw in chapters 1–3.

The word “whore” appears 17 times in Hosea, and the phrase “play the whore” appears six times – with five of those six occurrences found here in Hosea 4. What does that phrase “play the whore” in verse 10 mean?

One commentary says that it means to flirt with false gods, but I don’t think that is right. God is not calling his people a flirt; God is calling them a whore. These people were not just flirting with false gods; they were actively pursuing false gods in an attempt to sell themselves to those false gods.

I think Jeremiah provides for us the difference between a flirt and a whore.

Jeremiah 2:23-24 – How can you say, ‘I am not unclean, I have not gone after the Baals’? Look at your way in the valley; know what you have done – a restless young camel running here and there, a wild donkey used to the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind! Who can restrain her lust? None who seek her need weary themselves; in her month they will find her.

That is not just a flirt; that is a whore. Yes, it is a strong word, but it is the word that God chose to use, not just once, but 17 times in the book of Hosea.

I think we should view that phrase “play the whore” on two levels.

First, we can view the phrase literally – the priests were engaged in sexual immorality.

By mixing the worship of God with worship of Baal, the false fertility god, the priests were most likely themselves engaging in the ritual fornication that was part of Baal worship. I think that is what we are about to be told later in verse 14 of this same chapter – “for the men themselves go aside with prostitutes and sacrifice with cult prostitutes.”

But second, I think we can view the phrase “play the whore” from a broader perspective.

These priests were playing the whore with false gods – that is, they were guilty of spiritual adultery against God, which we know is a major

theme of this book – and perhaps the major theme of this book.

Here in verse 10 we see two of those false gods – food and sex. We see gluttony and fornication.

But are we really saying that gluttony and fornication are examples of idolatry? Yes, that is exactly what we are saying.

In Colossians 3:5, Paul told us that covetousness is idolatry, and I think gluttony and fornication are also idolatry for the same reason. They are all things we place ahead of God and in front of God in our lives. By definition, this is idolatry.

When I see the word “whore” used 17 times in the book of Hosea, I should not just smugly sit back and smirk at those backward ancients bowing down to their wooden idols. Instead, I should look for things in my own life that I place ahead of God. Perhaps I am guilty of that same terrible sin!

And what is the result of this idolatry of gluttony and fornication? We have already discussed the inevitable result – disappointment. They will all fail, and that is what verse 10 tells us. The gluttony for food will end with a shortage of food (they will not be satisfied), and the gluttony for sex will end with sterility (they will not multiply or increase).

If we are led about by our earthly appetites, then we are headed only for disappointment. There is only one path that will not end in disappointment. That was Jesus’ point in John 4

when he spoke to the woman at the well (who we recall was a descendant of the same people who were listening to Hosea).

John 4:13-14 – Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Earthly water ends with disappointment. Heavenly water ends with eternal life. Those are the only two choices. Those are the only two paths.

Finally, in verses 10-11 we have the phrase, “because they have forsaken the LORD to cherish whoredom, wine, and new wine, which take away the understanding.” What does that mean?

The commentaries agree that this phrase is very difficult to translate, but they disagree on how it should be translated. (Again, see the many different examples on the handout for Lesson 18.)

One issue is whether the word “whoredom” should be at the beginning of verse 11 or at the end of verse 10. A related issue is to determine the object of the verb “cherish” at the end of verse 10 – is it just whoredom (as in the NIV); is it whoredom, wine, and new wine (as in the ESV); or is it something else entirely (as in the KJV)?

One proposed solution suggests that the word “whoredom” originally appeared twice in these verses, but one of the two occurrences was dropped at some point by a copyist. That type of copying error is so common that it has its own

name – haplography. If that happened here, then verse 10 would tell us that the priests forsook God to instead cherish whoredom, and then verse 11 would be a proverb of sorts about whoredom, drunkenness, and gluttony. (The Amplified Version in the middle column of the handout takes this approach.)

Either way, the translation question does not really have any impact on the message on verses 10–11. The priests had rejected God in favor of their false gods, which ultimately were their own sensual appetites.

Let’s look again briefly at the words translated “wine” and “new wine” in verse 11.

As we recall, there are 14 different words used in the Bible to denote “wine.” Two of those 14 words are found here in verse 11.

The word that was used back in Hosea 2:8–9 was *tiyros* (from the word for expulsion), and it refers to freshly squeezed grape juice that has not fermented. And, as we also said earlier, the ESV translates the same Hebrew word differently in Hosea 2 (“wine”) and Hosea 4 (“new wine”).

Why does verse 11 in the ESV stress that this wine is new wine? Because verse 11 also includes another Hebrew word for “wine” – the Hebrew word *yayin*.

Unlike *tiyros*, *yayin* can refer to fermented grape juice, and, from the context, we can see that it likely does that here because it is included along with “new wine.”

But, it is not correct that *yayin* always refers to intoxicating wine, as the NIV seems to suggest with its odd translation of “**old** wine.” (That’s the part I don’t like about the NIV’s translation here.) Instead, *yayin* sometimes is intoxicating, and sometimes is not intoxicating. Here are some examples where it is **not** intoxicating.

Jeremiah 40:10 – But as for you, **gather wine** and summer fruits and oil, and store them in your vessels, and dwell in your cities that you have taken.

Isaiah 16:10 – No treader **treads out wine** in the presses.

Lamentations 2:11-12 – Because **infants and babies** faint in the streets of the city. They cry to their mothers, “Where is bread and **wine**?”

Often we find *yayin* combined with yet another word for wine, *sekar*, which is usually translated “strong drink.”

And, again, I’ll make the same point here that I made back in Lesson 11 – we should avoid the reckless use of the Bible to justify the reckless use of alcohol!

Yes, we can determine what the Bible has to say on the subject of intoxicating drink, but we need to proceed carefully in such a study and not make blanket unfounded assertions that ignore the underlying Hebrews and Greek words. Superficial Bible study is always dangerous, but it is particularly dangerous when it comes to the subject of alcohol. And that danger is heightened

when that study is carried out by someone seeking a justification rather than illumination.

But, what about that final phrase in verse 11? If some of the wine in verse 11 is “new wine,” then how can grape juice ever be said to take away the understanding?

First, of the three things listed in verse 11 (“whoredom, wine, and new wine”), only one (“wine”) could literally take away our understanding.

But second, all three do take away our understanding in a sense. In Hebrew, the verse literally reads, “takes away the heart.” And the Hebrew word found here for “heart” is used “very widely for the feelings, the will, and even the intellect.” To take away someone’s heart means to “rob them of their rational ability to orient themselves; to hand them over to deception.”

Could “new wine” take away the heart? Yes, it could – as could whoredom. As one commentary explained, “the longing for a good wine harvest drives the people to wailing in the Canaanite fertility cults rather than to praying to God.”

Verse 11 says that the people were guilty of sexual immorality, drunkenness, and gluttony – and all three of those sins were associated with the worship of Baal. And all three of those sins took away the heart – they all took away the understanding.

One more comment about these verses before we move on – the Hebrew word translated “cherish” in

verse 10 is the word *samar*. That word literally means “to hedge about as with thorns,” and it refers to something that is carefully guarded and protected.

Here in verse 10, the word *samar* is used to describe people who were guarding and protecting Baal, but that is not how this same people started out.

Deuteronomy 6:1-3 – Now this is the commandment – the statutes and the rules – that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son’s son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

The word translated “keeping” and “careful” in those verses is the word *samar*. The people had been told that if they carefully kept and guarded the things of God, then they would prosper in their promised land – but they had not. As we see in verses 10-11, the people were now carefully keeping and guarding the things of Baal, and so they would soon be removed from their promised land.

Hosea 4:12

12 My people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking staff gives them oracles. For a

spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the whore.

Verse 12 is both a very funny verse and a very sad verse.

The funny part is easy to see – we have a picture here of someone who seeks guidance from a piece of wood and who wants his walking stick to tell him his future.

Perhaps the best word to describe the first sentence in verse 12 is sarcasm. And, yes, the prophets were frequently sarcastic. Elijah, for example, was sarcastic when Baal did not show up to defend himself on Mount Carmel.

1 Kings 18:27 – And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.”

And these examples are not the only places where we see God poking fun at idols and the people who worshiped them.

Isaiah 44:13–19 – The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, “Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!” And the rest

of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god!" They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals; I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?" He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?"

Yes, there is some humor in these descriptions. Psalm 2:4 tells us that "he who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision," and I think we see that laughter here with regard to these idols.

But, of course, on another level these verses are very sad. The people to whom these verses were directed were God's chosen people. God had loved them and provided for them and protected them throughout their history. And God wanted to continue doing that. That is why God send the prophets, including Hosea, to teach the people and warn the people and guide the people.

Hosea, of course, had been sent by God to provide both guidance and oracles – but the people ignored Hosea, and instead sought those things from lifeless objects. The people did not want to hear anything from Almighty God.

Instead, they were listening to a piece of wood and to their walking stick. Yes, that is funny, and yes that is sad, but the sadness far exceeds the humor.

Jeremiah 2:12-13 – Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

How had this happened? Verse 12 tells us, and the previous verses also told us. “For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the whore.”

The spirit of whoredom that we discussed earlier had led the people astray. They had followed their own appetites rather than God, and their appetites had led them to their destruction. They had forsaken the living God to instead play the whore with their false lifeless gods.

Let’s look again at that first phrase – “**my people inquire of a piece of wood.**”

It is so easy to see descriptions of idolatry such as that and to think about that problem as only an ancient problem experienced by an ancient superstitious people bowing down to their wooden idols.

But is that right? Can we just dismiss these warnings about idolatry because they do not and cannot ever apply to modern man? No, that is not right.

Not only is idolatry a problem for modern man, I think we could say that idolatry is **the** problem for modern man.

1 John 5:21 – Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

But we don't ever seek guidance from a lifeless object, right? Well, let's look at that question.

- Is there a lifeless object around today from which I seek guidance and oracles?
- Is there a lifeless object around today to which I turn for answers to all of my questions?
- Is there a lifeless object around today that I seek first? Perhaps something that I look at right before I go to sleep, and then look at again as soon as I wake up?
- Is there a lifeless object around today that I keep with me always and that causes me to panic if I ever misplace it?
- Is there a lifeless object around today that I believe without question, that is seemingly everywhere, and that guides me wherever I go?
- Is there something like that out there anywhere today? Perhaps something that I even bow my head to look down at while seeking guidance?

Maybe we shouldn't be so hasty in dismissing the warning in verse 12!

Marshall McLuhan, the famous media professor, once said, "We shape our tools and then our tools shape us." But he was not the first to say that. Many centuries earlier, the Psalmist wrote "Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them" (Psalm 115:8).

Has my cell phone become my god? Have I become like those in Job 12:6 who "bring their god in

their hand”? Do I have more in common with these ancient Israelites than I think I do? **“Is there not a lie in my right hand?”** (Isaiah 44:19)

It is tempting to just laugh it all off and say “of course not.” But do we think the people listening to Hosea would have had a different reaction when they were confronted with their own false gods?

I could preach an entire sermon on Internet idolatry – and, in fact, I have! You can find it at www.StudyHosea.com.

Hosea 4:13a

13a They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good.

Our key themes are really on display here in chapter 4. We have seen the theme of **knowledge**, we have seen the theme of **whoredom**, and we have seen the theme of **sacrifice**. Here in verse 13, we see two of those three themes – **sacrifice** in the first half of verse 13 and **whoredom** in the second half.

We talked in an earlier lesson about the high places. We recall that, as with many false religious practices, the high places started off with the best of intentions.

1 Kings 3:2 – The people were sacrificing at the high places, however, because no house had yet been built for the name of the LORD.

But, as with all departures from the word of God (even those with the best of intentions), this departure quickly moved further and further away from what was right.

1 Kings 14:23 – For they also built for themselves high places and pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree.

That verse is describing the same kind of situation that we see here in Hosea 4:13. God had earlier told the people what to do with these false shrines:

Deuteronomy 12:2–3 – You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place.

But the people had not destroyed these shrines. Instead, the people had embraced these false shrines and worshipped these false gods.

Note that both 1 Kings 14 and Deuteronomy 12 mention Asherim. The Asherim were wooden pillars that stood near the altars in the Canaanite high places as depictions of the false goddess Asherah. God had given very explicit instructions regarding the Asherim:

Deuteronomy 16:21–22 – You shall not plant any tree as an Asherah beside the altar of the LORD your God that you shall make. And you shall not set up a pillar, which the LORD your God hates.

But the people had not obeyed God. In these verses we are seeing examples of why and how the people were being destroyed by their lack of knowledge.

Anyone who says that there is no humor in the Bible is someone who has never read the Bible. As serious as verse 13 is, we do see a touch of humor.

Why do the people choose these types of trees to offer their sacrifices? Is it because they have some special religious significance? Are they perhaps Baal's favorite trees? No. It is because their shade is good!

But there is more than just a touch of humor in that comment. There is also something insidious, and something that we still see today.

These false priests knew that if they wanted a lot of people to show up, they needed to make things very comfortable and very easy for them. How many would have shown up to these sacrifices had they been required to stand out in the hot sun all day? Not nearly as many as would show up to sit in the shade!

Here is how one commentary describes the situation:

The "sacrifices" were not simply for the gods but were eaten by human participants. In a beautiful setting in the hills and under trees, the people could experience something that combined a picnic with "sacred mysteries." ... This, combined with a belief that these gods and their rites had the power to insure good crops and healthy births in their flocks and herds,

made for a religion as irresistible as it was corrupting.

Most false worship today begins with the basic misconception that we are the audience in our worship assembly. We are **not** the audience, and the goal of our worship is **not** to please us. God is the audience, and the goal of our worship is to please God. And God has told us what pleases him.

Why these three trees – oak, poplar, and terebinth? I think the main thing to notice here is not the tree types, but rather the number of tree types – three. We already know that there is an emphasis on the number three in Hosea, and this is yet another example.

Why the focus on three? We have discussed two possible reasons so far. First, Gomer had three children that are serving as themes for the book. And second, due to the civil war in Israel, the Jews were divided into three groups – Judah, the pro-Assyrian faction of Israel, and the anti-Assyrian faction of Israel.

As for the types of trees, most likely their size and their shape made them the most effective at providing shade, which seems to have been the primary motivation of these worshippers.