

Lesson 23

Hosea 5:11

11 Ephraim is oppressed, crushed in judgment,
because he was determined to go after filth.

We have been in a particularly difficult section of Hosea. Verses 7, 8, and 10 were difficult verses, and verse 11 is yet another difficult verse.

The first part is easy – Ephraim is oppressed, crushed in judgment.

That, of course, is yet another reference to the overwhelming Assyrian forces that were coming to crush them. And I think we see the prophetic past tense here – Assyria had not yet come, but their arrival was so certain that it could be spoken of in the past tense.

And we know that the Assyrian invasion was a judgment sent from God.

2 Kings 17:6-8 – In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. **And this occurred because** the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the

people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had practiced.

But what about the end of verse 11? “Because he was determined to go after filth.” What does that mean?

First, we can see that that final phrase is explaining why Assyria invaded the northern kingdom.

We just saw one explanation for that event in 2 Kings 17 – Assyria was sent by God as a punishment. And so we should expect this phrase in verse 11 to either be an additional reason for the Assyrian invasion or a re-statement of the reason given in 2 Kings 17.

But, second, we need to once again consider a translation difficulty. Here are some different translations of that final phrase in verse 11.

- because he was determined to go after filth (ESV) – with a footnote giving the alternative “to follow human precepts”
- because he was determined to follow man’s command (NAS)
- [because he was] intent on pursuing idols (NIV)
- because he was determined to go after vanity (NRSV)
- **because he willingly walked after the commandment** (KJV)
- because he was content to walk after man’s command (ASV)

- because he willingly walked after the Decree [of Jeroboam] (Samuel Sharpe 1883)

As we can see, there is a lot of variation in how the final word in that final phrase in verse 11 is translated.

The Hebrew word means commandment or precept, but that Hebrew word is very close to the Hebrew word for “enemy” and also fairly close to the Hebrew word for “idol” and the Hebrew word for “filth.” So, as usual, when the translators can’t make sense of the Hebrew word we have, they start looking for Hebrew words we don’t have (but that are close to the word we do have).

I think the best approach is to consider the word we have (even if the meaning is unclear) rather than to look for words that are close to the word we have but are easier to understand. It is a bit like losing your keys at night beneath your car but looking for them out under the streetlamp where the light is better!

So, with that said, I think the best translation is (surprise!) the KJV – “because he willingly walked after the commandment.”

But that then leaves us with a big question – which commandment?

We know it is not a commandment of God because the problem in verse 11 is that the people **are following** this commandment – not that they are failing to follow it. So what that means is that we need to find a commandment that the people should **not** have been following.

The best explanation I found is that this commandment is a commandment of Assyria.

I think this commandment refers to the commandments that Assyria made to the vassal nations that it oppressed and conquered. The handout for Lesson 23 shows an Assyrian Vassal Treaty in which Assyrian commands were communicated to Assyrian vassal states. I think these are the commands in verse 11 that the people should not have been following.

But we see Ephraim following such Assyrian commandments in 2 Kings 15.

2 Kings 15:19-20 – Pul the king of Assyria came against the land, and Menahem gave Pul a thousand talents of silver, that he might help him to confirm his hold on the royal power. Menahem exacted the money from Israel, that is, from all the wealthy men, fifty shekels of silver from every man, to give to the king of Assyria. So the king of Assyria turned back and did not stay there in the land.

Why did Menahem exact money from Israel to pay Assyria? Because Menahem was following the commandments of Assyria.

And, as we saw on the handout for Lesson 21, this tribute from Menahem was even mentioned by the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser (Pul) on one of his own monuments.

And, yes, Assyria turned back from the land after that money was paid, but those payments were the beginning of the end for Ephraim. They were oppressed, and then later they were crushed because they were determined to be a vassal of

Assyria and follow Assyria's requirements – just as verse 11 tells us.

Hosea 5:12

12 But I am like a moth to Ephraim, and like dry rot to the house of Judah.

And the stretch of difficult verses continues!

Some of the strangest descriptions of God anywhere in the Bible are found in the book of Hosea, and here we may see the two strangest descriptions of all. God says, "I am like a moth" and "like dry rot." What does that mean?

Let's start with the word "moth."

The Hebrew word translated "moth" could also be translated as a "maggot" in an open wound or even as "pus" from an open wound. Either way, the focus here is on decay – either decay of fabric eaten by a moth, or decay of a body with an open wound.

Which view makes more sense from the context?

Well, let's look ahead a bit to the next verse: "When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his wound." It seems like the context is decay of the **body** rather than decay of fabric.

I think the NRSV translation may be best here for verse 12: "Therefore I am like maggots to Ephraim, and like rotteness to the house of Judah." Or perhaps even: "I am like the maggot

to Ephraim, and like the gangrene to the house of Judah.”

But let’s pause here and ask a question about Bible translations. Looking at the underlying Hebrew word, and looking at the context, it seems perfectly clear that “moth” is **not** the correct translation in verse 12. The context from verse 13 is sickness and wounds, and so certainly “maggot” is a much better translation in verse 12 than is “moth.”

Why then do so many translations choose “moth”? The ESV, the KJV, the ASV, the NASB, the NIV, the NKJV – they all choose “moth” over “maggot.” Why?

Is it because “maggot” is too shocking? Too crude? Too harsh? Too unexpected? If so, that is a mistake. The Bible does not need our help. The Bible does not need us to make it more respectable, or less crude, or less shocking. The Bible does not need us to smooth out its edges! God does not need an editor!

We could give more examples of this phenomenon, but instead let’s just state the obvious – if God chose the word, then that word is the perfect word! And if that perfect word seems shocking or crude or inappropriate to us, then so be it. I suspect that was precisely why God chose that perfect word! None of us is qualified to be God’s editor!

The image in verse 12 is that of a wounded man who is left unattended so that his injuries fester horribly. And such wounded men would have

been very familiar to people during times of social unrest and war.

And who is it who did this to them? Who is it who failed to help them? Who is it who failed to clean and bind their wounds?

It is God. God is speaking here. God is like this maggot. God is like this gangrene. And God is like these things to people who were once his own people.

As we said, we see here some of the strangest descriptions of God found anywhere in the Bible. And some of the saddest.

But **when** did this happen? Is this verse pointing to some specific event, or is this just a general description of the sad state to which the people had descended? Let's keep reading.

Hosea 5:13

13 When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his wound, then Ephraim went to Assyria, and sent to the great king. But he is not able to cure you or heal your wound.

What we see in verse 13 is an example of Ephraim playing the whore. Instead of turning to God for help, Ephraim turns to Assyria.

And the problem with turning to Assyria for help was **not** that Assyria was cruel and oppressive, although Assyria certainly was cruel and oppressive. The problem with turning to Assyria for help was that Assyria was not God! The people

would have been wrong to turn to anyone other than God for help.

So, now that we have read verse 13, let's again ask our question about the horrible decaying wounds in verse 12: are they describing some specific event?

We now know that they are **not** describing the final Assyrian invasion in which Israel was removed from the land. Why not? Because verse 13 tells us that these wounds cause the people to turn to Assyria for help. So verse 12 cannot be describing the final invasion by Assyria.

I think the crushing in judgment we saw in verse 11 is that final Assyrian invasion, but I also think that we have now backed up a bit historically in verse 12 to describe events that led up to that Assyrian invasion. But which events are being described in verses 12-13?

Perhaps we should start by determining **when** something like what we see in verse 13 happened – when did Ephraim turn to Assyria for help?

Earlier we talked about the war between Judah and the combined forces of Ephraim and Syria described in Isaiah 7 – but that is **not** what we are looking for here. Why not? Because there it was Judah rather than Ephraim that turned to Assyria for help. What we need is an example where Ephraim turned to Assyria for help.

We have at least two possibilities.

First, in 2 Kings 15, Menahem turned to Assyria for help. And if that is the correct event for verse 13, then the civil war had not yet ended.

2 Kings 15:19 – Pul the king of Assyria came against the land, and Menahem gave Pul a thousand talents of silver, that he might help him to confirm his hold on the royal power.

Yes, but that was an invasion by Assyria. Did Menahem ask Assyria for help? Yes he did – as we just read: “that he might help him to confirm his hold on the royal power.”

And, second, in 2 Kings 17, Hoshea paid tribute to Assyria.

2 Kings 17:3 – Against him came up Shalmaneser king of Assyria. And Hoshea became his vassal and paid him tribute.

But there is a problem with that event from the reign of Hoshea – it does not show Hoshea seeking help from Assyria, but rather it shows Assyria oppressing Hoshea.

And, in fact, we know that Hoshea did seek help from a foreign power, but not from Assyria. Hoshea sought help from Egypt.

2 Kings 17:4 – But the king of Assyria found treachery in Hoshea, for he had sent messengers to So, king of Egypt, ...

So, I think the first possibility is the best answer: verse 13 is referring to Menahem’s payment and request for help from Tiglath-pileser in 2 Kings 15:19. And that, of course, would mean

that the “great king” in verse 13 is Tiglath-pileser.

Verse 11 ends by talking about the Assyrian vassal relationship, and verse 13 is giving us an example of such a relationship.

And how would that turn out for the people? Verse 13 tells us: “But he is not able to cure you or heal your wound.” Assyria would neither cure them nor save them. The people had chosen Assyria over God, and that was a very bad choice.

Earlier we considered whether these events in Hosea 5 occurred before or after the events described in Isaiah 7. Here, I think we see some more evidence that these events occurred **before** the events in Isaiah 7. Why? Because **Judah** ran to Assyria for help in Isaiah 7, and it seems very odd that such an event would not have been mentioned here in verse 13 had it already occurred.

Before we leave verse 13, let’s consider another translation issue.

If you look at the ESV translation of verse 13, you will see a footnote next to the phrase “the great king” that provides an alternate translation of “King Jareb.” Who is King Jareb? (We will see the same word used again later in Hosea 10:6.)

There was no Assyrian king named Jareb, and we know that the king at this time was Tiglath-pileser. So one possibility is that “Jareb” was a nickname for Tiglath-pileser perhaps meaning

“King Contentious” (just as we already know that “Pul” was a nickname for that same king). If Jareb is a nickname, then it is most likely making the point that Tiglath-pileser would prove to be much more of a problem than an ally. Israel had a tiger by the tail!

That is a possibility, but another possibility is that the phrase means “the great king,” as we see in the ESV. That option differs from “King Jareb” only with the pronunciation of the Hebrew letters and not the letters themselves. Also, there is an Assyrian word meaning “great king” that, when translated into Hebrew, has consonants similar to the Hebrew text.

Which is correct? It is hard to say, although we know that God does enjoy giving people nicknames! Ultimately, it doesn’t really matter which option we choose because, either way, the phrase is referring to Tiglath-pileser.

Hosea 5:14

14 For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, and like a young lion to the house of Judah. I, even I, will tear and go away; I will carry off, and no one shall rescue.

The Hebrew text of verse 14 strongly emphasizes the pronoun “I,” and we can also see that emphasis in the ESV translation – “I, even I.”

The people were frantically seeking help from everywhere and everyone but God. They looked to Syria, they looked to Assyria, and they looked to Egypt. And, of course, they were also looking to

their own false gods and to their own military might. God is reminding them where they should have looked for help with the emphasis here on the pronoun "I" – they should have been seeking help from the great I AM!

But because they did not look to God for help, God will punish them. And again we see a lesson here that we have already seen in this book – the people cannot avoid God forever. God will always have the last word. Their actions will always catch up with them eventually.

The metaphor for God in these verses has now shifted from a flesh-eating decay in verse 12 to a flesh-eating lion here in verse 14.

And perhaps that change suggests we are getting closer and closer to the end. While flesh-eating decay describes a prolonged event, a flesh-eating lion describes a sudden end. As one commentary describes it:

The Israelite states were already in a lengthy state of decay and had suffered ravages of various kinds, but the final conquest would come upon them with the ferocity of a lion.

By why does Ephraim get a lion, while Judah gets only a young lion?

I think that is telling us what we already know – Ephraim would be punished much more severely than Judah. The Assyrians invaded both Ephraim and Judah, but only Ephraim was carried off and scattered. God miraculously spared Jerusalem, but God did not spare Samaria.

Hosea 5:15

15 I will return again to my place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face, and in their distress earnestly seek me.

The lion metaphor continues in verse 15, but it takes an odd twist.

First, the lion returns to his place or his lair, but then – after devouring and carrying off its prey in verse 14 – this lion very unexpectedly gives its prey a second chance in verse 15. I think we can say that this is no ordinary lion!

It is telling that we do not see Ephraim and Judah mentioned separately in verse 15. Instead, we see the collective pronoun “they.” After this lion shows up, those distinctions between north and south lose their significance. Suddenly, the people find themselves all in the same boat.

And I think there is a big lesson for us here with that simple change from Ephraim and Judah in verse 14 to “they” in verse 15.

There are many walls and divisions in this world today based on race, nationality, economic status, education, religion, and many other things that seem so important to so many people. But when Jesus – the Lion of Judah – appears again, none of those distinctions will matter.

All that will matter on that great day is whether I am in Christ or out of Christ. When the trumpet sounds, there will be no Ephraim and Judah, but instead the entire world will be reduced to the collective pronoun “they” – we will all be in the

same boat, waiting to appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10).

And who on that day will hear the wonderful words, "Well done, good and faithful servant?" Verse 15 tells us: those who "acknowledge their guilt and seek my face, and in their distress earnestly seek me." And the promise is that those who earnestly seek God – those who seek God first – will find him. Today, such people are those who hear the gospel and obey the gospel.

So where are we at the end of chapter 5?

Starting with the first verse of Hosea 4, we have now seen three subsections of Hosea that remind us of Hosea and Gomer's three children.

Hosea 4:1–3 reminded us of Gomer's first child, Jezreel, when we saw the bloodshed in verse 2.

And Hosea 4:4–14 reminded us of Gomer's third child, Not Mine, when we saw the change from "my people" in verses 6, 8, and 12 to just "a people" in verse 14.

In this third section (Hosea 4:15–5:15), we have been reminded of Gomer's second child, her daughter, Not Loved.

Why? Two reasons. First, we have seen harsh and violent language describing God's punishments of the people, and second, we have seen messages for Judah, which reminds us of the surprising message to Judah that we saw in Hosea 1:7 after Not Loved was first introduced.

Combined, these three sections in Hosea 4–5 have laid out the principal charges against Israel.

What happens next? Two things.

First, in Hosea 6:1–3 we will see a call to repentance.

And second, from Hosea 6:4 through the end of Hosea 7 we will see a lament over the stubbornness of the people.

Yes, we will continue to see glimpses of the gospel, but the tone of Hosea will become increasingly dark. Yes, the door for repentance was open, but there would be no repentance. The book of Hosea is proceeding toward the inevitable end of this stubborn, ignorant, faithless, loveless, rebellious people.

What is the saddest book in the Bible?

We might say Lamentations, but that book is about the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of Judah – and Jerusalem was rebuilt and Judah returned from exile. But not so with Israel.

Israel fell from blinding heights as the chosen people of God to instead be disowned by God and cast away and scattered, never to return. And in Hosea, we see God's final appeal to Israel – an appeal that was once again rejected and thrown back in God's face. I think Hosea may be the saddest book in the Bible.

But despite the sadness, we still see glimpses of the gospel throughout. And so, Hosea is both a very sad book and a very beautiful book.

And not only do we see the gospel of Christ, but we also see Christ in this book.

Where is Jesus in this book? We have already seen references to the coming king, but I think we will also see a reference to the resurrected savior. In fact, I think we will see that very soon! Let's keep reading.

Hosea 6:1-2

1 "Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. 2 After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.

We know that knowledge is a major theme in Hosea, but so too is repentance. And we see that theme of returning to God here in verse 1.

God wanted his people to return to him. In fact, that is why God sent the prophet Hosea to give them a final warning about what was coming.

In the first three verses of chapter 6, we find a short song about those who return to God and enjoy the great blessings that God has to offer.

And in this short song, we see a reversal of the terrible punishments that we saw in chapter 5. God as a lion had torn them, but now God would heal them. God as gangrene and maggots had

infected their wounds, but now God would bind up and bandage their wounds.

Yes, God had punished them, but those punishments had been inflicted for a reason – to wake them up to their true condition so that they would return to him. Even in their punishment, God was seeking their restoration, not their destruction.

But who is singing this song? Who is making this statement in verse 1? Are the people finally waking up? Are they returning to God?

Perhaps a few might have heeded Hosea's warnings, but we know that most did not. We know that most of the people were killed or carried off by Assyria. So who then is singing this song?

I think this short song at the beginning of Hosea 6 is a song that God was longing to hear from his people, but is a song that God did not actually hear from this people. I think that with this beautiful song of repentance, God through Hosea is telling the people what they should have been singing to God. But they were not singing this song. If they had, then God would have turned Assyria around.

If the people had repented, then verse 1 would be telling us what we would expect to see after the punishment in chapter 5 – the lion tears, and God heals; the gangrene infects, and God binds.

But what about verse 2? "After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him." How do this revival

and this raising up in verse 2 fit with what we saw in chapter 5?

Yes, the lion tore its prey and carried off its prey, and perhaps that suggests the lion killed its prey, but we were not told that explicitly in chapter 5. Is there something more going on here in verse 2?

And the answer is yes. There is something more going on here in verse 2 – something much more! Let's listen as the Apostle Paul tells us about it.

1 Corinthians 15:3-5 – For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, **that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures**, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Paul tells us that Jesus was raised on the third day **in accordance with the Scriptures**. But where? Where do the Scriptures tell us that?

One possibility might be Jonah 1:17 – “And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” And we know that Jesus referred to his own resurrection as the sign of the prophet Jonah.

Matthew 12:39-40 – An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except **the sign of the prophet Jonah**. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be **three days and three nights** in the heart of the earth.

And, yes, Paul may have been thinking about the sign of Jonah in 1 Corinthians 15:4, but I don't think so.

Yes, what happened to Jonah was certainly a **sign** of Jesus' resurrection, but I think Paul's phrase "in accordance with the Scriptures" in 1 Corinthians 15:4 is pointing to something more specific. I think Paul is telling us that the Scriptures somewhere specifically foretold a resurrection of the Messiah on the third day.

And, if so, then the only place in the Old Testament where we find anything like that is right here in Hosea 6:2 - "After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him."

But if that is correct, then we immediately have at least two questions: (1) Why does the prophecy also talk about two days?, and (2) Isn't the context here about the restoration of Israel - and if so, how can we apply it to Jesus?