

Hosea 4 • How Did THIS Happen?

Introduction

When a person become unfaithful in their marriage, the uncomfortable question invariably arises, “Why did you choose to do this?” Everyone understands that the purpose of taking the oath of marriage is to make a personal, exclusive commitment to only one other person. To break such a bond, “something” happened to cause that sacred trust and promise to be completely forsaken. The same question arises in terms of spiritual unfaithfulness. Why does a person go from being a faithful, practicing Christian to a former shadow of that walk? Actually, it’s not unlike an alcoholic who only thought they were taking a “couple of drinks a day” before they ended up in such a serious situation that they could no longer avoid the truth of their addiction. It’s usually at that rock-bottom point they finally ask, “How did THIS happen?” It starts with the basics: Once the foundation is undermined, the whole house is at risk.

¹Listen to the word of the LORD, O sons of Israel,
For the LORD has a case against the inhabitants of the land,
Because there is no faithfulness or kindness
Or knowledge of God in the land.
²There is swearing, deception, murder, stealing and adultery.
They employ violence, so that bloodshed follows bloodshed.
³Therefore the land mourns,
And everyone who lives in it languishes
Along with the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky,
And also the fish of the sea disappear.

[Read v.1-3]

Q: What is the specific accusation God makes in v.1?

A: “...there is no faithfulness or kindness or knowledge of God in the land.” Note that this is in the form of a **legal** accusation by His qualification, “the Lord has a case”.

Application: Pause for a moment and consider why and how these 3 things are related. Have you considered that the evidence of your spiritual faithfulness, for instance, is the quality of your spiritual kindness and knowledge? Or that knowledge of God is proved by the degree of your spiritual faithfulness and kindness?

Q: What are the specific things they have done to justify God’s case against them? What are the exact charges?

A: “...swearing, deception, murder, stealing and adultery...violence...bloodshed”.

Q: In their own earthly, legal system based on the Law given through Moses, what do all these things have in common within the Law of Moses?

A: They are all violations of the “second tablet”, those commandments that are summarized as showing love to one’s neighbor.

Q: Throughout Scripture, God constantly begins these kinds of dialogs not by pointing out that they have violated the “first tablet” summarized as loving God with all one’s heart, but having violated His commandments to love others. Why?

A: They may describe two things, but they are connected as one thing in God’s view, sort of like the two sides of the same coin. No one can love God with all their heart if they don’t prove by biblical standards that they love their neighbor. A person may **claim** they love God, but the proof of that claim’s validity is in the quality of their love for others.

Whereas it might be difficult for us to prove whether someone truly loves God, we can clearly prove by their actions whether they love their neighbor. The things they were doing proved beyond a doubt that they had no love for their neighbor, therefore God translates this to mean they absolutely have no actual love for Him.

Q: How is v.3 expressing a complete and total judgment?

A: It is directed at all things whether they come from the land, air (“sky”), or sea. It’s a way of expressing that they will be completely cut off without a single earthly possibility of relief or rescue.

⁴Yet let no one find fault, and let none offer reproof;
For your people are like those who contend with the priest.
⁵So you will stumble by day,
And the prophet also will stumble with you by night;
And I will destroy your mother.
⁶My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.
Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest.
Since you have forgotten the law of your God,
I also will forget your children.

[Read v.4-6]

Q: What is the basic behavioral problem being described in v.4? What is the deeper disease for which this is but a symptom?

A: They refuse to be corrected according to the standard of God's Word, and resist even should a priest – an expert in the Law – admonish them. This is an indication that at their core, they have completely rejected the authority of God's Word and will do as they please.

Q: According to the Mosaic Law, what should have happened to “those who contend with the priest”?

A: According to the Law, it was a capital crime invoking the death penalty. (Deuteronomy 17:12) Imagine no one afraid to commit murder, rape or kidnapping in today's society and the police and courts being completely ignored on such matters, even complicit with same.

Q: Why does v.5 state that “the prophet also will stumble with you”?

A: It continues the thought from verse 4 to indicate that although the people were disobedient, their religious leaders weren't even attempting to make them accountable to the Law. **BOTH** are equally disobedient and therefore equally blind spiritually so that they will stumble both “by day” and “by night”.

Q: What does it mean, “I will destroy your mother”?

A: Those that choose not to build upon the foundation of God's Word are building on an alternate foundation, constructing a new institution or movement that is itself a harlot in the ways of God and giving birth to even more spiritual harlotry. To re-establish the bond with our Father, all other bonds to earthly “mothers” must be completely severed.

Q: How does God describe this state of behavior and attitude that has overtaken the people and their leaders to induce spiritual unfaithfulness?

A: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” Although they had the Word, they neither put it into practice nor held each other accountable to it.

Point: *The biblical definition that someone “knows”, “hears”, or “understands” something is whether they actually put it into action. No matter how educated or informed one is concerning Scripture, God considers them completely devoid of actual knowledge of it if they don't actually put it into practice.*

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

James 1:22-25

[Continued on the next page.]

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⁷The more they multiplied, the more they sinned against Me;
I will change their glory into shame.
⁸They feed on the sin of My people
And direct their desire toward their iniquity.
⁹And it will be, like people, like priest;
So I will punish them for their ways
And repay them for their deeds.
¹⁰They will eat, but not have enough;
They will play the harlot, but not increase,
Because they have stopped giving heed to the LORD.

¹¹Harlotry, wine and new wine take away the understanding.
¹²My people consult their wooden idol, and their diviner's wand informs them;
For a spirit of harlotry has led them astray,
And they have played the harlot, departing from their God.
¹³They offer sacrifices on the tops of the mountains
And burn incense on the hills,
Under oak, poplar and terebinth,
Because their shade is pleasant.
Therefore your daughters play the harlot
And your brides commit adultery.
¹⁴I will not punish your daughters when they play the harlot
Or your brides when they commit adultery,
For the men themselves go apart with harlots
And offer sacrifices with temple prostitutes;
So the people without understanding are ruined.

Q: What are the even greater consequences of forsaking God's Word? Are the consequences confined exclusively to just the individual?

A: It not only disqualifies one from greater spiritual service for God's kingdom ("I also will reject you from being My priest"), but passes on a spiritual legacy to those closest to us. ("I also will forget your children"). It affects both our heavenly and earthly heritage.

[Read v.7-10]

Q: How does v.7 provide a picture of the depth of spiritual corruption that comes from rejecting God's Word?

A: Because it experiences growth, it reinforces the notion that it's successful and pursued even more vigorously. In the end, it becomes one's personal pride and "glory". As we see in v.8, it is fueled by "their desire toward their iniquity".

Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.

Philippians 3:17-19

Q: How are spiritual consequences ultimately expressed?

A: In corresponding physical consequences (v.10). Just as their spiritual legacy is corrupted and judgment comes upon it, so their earthly legacy experiences the same kind of judgment. Spiritual consequences ultimately become expressed in the tangible, physical realm.

[Read v.11-14]

Q: Why does God describe not just their problem as "a spirit of harlotry" but categorically labels them as a "harlot"?

A: Just as giving one's heart and devotion to another is physical prostitution, so is selling yourself in exchange for what you believe will be spiritually received from that false god or institution. But in the very practices recounted here, the physical act of worshiping these false gods involved physical acts of sex outside of marriage, a **literal** adaptation of prostitution. This involved not just giving away their wives and daughters, but the males themselves as described in v.14, "and offer sacrifices with temple prostitutes".

Q: Again, what is the bottom line expression God uses to describe the root cause of all this behavior?

A: "So the people without understanding are ruined". (v.14) Because they do not put God's Word into practice – even though they may have read or known about it – and choose to act contrarily, they are ruined because their behavior reveals they're actually "without understanding".

Point: *If someone truly "understands" the benefits of obeying God's Word and the like consequences for rejecting it, they would never choose to engage in behavior that leads to eternal destruction. If one truly "understands", they have absolutely no hesitation to reject the ways of sin for the ways of God.*

¹⁵Though you, Israel, play the harlot,
Do not let Judah become guilty;
Also do not go to Gilgal,
Or go up to Beth-aven
And take the oath:
“As the LORD lives!”
¹⁶Since Israel is stubborn
Like a stubborn heifer,
Can the Lord now pasture them
Like a lamb in a large field?
¹⁷Ephraim is joined to idols;
Let him alone.
¹⁸Their liquor gone,
They play the harlot continually;
Their rulers dearly love shame.
¹⁹The wind wraps them in its wings,
And they will be ashamed because of
their sacrifices.

[Read v.15-19]

Q: First of all, what is significant about Gilgal and Beth-aven?

A: They are major centers of false worship in the northern kingdom of Israel which were situated very close to its border with the southern kingdom of Judah. They had temples, idols, altars, priesthoods – everything necessary for sustaining false worship. “Beth-aven” means “house of vanity” or “house of nothingness” and is a sarcastic variation of its original name “Beth-el”, the “house of the LORD” to describe it as now being a “house of idols”.

Point: *The warning in v.15 was to those who still maintained an obedient relationship with God in Judah to not join their fallen brothers in Israel in bringing God’s ways alongside those of other gods. Believers are supposed to learn the right lesson from others’ mistakes without partaking their self.*

Q: What overall condition is v.16 referring to?

A: Refusing to put God’s Word into practice, they are like an untamed heifer that refuses to be penned and thus runs about, or refuses to accept a yoke to do the work required of them. So they will be spread abroad in the Assyrian captivity with little protection, like a single sheep in a large field. (Sheep are generally much safer in a group, in a controlled space, and submissive to their shepherd, none of which describes those who live contrary to God’s Word.)

Q: What does it seem to take to make the idolatrous see the error of their ways?

A: According to v.17-19, they seem to have to experience a rock-bottom experience so severe that they realize that all they previously trusted in not only did not save them, but actually resulted in their destruction.

Point: *It’s been oft-observed that people with addictive behaviors cannot simply go into a treatment program unless they first come to a place of honest and sincere acknowledgment of the scope and source of their problem. So it is with those that continue in disobedience – they have to come to a place where they honestly and sincerely repent and acknowledge their need to forsake all ways other than God’s.*

Let’s Connect the Dots

Consider the following Scriptural sequence culled from the lesson’s reading and discuss how it provides a basis for understanding how a person, church, or movement can start out right but end up in the completely wrong place spiritually.

1. (v.1) “...there is no faithfulness, or kindness, or knowledge of God in the land.” (Issue: Right treatment of others)
2. (v.4) “Yet let no one find fault, and let none offer reproof...” (Issue: Lack of accountability)
3. (v.6) “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” (Issue: Replacing the Father with a substitute “mother”)
4. (v.6) “...you have forgotten the law of your God...” (Issue: Being a “forgetful hearer”)
5. (v.10) “...they have stopped giving heed to the LORD.” (Issue: Withdrawal from God’s Word)
6. (v.12) “...a spirit of harlotry has led them astray, and they have played the harlot, departing from their God.” (Issue: Visible personal unfaithfulness to match underlying spiritual unfaithfulness)
7. (v.16) “...Like a stubborn heifer, can the LORD now pasture them like a lamb in a large field?” (Issue: Must have a rock-bottom experience to see the truth and want to change)
8. (v.19) “...they will be ashamed because of their sacrifices.” (Issue: Must engage in true and sincere repentance)

Do you or anyone you know fit at least part of this profile? Do you see the value of gentle but firm admonishment – of speaking up to make them accountable – and not being a party to allowing behavior to escalate? If we don’t make a stand against sin **AND** for God’s Word, where will we end up, both ourselves and the others for whom we remain silent?

Final Application: *Part of the process of spiritual healing and reconciliation **MUST** involve a return to God’s Word, a powerful tool that heals unfaithfulness by encouraging faithfulness. Spiritual accountability doesn’t simply end at identifying and correcting sin, but accompanying that behavioral change with a consistent return to God’s Word.*