

# Hosea 4:1

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'd like to now turn to the prophecy of Hosea in chapter 4 and page 905 of the Pew Bible. At the beginning of this chapter we have these words, Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land.

The Lord has a charge to bring against you. One of the illusions of the age in which we live is that anything that is worthwhile is new.

We need to recognise that many of the things that we claim to be new today, in fact have been discovered many centuries before, and that we can learn a great deal not only from the present, but also from the past.

One of the oldest, some people say the oldest manuscript of papyrus that has been found with a single sentence written on it dating back to about the year 2000 in the ancient Near East, or coming from the Middle East, contains these words, Things are not what they used to be.

Now we tend to think today that things are not what they used to be today, but that is the impression that many generations have experienced.

[ 1 : 49 ] And just because we turn tonight to a prophet who wrote over two and a half thousand years ago, there's no reason for us to dismiss out of hand what that prophet has to say.

There's a huge amount in this prophecy of Hosea, which is intensely relevant to the world in which we live today.

We see here a prophet not only for his own generation, but a prophet also for ours. He was one of the great 8th century prophets.

He worked along with Amos, Micah, and Isaiah. His ministry was one which was directed towards the northern kingdom of Israel, similar to the ministry of Amos, whereas Micah and Isaiah focused their prophecies on the southern kingdom, the kingdom of Judah.

At this time the northern kingdom was still intact. It had not yet been captured by the Assyrians, and the people, the population carried into captivity.

[ 3 : 07 ] Now one of the reasons that the prophets, such as these men, such as these men, are so relevant today is that they spoke in pictures. They spoke in verbal images, which are relevant, not only then, but also today.

Images which we can apply to multiple situations. And the image that Hosea uses here is an image which is still very popular, very topical, and very common today.

The image of a lawsuit. We live in a litigious society. We live in a society where perhaps more people are going to go than ever before.

We live in a blame culture, where people are accused often falsely. And here the prophet tells us that God has a charge against us.

That our greatest concern ought not to be what our neighbour or competitor may, what charge they might bring against us. But our greatest concern ought to be concerning the charge the Lord has against us.

[ 4 : 22 ] And what Hosea is saying to us is that the Lord is filing a lawsuit against us. That the Lord has a complaint. The Lord has a legal action against us.

And that that action will be heard at the greater size on the day of judgment. And so Hosea is warning us now and telling us now that there will be that charge.

There will be that confrontation. That lawsuit will be presented. And he is telling us now so that we might prepare to respond to it.

So that we might prepare for that confrontation. So what Hosea does here in chapter 4 is to portray an ancient version of a contemporary courtroom drama.

Now courtroom dramas are often in the news. Sometimes in terms of fiction. Other times in terms of reality in the news. In the ancient world, lawsuits were presented not in a law court as such but at what was called the gate.

[ 5 : 38 ] The gate of a city where the elders gathered and the elders were the judges. The elders of the community heard and judged in cases that were taken in law by one person against another.

We know from references elsewhere in the Old Testament that the gate of the city was a very important place. It was the place where the city was governed.

It was the place where justice was administered. It was, if you like, the center, the legal center and political center of these ancient communities.

Now Hosea may well have uttered the oracle that is recorded in this chapter standing in the gate of Samaria, the capital city of the ancient kingdom of Israel.

Perhaps in order to bring home the reality of the charge that he was bringing, he went to the very gate, to the very place where justice was being administered, where a government was indeed being carried out.

[ 6 : 51 ] And it was there that he may have uttered this oracle. And he stands there to arraign the whole nation. He confronts not simply the elders of Samaria, but he confronts the whole of the northern kingdom.

Now as I said, Hosea's words are more relevant to us today than may at first sight be apparent. There are remarkable parallels between some of the conditions in Hosea's time and conditions in ours.

Of course there is a great deal of difference in terms of culture, in terms of social structure, in terms of time. There's a great barrier. But across that barrier there are remarkable similarities, there are bridges which link what Hosea says with where we are today.

For example, both in his time and in our time, people enjoyed relative material prosperity.

The northern kingdom, we see this very clearly in the prophecy of Amos, was enjoying a boom time. It was a golden age in terms of economic prosperity.

[ 8 : 13 ] The best time in the history of Israel since the days of David and Solomon. But alongside this material prosperity, there was spiritual declension, which is movingly depicted in Hosea's wife, Gomer, leaving him to become a cult prostitute in the shrine of Baal.

We live in an age which is enjoying unparalleled prosperity. We may complain that we don't have enough, but so also, to complain the richest people in the world today, no one ever has enough.

But nevertheless, we compared with previous generations and many other parts of the world, we are enjoying a prosperity today. Here in the Western world, at the same time, we are witnessing a spiritual declension.

We are witnessing a decline in church attendance. We are witnessing a decline in morality. We are witnessing a decline in law and order in our society.

We are living in a situation of prosperity in the one hand, of material prosperity in the one hand, and spiritual decline on the other. And so we see these, at least two parallels between Hosea's situation and ours, which underline for us the relevance, for us, of what he said to his generation.

[ 9 : 50 ] I would like us to look tonight at exactly what Hosea brought in this lawsuit. It was not really his lawsuit, it was the Lord's lawsuit. He was simply the, he was simply the, the prosecutor.

He was simply the lawyer, if you like. He was doing what he was commissioned to do by the Lord. It was the Lord's lawsuit that he was presenting. He was playing the role of public prosecutor.

So we have four elements in this lawsuit that Hosea brought. There is, first of all, the summons in verse 1. Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites.

Secondly, there is the charge. The Lord is the charge to bring against you who live in the land. There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land.

Then he goes on in verse 2 to bring out the third element, the evidence that substantiates this charge. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery.

[ 10 : 56 ] They break all bounds and bloodshed follows bloodshed. And then in verse 3 he goes on to announce the verdict.

The verdict that the Lord had already pronounced. Because of this, the land mourns and all who live in it waste away. The beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying.

Remarkably relevant observation. We live in an age today in which the environment, the physical environment which God has given to us to look after and to care for is suffering.

In some cases dying. And it's interesting that Isaiah says that this, the reason for this is failure of the people to keep covenant with God.

And when we confront today the problems of the environment it's important to listen to what Isaiah is saying because the root of the ecological problems that we face are spiritual and moral.

[ 12 : 10 ] And that's what Hosea is saying. The evidence, he says, of spiritual and moral decline is a despoiled environment. Let's look at each of these elements in turn.

First of all the summons. Hear the word of the Lord you Israelites. Now God's word came through Hosea to his generation.

But the spirit who sent him to the gate of Samaria is the same spirit who has caused his words to be recorded and preserved in scripture so that we might hear them and that this summons might come to us.

It is clear from scripture as a whole that the Lord has a charge against not simply Samaria but against all nations, against all communities and against all people.

He has served notice that he will press this charge on the day of final judgment. It is appointed he tells us it is appointed to all people to die and after that the judgment.

[ 13 : 25 ] And so this is the moral backdrop against to life which is painted in the Bible. We are reminded that we have an appointment with judgment that we have an appointment with this destiny at the end of the age that we are accountable and we are accountable to God above all else.

And Hosea summons helps us to see life in its true context. John Calvin used to speak of the Bibles as a Bible being like spectacles that help us to see things as they really are.

And this is what Hosea helps us to do here. He helps us to see life as it really is. We are being summoned. And Hosea is reminding us here, he is delivering the summons and he is telling us that we will be summoned to appear before the great white throne.

Every one of us. All communities. All nations. All peoples. But there's not only the summons here, there's also the charge in the second part of the first verse.

There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. Now these three phrases or words, love, faithfulness, love, and knowledge or acknowledgement of God, are all words that are linked to the covenant that God made with his people.

[ 15 : 04 ] They're all requirements of the covenant that God made with ancient Israel. He had chosen them and redeemed them from Egypt and brought them into the land of promise. And he described this new relationship in terms of a covenant.

A phrase or a concept which we saw this morning was borrowed from the culture surrounding of which Israel was a part where virtually all relationships were covenantal.

And the covenant that God made with his people has most parallels with the covenants that were made between the great emperors and the vassal kingdoms. And the requirements God says of this covenant are first of all faithfulness, secondly love, and thirdly the knowledge of God.

What Ahosea says is that he doesn't see these things in his generation. And we need to ask ourselves whether we see them in ours. Do we see faithfulness?

Do we see love? Do we see the knowledge of God? Let's look at these very quickly. First of all, faithfulness.

[ 16 : 21 ] This word translated faithfulness means firmness, reliability, dependability. What the prophet is saying is that he does not see this kind of reliability, spiritual reliability or faithfulness to God's covenant.

The people, he tells us in verse 12, are unfaithful to their God. They had gone over to the worship of Baal, which was a fertility cult.

which was very popular in the time of prosperity because the economy was an agrarian economy and a lot of the prosperity of the time was attributed to Baal.

The people had turned their backs upon God and were worshipping Baal. Now, Baal was not only a fertility cult, it was also a moral, a permissive cult.

There was much cult prostitution and where sexual relationships were used in terms of imitative magic. There was a great deal of corruption, a great deal of moral degradation associated with it.

[ 17 : 36 ] And that's why he says there is no faithfulness. The people had abandoned God for Baal, for the symbol of prosperity.

We live today in an age in which so many are abandoning God for materialism. The God today, the equivalent of Baal as materialism, is the idol of gold and silver, the idol of material prosperity.

People are turning to materialism today, turning their backs upon God. And associated with this search, this affiliation to materialism, there is a turning to the occult, there is a turning to New Age ideas, a turning to Neopaganism, almost turning back to the kind of Baalism that the prophet condemns.

There is no faithfulness. And we need to ask ourselves, are we being faithful? Are we faithful to God? Are we reliable?

Are we dependable? Are we committed to Him? Is He the first priority in our lives? Is He our first love? This brings us to the second point of the charge, there is no love.

[ 19 : 05 ] There is no love. Now love here is not simply compassion, it's much broader than that, it's kindness, it's practical. This word describes God's loving action towards Israel in bringing them into a current relationship with Himself.

It is a word which describes undeserved mercy. It is not the kind of love that you give to people who love you, the kind of love you give to people who hate you, the kind of love that people don't deserve.

What does the Lord require of you, said Micah to his generation, to love mercy and to do justly and to love and to serve God.

So this question of loving mercy is of vital importance. God's love our society today is a society which apparently seems to be becoming increasingly callous, increasingly cruel, where compassion and sensitivity to others is all too often evident in its absence.

And means you recognize that this is a result of a broken relationship with God. But then the prophet says there is no knowledge, no acknowledgement of God, or simply there is no knowledge of God.

[ 20 : 28 ] To know God was Hosea's favorite description of salvation. If he was asked to explain what does it mean to be saved, he said it means to know God. Just as Paul, if he were asked what does it mean to be saved, he would say it means to be put right with God, to be justified.

The prophet here is speaking about the lack of a personal saving relationship with God.

Much of the religious activity of his time was purely formal, ceremonial, and awkward. Very few, it appears, had a true personal relationship with God.

Now it's dangerous for us to make superficial judgments today, but the fact was seen to indicate that a great deal of our religious affiliation, and many of us, still a majority of people in our society say they believe in God, 75%, say that they believe in God and are Christian, but how deep does that go?

Is there really a knowledge of God? When so many, so few, read the Bible, when so few, attend the means of grace, when so few, are prepared to nail their colors to the mast.

[ 21 : 50 ] So the prophet says to his generation, and I believe he says it to ours, there is no faithfulness, no kindness, no knowledge of God in the land.

And this is a remarkable parallel between the nation of Israel and the nation of Scotland tonight. We live in a country which in 1638, half the adult population signed a national covenant with God.

And they did it not only on their own behalf, but on behalf of succeeding generations. And we today see that covenant flouted, see that covenant broken, there is no faithfulness, there is no kindness, there is no knowledge of God in the land.

Then moving from the charge to the evidence, in verse 2, all of these pieces of evidence are in fact ethical components.

They are not primarily religious, they are ethical. Cursing, for example, the cursing did have religious overtones, it was a means of exercising spite and hatred against others.

[ 23 : 16 ] There's a reference here not only to bad language, but to the formal cursing of a neighbor in the name of God, which is a breach of the third commandment, the misuse of the name of God, you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

And that's what those who were cursing were doing. They were breaking the command, they were using religion to justify vendettas, much as what is happening in Iraq today, but has happened in our own society in Northern Ireland, where religion becomes a cloak for vendetta, cursing.

Then he speaks also about lying. Probably the reference here is not only to false statements, but also to false testimony in court. False testimony which undermined the whole traditional system.

He speaks also of murder. And murder here, of course, is a sense not of accidental homicide, but of premeditated homicide.

See, it refers also to stealing. Stealing was not only, it is described not only simple theft, but also the kidnapping of people, stealing of people.

[ 24 : 39 ] That was very common in the ancient world. It is still common today with the very distressing resurgence of slavery in different parts of the world today, where people are captured.

captured, and this is happening in our own European society, where people in Eastern Europe are being captured and brought into the sex trade, and brought into this country. They're being stolen.

We see here the commandments of God being flouted openly before our eyes. It refers also here to adultery, not simply simple adultery, but religious prostitution, which is part and partial of Baal worship.

So what Hosea is saying here is that there was an ethical breakdown, that society was beginning to break up. So that when the judgment came upon Samaria a generation later, that judgment came upon a society which was already falling apart.

The ancient kingdom of Israel did not fall to the Assyrians, it fell to itself. It crumbled from within, it imploded because of this ethical malaise and the spiritual vacuum which was at its heart.

[ 26 : 10 ] Now similar symptoms are evident in our own society. And these are truly things that should concern us, they certainly concern God. A society which is totally permissive breaks up.

A society in which we are bent on pursuing selfish pursuits will not inevitably, will not eventually hold together.

There must be a willingness to sacrifice, there must be a willingness to work for others as well as for ourselves, to work for the common good. But if the common good is marginalised and selfish priority takes the centre stage, society begins to disintegrate.

And we need biblical spectacles to help us to see what is happening in our society today. Then we have the verdict in verse 3, because of this the land mourns and all who live in it waste away, the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying.

Those elders in the gate who were farmers, and many of them probably were, must have sensed a chill running down their spine, the thought of Israel's agrarian prosperity disappearing.

[ 27 : 39 ] In an agrarian economy, for the land to mourn, to dry up, would spell economic disaster. And it's important, as I emphasized earlier, that this ecological crisis, which Hosea paints here as a result of ethical breakdown, which in turn is the result of a spiritual crisis.

And it's important for us when we talk today about all the problems of the environment to track back. If we deal only with the environment, we're dealing only with two removes away from reality.

We need to go back to the moral breakdown, to the spiritual crisis that has produced this. God has given us the environment to use and to rule over for him.

We are the trustees, the human race is the trustees of the creation. And the reason why we've got it wrong is that our relationship with God has gone wrong.

with a spiritual crisis. And more than that, because of that, there is a relationship with others that's gone wrong, with an ethical crisis. And so we need to look at the ecological crisis holistically.

[ 28 : 58 ] Look at it in the light of all that the prophet says here. And so this is the biblical perspective that God is inviting us to have as we look out at life.

As we look at our own lives, at the life of society as a whole. To look at life in terms of a covenantal relationship between God and people, between us and God, between God and nature, and between us and nature.

And so we have here is a triangular relationship between God, people, and the creation. and we are urged to live as his servants in this situation. And so the word of Hosea is a word which is relevant.

It's a word for the 21st century. It's a word for our age and our generation just as much as it was for his. And he reminds us especially that the ecological crisis has its root in a moral crisis which has its root in a spiritual crisis.

ultimately the problem, the key root problem is a broken relationship with God. And it's so important that that relationship be put right.

[ 30 : 18 ] And that's where the gospel is so vital, that's where the gospel is so crucial, that's where the gospel is so relevant. We need to have our relationship put right because our relationship is wrong.

There is a lawsuit against us. The evidence is there. We are condemned. We don't have a hope that Jesus Christ has lived our life and has died our death in order that he might plead our case, in order that he might put his own life in place of our lives and present the merits of his own life and his own death for us so that we might be acquitted, that we might be justified on that great day.

and so the Lord Jesus Christ offers to become our advocate. Here we have Hosea as the prosecutor and the whole Jesus comes as our advocate, as our defender.

He comes to defend us not on our own record but on his record and he will plead his record, his life, his death, his resurrection, who he is, what he has done.

he will plead that record on behalf of all who place their trust in him. And that is why Paul can say that if we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ we are already justified.

[ 31 : 46 ] The word justified is a word which would properly refer us to the day of judgment. But Paul says that God's salvation is so real that we can experience it now, that we can be justified, we can be acquitted now, we can have that assurance now, that as it were, the verdict of the day of judgment is advanced now.

So that if we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, if we trust in him, God justifies us, God accepts us, God acquits us. Not because of who we are, but because of who Christ is, and because of what he has done.

God and that is the offer that God makes to you tonight. But he comes to you and he comes to me with this lawsuit. And he reminds us of the danger to which we are exposed, of the judgment which will be inevitable.

But he also points us to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the great advocate of his people, and who offers to deliver us from that judgment, because he himself has borne it in his own life and in his own death.

He is the one who comes to us tonight as our advocate. He offers to justify us. He offers to put us right to God. And I would plead with you to believe in him, simply to trust him, to take him as your savior, because that's how we are justified.

[ 33 : 18 ] We are justified by faith. It is not something, that great work that we have to do, it is not some great amount of moral energy that we've got to generate.

We simply believe, just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, O Lamb of God, I come to thee. That's faith.

Simply to trust in Jesus, throw yourself upon him, upon his mercy and upon his grace, that he will justify you. He will put you right with God.

God, he will deal with his lawsuit which is against us. He will take you out of the path of death, of judgment, of hell, and bring you into eternal life.

He will lift you out of the kingdom of darkness and bring you into the kingdom of light. He will lift you out of the broad way that leads to destruction, and set you in the narrow way that leads to life.

[ 34 : 18 ] That is what he's offering to do for you tonight. I wonder what is your response. Are you going to trust him? Are you going to believe in him?

He's holding out his hand to help you. You and I without him are like a drowning person. We're drowning, we're sinking, and he's putting out his hand.

The question I want to leave with you tonight is whether you're going to put out your hand and grasp his hand, hand, because his hand is powerful. And once he grasps your hand, there is nothing, nothing on earth or in hell that will break his grip.

He is willing to lift you, lift you out of the kingdom of darkness and bring you into the kingdom of light. May God grant that you may take full advantage of this opportunity tonight, and trust him, ask him to be your Lord and Savior.