

**RETURN**  
**Hosea 14:1-9**

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The first word is RETURN.

A powerful word, don't you think? Come back. Let's have fellowship again. I miss you. Your absence is so strong that it is felt.

In a *Guideposts Magazine* several years ago, an article was entitled "How to Welcome Home a Prodigal." The article shared the personal experiences of Barbara Hamlin and her daughter, Dawn. Excitement, relief, and eagerness were the feelings that Mrs. Hamlin had when she received "the call" from her seventeen-year-old daughter asking for a place back in her home. She wanted to return. Before, when reading the Prodigal Son story in the Gospel of Luke, Mrs. Hamlin had always pictured herself as the wayward child returning to a forgiving heavenly father. But now, she found herself having to be the forgiver – forgetting old fights and letting go of old grievances. She had to handle her resentment toward Dawn for all the painful, sleepless nights that she had inflicted upon the family.

As the article proceeds, Mrs. Barbara Hamlin gives first-hand "pointers" on how to be the forgiver and receive others with open arms – even people who have left you cold, undone, and wondering inside. ("How To: Welcome Home a Prodigal, *Guideposts*, Dec. 1987)

Well, Barbara Hamlin discovered it's not easy to be the "forgiving parent" in a prodigal relationship. But God remains the supreme example of a forgiving father. In fact, God calls on His people to restore their broken relationships with Him. God calls us to return.

It's the first word of our text this morning. RETURN.

Hosea is what we call a minor prophet – not minor because he's unimportant, but minor because of the length of his work compared to the longer works like Isaiah or Jeremiah. Hosea is preaching to the Northern Kingdom, Israel. It's the eighth century, B.C. The Assyrians are now sure to overthrow Israel because of her disobedience and lack of trust in God. Not only was Israel eventually defeated by the Assyrians, many of the inhabitants of Samaria were hauled away in exile – away from their homeland. Probably at this time, the king is Hoshea, the final ruler in Israel. He was playing a dangerous game of Russian roulette by making secret political alliances with both Egypt on the one hand, and Assyria on the other.

Look at Hosea 12:1  
Ephraim (another word for Israel) feeds on wind,

And pursues the east wind continually;  
He multiplies lies and violence.  
Moreover, he makes a covenant with Assyria,  
And oil is carried to Egypt.

The year of the fall was 722 B.C. Part of the problem with the Northern Kingdom was their acceptance of the Canaanite culture and its religion of idols – worshipping Baal. God was angry because His people had worshipped other gods and not remained faithful to their covenant with Him to love the God of Israel with all their heart and soul (Deuteronomy 6:5; 10:12). So right before the fall, or even moments after, we hear this word from Hosea – his last word – the word to return.

I want you to notice three things this morning.

### **I. God calls us to return by bringing before Him our prayer of repentance (vs. 1-3)**

What we have in these first three verses of chapter 14 is a model prayer of repentance. There are a lot of us who are in need of finding a way home to God. Maybe if we follow Hosea's path we'll find our way.

The call for each of us this morning is to begin with ourselves, for nothing can happen “through” us that is not happening “within” us. If we're to lead others to a right relationship with God, we ourselves must also come with repentant hearts. So the call this morning is for each of us to focus on ourselves. And then, and only then, can we take people by the hand and join with them as, together, we return to the Lord.

Perhaps this model prayer comes even during the siege of Samaria by the Assyrians. In this model of repentance, we see how to get home to God.

#### *A. The first step of repentance is to accept responsibility for departing from God.*

The first thing He tells us about repentance is that we need to accept responsibility for departing from Him. Look what He says in verse 1, “You have stumbled because of your iniquity.” God's repeated overtures of love, guidance, and blessing to Israel were constantly denied, ignored, rebuffed. They had said “no” to God and “yes” to their own way.

We think we're pretty good at life – doing things our way instead of God's way – until a crisis causes us to crumble. We are then brought face-to-face with the person we have become without repentance. We stumble because we have wandered away from a trusting relationship with God.

I've told you before about the old man and old woman who had been married about sixty years. They came to a red light, and in the car in front of them was a young couple. The girl in the passenger's seat was practically sitting on top of the boy in the driver's seat. They looked like one two-headed person. Their shoulders were indistinguishable, overlapping. The two heads so close. The lady looked at her husband, kind of reminiscing, and said, “Do you remember when we used

to sit that close? Look at that. Isn't that sweet?" The old man, still wise and full of wit, looked at her and said, "Yes I do, honey – but guess who moved." The old man was still in the driver's seat, but she had scooted over to her side of the bench seat.

If you are not as close to God, guess who moved!

*B. There is a second step in repentance from verses 1-3. That is a call to honest confession.*

Notice what he says in verse 2.

Take words with you and return to the Lord.

Have you ever met someone who just can't say the words, "I was wrong. I am sorry." I was talking to someone, and there had been a quarrel in the family. After a period of silence, the offender started making calls again – was re-establishing old patterns of an unbroken relationship. The caller stopped and said, "You know, that's just her way of showing 'I'm sorry.' She just can't say it."

That might work with your lover, your mom, your dad, or your children. But it will not work with God. Hosea says, "Take words with you and return to the Lord." How do you return to the Lord? You return with words.

God didn't want their sacrifices, formal rites, nor their rituals. He wanted words that exposed their true condition before the Lord. They'd already tried all the other things. "They shall go with their flocks and herds to seek the Lord, but they will not find Him" (Hosea 5:6). Ritual will not do. The sacrifice God wants is their words. "Take words." You cannot hide from God what you've hidden from others – maybe even hidden from yourself. We must verbally express who we are and what we've done to God. And those words prepare us for an encounter with Him.

What are their words to contain? Here is your model. Here is your method.

Hosea 14:2

Say to Him, "Take away all iniquity  
And receive us graciously,  
That we may present the fruit of our lips.  
Assyria will not save us,  
We will not ride on horses;  
Nor will we say again, 'Our god,'  
To the work of our hands;  
For in You the orphan finds mercy."

Now, what are we supposed to say? Let's break this down.

"Take away our sin" (look at the middle of verse 2) "and receive us graciously." Put plainly, they're saying, "We're being honest about our sin, and we believe that You will be forgiving and gracious." One commentator says it is best translated, "Receive us, O Good One."

We can't really confess our sin until we believe that God is gracious. Maybe that is why people won't open up with us when we have a broken relationship. Maybe they don't believe that we'll be gracious. But you can be sure that God will.

Look what else he says. "We offer the sacrifices of our lips." You have nothing to give God except your stuttered confession from a broken heart. There is nothing else to offer. You can't barter with him with your good works. But as the psalmist said, as David declared, God will not despise a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). Paul put it this way in Romans, "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

*C. Another part of this repentance is acknowledging that nothing else will do but God alone.*

Look at verse 3. "Assyria will not save us. We will not ride on horses; nor will we say again, 'Our god,' to the work of our hands; for in You the orphan finds mercy."

No, Assyria won't save them. Assyria destroyed them. No longer, moreover, can they trust in their own army, riding on horses of war. And the things that they had made with their hands – the idols of Baal – had to be discarded forever, for the previous objects of trust had to be cast away.

Who, or what, has the potential of being your false God? What in your life do you use to draw security and assurance that only God should be providing? The only way back to God is to come with your lips, with your words, with your confession. And all the false gods – Assyria, the war horses, and the handmade accomplishments – will not do, because we "present the fruit of our lips" (v. 2).

Only God is good to the orphan. Only God lets us return home.

In February 1985, Mary Lou Smith, who had felt an empty spot in her many broken relationships, wrote a letter to Children's Center in Louisville, Kentucky – where she had been born – asking if they had any information about her brothers. She had been separated from her family as a two-year-old child in adoption. She didn't really expect an answer. But two weeks later she received an excited phone call from Lydia Roberts, who gave her information so startling that she nearly fell over upon hearing it. "Your brother, Mickey, has been looking for you for 22 years. He has used newspapers, hired lawyers, even television, calling for you to return home to be with him."

Mary Lou Smith discovered that all this time her brother had tried every kind of search he could possibly think of to find her.

Upon meeting Mickey, her brother, she concluded that "meeting this cheerful, bearded man somehow returned a missing piece of myself." Their relationship grew over the months ahead. (*Good Housekeeping*, May 1986)

Just so, God's been looking for you. And today He sends His word – a prophet, Hosea. God calls you to return. As Mickey had done all that he could to restore the relationship with his missing sister, God has done all that He can do to heal his relationship with you – even at the expense of

His own son. God has called to you through Calvary, and now He calls you to come home – to come to Him with a prayer of repentance.

If you're willing to return to the Lord, He has a promise for you.

## **II. God calls you to return by promising that He stands waiting to heal the broken relationship (vs. 4-8).**

God calls you to return by promising that He stands waiting to heal the broken relationship. Look at verses 4-8. Hosea reveals how God will respond if we return and worship only Him. He will heal our waywardness. Apostasy is the word in my translation – it means waywardness. He will heal our waywardness.

He will love us freely. This word for love is the one used in Deuteronomy 4:37, when it is said “Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power.”

And even as He loves them, His wrath has been satisfied, and He will turn His anger (v. 4) away. Yahweh's anger is appeased by His grace. Anger, here, is the word of covenant, as much as the word “love” is. God has a covenant with those whom He loves. But part of that covenant states that disobedience brings wrath, and wrath brings punishment. We know about that turning away of wrath, don't we? It happens because of Christ Jesus. “We are justified,” Paul says in Romans 3:24-25, “as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation [you might say the word “satisfaction”] in His blood through faith.”

God had passed over the sins of the past, Paul continues, because of this day, this Christ, this sacrifice – when God's wrath is satisfied through the spilled blood of His Son. God loves us enough that, even as His holiness demands payment for sin in the form of shed blood, He becomes that payment himself.

What is the result of God's love and God's healing? Flourishing. Look at verse 5. He will be like the dew to Israel – that moisture that rolls off the Mediterranean at night, that soothes the vegetation. God will be like that to His people – to refresh, to give life. Israel will grow like a lily when she is restored (v. 2).

The plant life pattern continues through these verses in Hosea. It's not just the dew that makes the lily grow. Roots will be lengthened, like the cedars of Lebanon. Or how about the olive tree – the beauty of the blooms of the olive tree, the scent of the cedars of Lebanon. Put together, it's a picture of God's gracious presence bringing Israel abundant beauty and growth, firm rootedness in the fragrance of holiness.

And they will dwell under the shadow of God's protection (v. 7). No more idols (v.8). Like the cypress tree, like the fruit that comes from God (v. 8).

There was an article in *U.S. Catholic* years ago, “Why I Don’t Go to Confession,” by Frank Wessling. In fact, the Catholic gentleman has discovered that long confessions lines are a problem of the past. Wessling explains that he found it difficult to discuss the intimate problems of his life with a stranger, to share his secrets with a man who would surely not understand and would probably lose all respect for someone with a soul as stained as his. Wessling concludes, “I tolerated the Confession passed on by those old Irish monks as long as I was a child. I endured it for a while as an adult. I do not any longer because I seem to need something better.” To Frank Wessling, to you, and to me comes the message of Hosea. God Himself will hear your confessions. And faithfully and forgivingly, He awaits the fruit of your lips.

### **III. God calls you to return by reminding you that His ways are right (v. 9).**

This isn’t the end of Hosea’s message. There is one more thing I want you to see in verse 9. “Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them. For the ways of the Lord are right, and the righteous will walk in them, but transgressors will stumble in them.”

While wise men do recognize that God’s ways are the right ways, even the wisest of men – King Solomon – made the devastating decision not to go God’s way at a point in his life. He, despite God’s great gifts and blessings, decided that he knew best. He loved many pagan women from the surrounding countries. He worshipped idols. And as scripture concludes, “Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord and went not fully after the Lord as did David his father.” God’s message to Solomon is that “I will surely take away the kingdom from you” (1 Kings 11).

We know of Solomon and all of his wisdom. But in the end, he missed it, didn’t he? We might not be as wise as Solomon, but if you listen to Hosea, it will work for you. It’s still true – God’s ways are right. Look at the middle of verse 9. “For the ways of the Lord are right, and the righteous will walk in them.”

You know, we don’t have any idea how Israel responded to Hosea’s final call to return. Look back at Hosea 14:1. How did we begin? “Return to the Lord your God.” We don’t know. Did they repent? Did they return? Did they confess? Did they bring the sacrifice of their lips? Were they open with God?

That’s millennia ago. But God’s word is as true today as it was then, and its call to you from Hosea is the same. Return.

God is calling on you today, if your relationship with Him has been strained by sin – He waits for you to come to Him with a repentant heart, willing to turn from whatever is keeping the strain on the relationship. He promises to freely forgive you and love you. The message of Hosea 14 is not only a condemnation of sin, but it is primarily a call to return to the Lord. If you’ve gone away, He calls you today. Return to the Lord, your God.

Perhaps you’re here today and you’ve never started that relationship. The call is the same. The Father waits. He longs. Will you come?