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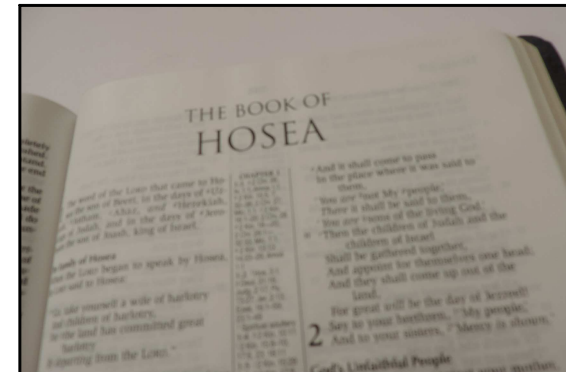
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# PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



## December 2018

Psalms 148 to 150, Hosea, Joel  
Psalms 1 and 2

*A people near to him*

This is another great psalm of praise with a call to praise God from the heavens (1–6) and from the earth (7–14). The angels and all the heavenly bodies are called upon to *praise him in the heights* (1). God has created them and established them for ever. His decree cannot be annulled and he is worthy of praise (5–6). Spurgeon writes, ‘See how the psalmist trumpets out the word, “Praise.” It sounds forth some nine times in the first five verses of this song. Like minute-guns, exultant exhortations are sounded forth in tremendous force — *Praise! Praise! Praise!*’ (TREASURY OF DAVID).

The psalm takes our thoughts from the heights of the heavens to the depths of the ocean as the great sea creatures are called on to praise God (7). The elements, mountains, hills, trees, all animals, all people, kings, princes, judges, young men and maidens, old men and children are called on to give God praise for *his glory is above the earth and heaven* (8–13). All creation is pictured as worshipping the exalted Lord Jesus in heaven (Revelation 5:13).

God *has exalted the horn of his people* (strengthened them). We are *his saints . . . a people near to him* (14). Though this psalm speaks of the children of Israel, these promises are also for those of us who belong to the new covenant. The promises made to Abraham are for those who are in Christ (Galatians 3:7–9,14). The promise in Isaiah 54:1 is quoted with reference to the church in Galatians 4:26–28. What a privilege it is to be near to God! We were once far off from him and alienated because of our sin. Now we are near to him through the sacrifice of Christ and we can call upon him at all times (Ephesians 2:13; Deuteronomy 4:7). We can *come to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (Hebrews 4:16).

**What a priceless privilege! Let us praise his glorious name!**

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Book	Date
Amos	March, April 2019
Obadiah	April 2019
Jonah	April 2019
Micah	April 2019
Nahum	August 2019
Habakkuk	December 2019
Zephaniah	December 2019
Haggai	January 2012; revised January 2020
Zechariah	February 2012; revised January 2020
Malachi	June 2012
Matthew	January to March, May, June 2019
Mark	August to October 2015
Luke	February March 2014
John	April to June 2018
Acts	February to April 2016
Romans	October to December 2015
1 Corinthians	July, August 2016
2 Corinthians	November, December 2016
Galatians	February, March 2017
Ephesians	May, June 2017
Philippians	September 2017
Colossians	October 2017
1 Thessalonians	November, December 2017
2 Thessalonians	January, February 2018
1 Timothy	September 2018
2 Timothy	November 2018
Titus	November 2018
Philemon	August 2019
Hebrews	October, November 2019
James	July 2014, revised February 2020
1 & 2 Peter	October 2014.
1, 2 & 3 John	December 2014.
Jude	March 2015
Revelation	April and May 2015.

Regular notes began publication in 1990. ‘Through the Bible in a year’ (selected readings from every book) was published in 1989 and 1996.

## Bible Reading Notes Index 2008 to 2018

Book	Date
Genesis	November, December 2013; January 2014
Exodus	April to June 2014;
Leviticus	August to September 2012
Numbers	August, September 2014
Deuteronomy	January to March 2015
Joshua	October, November 2008; January, February 2016
Judges	May, June 2016
Ruth	June 2016
1 Samuel	September, October 2016
2 Samuel	January, February 2017
1 Kings	March, April, May 2017
2 Kings	July, August 2017
1 Chronicles	July 2019
2 Chronicles	August, September 2019
Ezra	December 2019
Nehemiah	May 2012.
Esther	May, June 2012
Job	February, March 2018
Psalms 1–2	December 2018
Psalms 3 to 15	January, November, December 2019
Psalms 16	December 2012
Psalms 17 to 23	March, May, June 2013
Psalms 24 to 66	Jan, June, July, Sept, November & December 2014
Psalms 67 to 78	March and December 2015
Psalms 79 to 89	June, October, November 2016
Psalms 90-106	December 2016
Psalms 107–134	June, August, Sept, November, December 2017
Psalms 135 –150	June, September, November, December 2018
Proverbs	January, February 2013
Ecclesiastes	January 2018
Song of Solomon	April 2013
Isaiah	April, May; August, September 2013
Jeremiah	May to August 2015
Lamentations	October 2015
Ezekiel	July to September 2018
Daniel	October 2018
Hosea	December 2018
Joel	December 2018

## 2 DECEMBER

## Psalm 149

### *He will beautify the humble with salvation*

This psalm is a joyful hymn of praise to God our Maker. When God delivers his people from their enemies, they sing to him a new song which expresses his greatness and his goodness. They rejoice in God as their Maker because they owe their existence to him and they know him as their glorious King (2).

What are we to make of the exhortation, *Let them praise his name with the dance* (3)? After God delivered Israel from the Egyptian army, they exalted God with a great song of triumph. Miriam led the women in song, instrumental music and dance (Exodus 15:20–21). When the ark was brought back to Jerusalem, David danced before the Lord (2 Samuel 6:14). Dancing in worship has become quite widespread in some churches and is justified from this psalm and the instances quoted above. W.S. Plumer comments, ‘In our time, dancing has no such use, and cannot, therefore, in any way be justified by pleading the practice of pious Jews of old.’ There is no instance or encouragement in the New Testament for Christians to dance in their worship (cp. Ephesians 5:19–20; Colossians 3:16). It is interesting to note that when we sing our new song in heaven, singing and musical instruments will be part of our worship but not dancing (Revelation 5:8–9; 14:2; 15:2–3).

We are again reminded that God takes pleasure in his people and that *he will beautify the humble with salvation* (4; cp. Psalm 147:11). God has changed our sin-soiled garments and has given us garments of salvation and a robe of righteousness (Isaiah 61:10). These garments display the beauty of holiness as the wearer displays the precious fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). The church is the bride of Christ and will be spotless, radiant, glorious and beautiful in heaven (Psalm 45:11; Ephesians 5:25–27). **The Lord has done so much for us that we should always have his praise on our lips, even when we are resting on our beds or engaged in spiritual conflict (5–6). — Praise the LORD!**

*Let everything that has breath praise the LORD*

There are thirteen exhortations to praise the Lord in the six verses of this psalm. Spurgeon writes, ‘We have now reached the last summit of the mountain chain of Psalms. It rises high into the clear azure, and its brow is bathed in the sunlight of the eternal world of worship. It is a rapture. The poet-prophet is full of inspiration and enthusiasm. He stays not to argue, to teach, to explain; but cries with burning words, “*Praise him, praise him, praise ye the LORD.*” ’ (THE TREASURY OF DAVID). We are to *praise him for his mighty acts; praise him according to his excellent greatness!* (2). Spurgeon goes on to write, ‘He possesses a multitude or a plenitude of greatness, and therefore, he should be greatly praised. There is nothing little about God and there is nothing great apart from him. If we were always careful to make our worship fit and appropriate for our great Lord how much better should we sing! How much more reverently should we adore! Such excellent deeds should have excellent praise.’

Matthew Henry exhorts us in his commentary, ‘Praise God with a strong faith; praise him with holy love and delight; praise him with an entire confidence in Christ; praise him with a believing triumph over the powers of darkness; praise him with an earnest desire towards him, and a full satisfaction in him; praise him by a universal respect to all his commands; praise him by a cheerful disposition to all his disposals; praise him by rejoicing in his love, and solacing yourselves in his great goodness; praise him by promoting the interests of the kingdom of his grace; praise him by a lively hope and the expectation of the kingdom of his glory.’

*Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!* (6). **Christian, we have so much for which we should be thankful. Let us praise the Lord and worship him for his excellent greatness.**

*Blessed are all those who put their trust in him*

The Lord Jesus Christ who is the Lord’s ‘*Anointed*’ speaks in verse 7: ‘*I will declare the decree: the LORD has said to me, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”*’ (7); this verse is quoted in Acts 13:33 and Hebrews 1:5. *The LORD* (Yahweh) has decreed that the Lord Jesus is his own begotten Son to whom he has promised to give the nations for his inheritance (8). Dale Ralph Davis points out that this is the decree that controls history (THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MUCK OF LIFE, page 34). **We must always remember this as we look out on a godless and hostile world with its injustice, wickedness, fearful economic problems as well as its hatred of God’s holy laws.** *The LORD reigns; let the earth rejoice* (Psalm 97:1).

This world does not welcome the rule of Christ. When challenged to repent of their sin and to trust and obey Christ, many people refuse, in effect saying, ‘*We will not have this man to reign over us*’ (Luke 19:14). When the Lord Jesus comes again in great power and glory, he will assert his rule, crushing the rebels (9; cp. Psalm 110; Revelation 19:15–16).

The psalmist calls on the kings and the rulers who plot against the Lord (Yahweh) and ‘*his Anointed*’ (2) to be wise and to serve him with fear. God is wonderfully gracious and merciful and he offers them the way of rejoicing and blessing if they will but trust him (10–12).

The wrath of God will come upon all who reject Christ. If you are not a Christian, take to your own heart the Psalmist’s words to the kings of the earth. – *Be wise ... serve the LORD with fear ... Kiss* (a sign of submission) *the Son, lest he be angry ... Blessed are all those who put their trust in him* (10–12). Our faith is often tried, but God wisely works **all things** together for good. He has never failed us yet and he will not fail us in the future. **Are you reverently serving the Lord? Have you put your trust in him?**

*He who sits in the heavens shall laugh*

Dale Ralph Davis observes: ‘Psalm 1 deals with the most urgent individual matter; you must know where you are going and must be sure you belong to the congregation of the righteous. Psalm 2 says that you must know where history is going’ (THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MUCK OF LIFE, pages 27–28). Spurgeon calls Psalm 2, ‘The Psalm of Messiah the Prince’. It divides into four sections:

Verses 1–3	The nations raging and speaking.
Verses 4–6	The LORD in heaven laughing and speaking in his wrath.
Verses 7–9	The Son of God ( <i>‘his Anointed’</i> or Messiah) speaking.
Verses 10–12	The Psalmist speaks, appealing to the rulers to humble themselves before God.

The psalm opens with the question, *Why do the nations rage ... ?* How futile for them to oppose the LORD and *his Anointed* (Jesus). This refrain was taken up by the church at Jerusalem when persecuted by the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:25–26). The world hates God as he reveals himself in the Bible; it hates and detests Christ and his people (cp. John 15:18–19).

The puny opposition of men against God and his people brings laughs of derision from the Almighty. *He who sits in the heavens shall laugh* (4). God is quite undisturbed by the raging of the wicked and he has set his King on his holy hill of Zion (5–6)! He cannot be toppled from his throne! Remember how Pharaoh came to grief in opposing the Lord (Exodus 14:27–31; 15:1–18), and Sennacherib fared no better (Isaiah 37:21–38). — ‘A sovereign Protector I have, unseen, yet for ever at hand’ (Augustus M. Toplady).

**We can take great encouragement from the fact that Christ is King and that no weapon formed against the child of God shall prosper (Isaiah 54:17).** He will come again to severely punish all who oppose him (Revelation 2:27; 6:12–17; 19:11–16).

**HOSEA**

Hosea prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel and four kings of Judah, the last of them being Hezekiah (1:1). His ministry (mainly to the northern kingdom) stretched over a period of at least 40 years — Jeroboam died in 753 BC and Hezekiah began his reign over Judah in 715 BC. Hosea probably ended his days in Judah after the northern kingdom went into Assyrian captivity in 722 BC.

**Historical Background**

Israel was divided after the death of Solomon (approximately 930 BC) following a rebellion by Jeroboam I who became king over the ten northern tribes. Solomon’s son Rehoboam was left to rule over the remaining two tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The two separate kingdoms were known as Israel in the north (capital – Samaria) and Judah in the south (capital – Jerusalem). The turbulent history of the two nations is described in 1 Kings chapters 12 to 22 and 2 Chronicles chapters 10 to 36.

When Hosea began his ministry, Israel was enjoying great prosperity, but wickedness and corruption were rife. The nation had forsaken the Lord to serve Baal, the god of the Canaanites and the goddess, Ashtoreth. These idols were supposed to give fertility, bumper harvests and prosperity to those who served them (cp. 2:8). The worship of these gods had been a cause of unfaithfulness to the Lord for many generations (cp. Judges 2:13; 1 Kings 11:5).

After the death of Jeroboam II Israel was torn by turmoil and instability. The Assyrian army conquered all nations in its path and put Israel to tribute during the reigns of Menahem and Pekah (2 Kings 15:17–22, 29). Her people were finally taken captive into Assyria in 722 BC.

**For further reading:** Wayward but Loved – A commentary on Hosea by Ray Beeley (published by Banner of Truth Trust).

Major Points from the Minor Prophets by John Blanchard (published by Evangelical Press) is a very helpful introduction to all the minor prophets.

## Troubled times in Israel (2 Kings 15:8– 31; 17:1–23)

Zechariah reigned six months – assassinated by Shallum  
Shallum reigned one month – assassinated by Menahem  
Menahem reigned ten years – succeeded by his son, Pekahiah  
Pekahiah reigned two years – assassinated by Pekah  
Pekah reigned twenty years \* – assassinated by Hoshea  
Hoshea reigned nine years – imprisoned by King of Assyria  
Israel taken into captivity 722 BC.

\* It would appear that Pekah reigned over part of northern Kingdom from 752 to 740 BC before assassinating Pekahiah. – see Edwin Thiele’s ‘Chronology of Hebrew Kings’ pages 46–48; cp. Hosea 5:5.

### Contemporary Prophets

Amos prophesied to Israel earlier in the reign of Jeroboam II. Isaiah prophesied to Judah from the reigns of Uzziah to Hezekiah.

### The Message of Hosea

Hosea’s wife Gomer was unfaithful to him and drifted into prostitution, eventually becoming a slave. Hosea bought her out of slavery, restoring her to himself as his wife (3:1–5). God used Hosea’s heartbreaking circumstances to show Israel her unfaithfulness in leaving him to serve idols and to show his steadfast love to the backsliding nation. Amos, the prophet of the broken law, sets forth the righteousness of God. Hosea the prophet of the broken home, sets forth the grace of God.

### Outline of Hosea

1. Hosea and his Faithless Wife (chapters 1 to 3)
  - a. The unfaithful wife – 1:1–9
  - b. Israel’s unfaithfulness – 1:10–2:23
  - c. The faithful husband – 3:1–5
2. Jehovah and Faithless Israel (chapters 4 to 14)
  - a. The Lord’s controversy with his people – 4:1 to 10:15
  - b. The Lord’s love for his wayward people – 11:1 to 14:9

## 29 DECEMBER

## Psalm 1

### *The way of the ungodly shall perish*

We continue to look at Psalm 1 where the godly and the ungodly are contrasted in verses 3 to 6. There is a difference in:

- Character. The godly man is described as being like a strong and fruitful tree which is *planted by the rivers of water* (3). He is a picture of stability and he bears precious fruit (cp. Psalm 92:12–15; Galatians 5:22–23). Spurgeon comments, ‘The Lord’s trees are all evergreens. No winter’s cold can destroy their verdure; and yet, unlike evergreens in our country, they are all fruit bearers’ (TREASURY OF DAVID). The ungodly *are like the chaff* (4). There is a great difference between a healthy verdant tree, and chaff which is light and blown about by the wind.
- Destiny. The ungodly will be condemned on the day of judgment and will not be able to enter heaven. They are not *in the congregation of the righteous* (5). *The LORD knows the way of the righteous but the way of the ungodly shall perish* (6); this way is blessed by the smile of God. Do not allow yourself to be intimidated by scorners (1); patiently remind them that they are lost and that they will come under God’s judgment if they refuse to repent of their sin.

The psalm begins with the word ‘*blessed*’ and ends with the word ‘*perish*’. There are two ways and two destinies. Are you sure that you are *in the congregation of the righteous*? If you are not, come to the Lord Jesus and ask him to forgive your sins and to save you. As you trust in him and obey him, you will know God’s blessing upon your life. **The Lord will prosper your way as you count your blessings, delight yourself in his Word and meditate upon it.** Try to memorise this lovely psalm, you will not find it too difficult.

*How blest is life if lived for thee,  
My loving Saviour and my Lord;  
No pleasures that the world can give  
Such perfect gladness can afford*

(Prust’s Supplementary Hymn Book 1869)

*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly*

This psalm presents us with a vivid contrast between the godly and the ungodly. There are two men, two ways and two destinies. *Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly* (1). ‘*Blessed is the man*’ can be rendered ‘Oh, the blessedness of the man’ (cp. the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3–12). Satan deceives millions with the lie that holiness kills happiness. What nonsense! The pleasures of sin do not last (cp. Hebrews 11:25). True happiness is only found in godly living. If we are always miserable there is something wrong with our walk with the Lord.

The godly person does **not** *walk in the counsel of the ungodly* (he does not think as they think, he has a different outlook on life); he does **not** stand in the path of sinners (he keeps himself from sinful behaviour). He does **not** *sit in the seat of the scornful*; the ‘*seat*’ is the place of instruction (cp. Matthew 23:2). *The seat of the scornful* is where sin is taught to others.

The godly man shuns evil-doing and finds no pleasure in the company of the wicked. He delights in God’s Word (‘*the law of the LORD*’) and meditates in it (2). How do we keep ourselves from giving in to the pressures of this wicked and ungodly world? Our minds are renewed (see Romans 12:2) by meditating on the Word of God (the Holy Bible). The Hebrew word translated ‘*meditates*’ means ‘to mutter’. We are to think much about the things we read in the Word of God, and repeat them to ourselves regularly throughout the day.

Do we really delight in God’s Word which is precious and pure, or do we seek to find pleasure in the godless pursuits of this world? How often do you meditate upon God’s Word, apart from the brief time when you read your Bible each day? **Many, many Christians are weak, confused and unhappy because they are ignorant of all the treasures in the Bible; this is just how the devil would have us to be.** Let us dare to be different and resist the pressures of the sinful culture that assails us.

*I will not be your God*

It appears that God commanded Hosea to marry Gomer, described as ‘*a wife of harlotry*’ (2). Some commentators do not think it possible that a holy God would tell his servant to do such a thing. They consider that Hosea’s experience was an allegory or given in the form of a vision but this view is not supported by Scripture. Gomer was a real person whose father is mentioned by name (3). There is no evidence that Gomer was a loose-living woman at the time of her marriage, though the Lord knew her heart. It would appear that Gomer became unfaithful to Hosea after the birth of Jezreel. The first child, Jezreel, was Hosea’s son: *She conceived and bore him a son* (3), but the words, ‘*and bore him*’ are omitted in the case of the other two children (6,8). Lo-Ruhamah and Lo-Ammi were conceived through adultery, they *were the children of harlotry*. The Lord’s message to Israel was that she was no better than Gomer but had *committed great harlotry* in departing from him (2).

Names were often chosen for their significance in Bible times (cp. 1 Samuel 4:21). God chose Hosea’s wife and he also chose the names of his three children to bring a message to Israel through them (4,6,8). King Jeroboam II came from the line of Jehu who had destroyed the family of wicked King Ahab in Jezreel (2 Kings 10:11). By calling his son ‘*Jezreel*,’ Hosea was bringing a message of judgment to the wicked king and his people (4–5). ‘*Lo-Ruhamah*’ (‘no-mercy’) also carried a message of judgment to the northern kingdom, but to Judah, there was a promise of mercy and deliverance from Assyria; this was fulfilled in the reign of Hezekiah (6–7; 2 Kings 19:35–36).

The Jews prided themselves as God’s people, but at this time, they were not faithful to the Lord, having turned to idol worship. Lo-Ammi (‘not-my-people’) was a warning to them: ‘*You are not my people, and I will not be your God*’ (9). **To be without God is to be without hope (Ephesians 2:12).** Are you a genuine Christian? God will not be your God if you refuse to turn from your sin and to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ to save you.

*You are the sons of the living God*

God is righteous and will certainly punish sinners, but he is also merciful to those who seek him and obey him. The prophecy in these verses looks beyond the return of the Jews from exile to the new covenant in Christ. The saying, *'For you are not my people'* becomes, *'You are the sons of the living God'* (10). The word, *'Jezreel'*, speaks of judgment in verse 5, but here there is the promise, *'Great will be the day of Jezreel!'* (11). The other children are now *'my people'* and *'mercy is shown'* (2:1; Hebrew = *'Ammi'* and *'Ruhamah'*).

Only Judah was restored from exile while the people from the northern kingdom remained scattered throughout the Middle East. In Christ, people from all twelve tribes will be gathered together (11). Peter's first letter was written to Jewish Christians who had been scattered throughout lands which are in present-day Turkey (1 Peter 1:1). Peter makes an obvious reference to these verses in Hosea, linking them with Deuteronomy 7:6. — *'You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy'* (1 Peter 2:9–10).

The Lord Jesus did not only die for the nation of Israel but also *that he would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad* (John 11:52). Not only Jews, but also Gentiles, are brought together in Christ (cp. John 3:16; Galatians 3:26–29; Ephesians 2:11–18). The precious promise, *'You are the sons of the living God'* is for all true believers (10; cp. Romans 9:24–26).

Christian, think about the amazing grace and mercy of God to unworthy, undeserving sinners and ponder your privileges as a child of God. **Come to your heavenly Father with your worship, with your praises and with your thanksgiving. Come with your requests, knowing that he will answer you.**

## PSALMS

The title, 'The Book of Psalms' is used in the New Testament (Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20). The Greek word ('psalmos') is a translation of the Hebrew title ('mizmor') used in 57 of the Psalms. 'Mizmor' is a song which is accompanied by a stringed instrument. David wrote almost half of the Psalms; other writers include Moses (Psalm 90), Solomon (Psalms 72; 127) and Asaph (Psalms 50; 73 to 80).

The Psalms have always been a hymn book for the church as they were for Israel (cp. Ephesians 5:19). They are a rich devotional handbook which we should know well and continually use. They encourage us to worship God. They give us much insight into the blessings, struggles and moods of a saint of God in various circumstances – in joy and in sorrow; in trial and in rest; in danger and in peace; in defeat and in victory; in penitence and in praise; in doubt and in trust.

**Hebrew Poetry** is not based on rhyme or metre as is usual with English verse, but uses a number of devices, the most common being parallelism. In parallelism, a similar or a contrasting thought is expressed:

Psalm 30:5      *Weeping may endure for a night,  
But joy comes in the morning.*

Proverbs 15:20      *A wise son makes a father glad,  
But a foolish man despises his mother.*

Another device is the use of acrostics, eg. Psalm 119 which has 22 sets of 8 verses, one set for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In each set, every verse starts with the same letter of the alphabet, eg. verses 1–8 all begin with the same letter 'Aleph'.

**I warmly commend** C.H. Spurgeon's commentary on the Psalms, THE TREASURY OF DAVID.

Dale Ralph Davis has written a very good commentary on Psalms 1–12, entitled, THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MUCK OF LIFE and on Psalms 13–24, SLOGGING ALONG THE PATHS OF RIGHTEOUS published by Christian Focus.



*The LORD will be a shelter for his people*

Chapter 2 ends with a promise of deliverance in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem. This chapter shows how this deliverance would be brought about by the destruction of the enemies of God's people. The Lord said that he would punish those who had enslaved and scattered his people (1–6). *The valley of Jehoshaphat* (2, 12) speaks of the place of judgment (the name, 'Jehoshaphat' means 'Jehovah judges'). It is also called *the valley of decision* referring to the decision of God as to their punishment (14).

Verses 4 to 6 refer to the Phoenicians and the Philistines who would be punished for selling Jewish people as slaves. They would see their own children sold into slavery (7–8). There are also prophecies against Egypt and Edom (19). These verses are a solemn warning to all who would seek to harm God's people.

We saw yesterday that chapter 2 ends with prophecies of Pentecost and of the end when Christ will return. This chapter not only points to the deliverance of the Jews from their captivity in Babylon, but there is also a wider application here for the church which is *'the Jerusalem above'* and the *'the Israel of God'* (Galatians 4:26; 6:16). The Lord mockingly challenges the enemies of his people to do their worst and to prepare for battle against him (9). *'Beat your ploughshares into swords'* (10) is the exact opposite of Isaiah 2:4 and this highlights the difference between the end of the heathen and the end of the godly.

The roar of the Lord will be a terrifying sound for the ungodly (16; cp. Amos 1:2; 3:8), but *'the LORD will be a shelter for his people'*. Those who belong to God will be preserved from judgment. *There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus* (Romans 8:1). Matthew Henry points out that God promises three blessings for his people at the end of this prophecy — plenty (18), perpetuity (20) and purity (17,21). Let us be grateful that we have a Sovereign Protector. **Let us rejoice in God with grateful hearts for all the blessings that he so freely bestows upon us!**

*For then it was better for me than now*

Gomer was a selfish and fickle woman who deserted her husband to take other lovers. Israel was no better! She was unfaithful to God who is pictured as calling upon individuals to plead with their mother, the nation of Israel (1–2). The Baals are described as Israel's lovers and Baal worship was supposed to bring prosperity with good harvests, but Israel did not know that it was the Lord who had prospered her (5,8). How would God respond to such unfaithfulness?

- He would chastise his people (6–7). The Lord said, *'Therefore, behold, I will hedge up your way with thorns, and wall her in.'* When we stray from the Lord, he will also chastise us and bring frustration, difficulties and darkness across our paths. He does this to restore us to himself, so that we will be able to say, *'For then it was better for me than now.'* **Remember, obedience brings the smile of God and his light into our lives but disobedience brings his frown and darkness.**
- God would *therefore* take away Israel's prosperity which she thought that Baal had given to her (this happened soon after the death of Jeroboam II) and he would punish her (8–13). This punishment was to be seen in Assyrian oppression and then captivity.

Have you been growing cold in heart and unfaithful to the Lord? If you are feeling his chastisement in your life, be thankful; it is a token of his love to you, to restore you to himself, to make you acknowledge like Gomer, like Israel, *'For then it was better for me than now'* (7). He will have mercy on you and he will freely forgive you (Isaiah 55:7).

*Where is the blessedness I knew  
When first I saw the Lord?  
Where is the soul-refreshing view  
Of Jesus and his word?*

*What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!  
How sweet their memory still!  
But now I feel an aching void  
The world can never fill.*

(William Cowper).

*A door of hope*

The first two *'therefores'* in this chapter bring a warning of chastisement and of punishment (6,9). The third *'therefore'* (14) brings a message of hope and of restoration. This is a wonderful passage of Scripture which shows the grace of God to an undeserving, unfaithful people. Look at the *'I wills'* as blessing after blessing is promised. Let us ponder some of them:

- *'I will allure her ...'* (14). This is an expression of love. — God, who had been so terribly slighted by unfaithful Israel went after her to *'allure'* (woo) her. In exile, he would *'speak comfort to her'* (cp. Isaiah 40:1–2).
- *'I will give her ... the Valley of Achor* ('trouble' – Joshua 7:26) *as a door of hope'* (15). God gives his people a door of hope so that they can sing even in the valley experiences of trouble, trial and perplexity. Hallelujah!
- *'I will take from her mouth the names of the Baals'* (17). God would restore his people so that they would no longer serve Baal (Baal means 'my master'; 16).
- *'I will make a covenant with them ... I will make them lie down safely'* (18). God will restrain harmful animals, birds or insects from harming them and will keep them safe from enemy weapons which he will shatter.
- *'I will betroth you to me for ever ... in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and mercy ... in faithfulness'* (19–20). The grace of God is truly staggering! He changes the most obstinate hearts!
- *'I will answer'* (21). He answers the prayers of a restored people. We can be bold in prayer when we are right with God!
- *'I will sow ... I will have mercy ... I will say ... "You are my people"'* (23). We are again reminded of the names of Gomer's three children. 'Jezreel' (22) means 'God will sow'. He promised to sow his people for himself.

**Are you discouraged? God's promises are fulfilled in Christ for you. There is hope for you in the valley of trouble! Take heart!**

*Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved*

Peter quoted these verses from Joel in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16–21). Matthew Henry observes, 'The promises of corn and wine and oil, in the foregoing verses, would be very acceptable to a wasted country; but here we are taught that we must not rest in those things. God has reserved some better things for us, and these verses have reference to those better things: both the kingdom of grace, and the kingdom of glory, and the happiness of true believers in both.'

Joel prophesies that the kingdom of grace will be introduced by a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit (28–29) this was fulfilled at Pentecost. The prophet then gives us a glimpse of *the great and terrible day of the LORD* (31) when Jesus will come again as King and Judge of all the earth. The ungodly will not call on God to save them in that day. In their terror they will call upon the mountains and rocks to fall on them in the vain hope of escaping the wrath of the Lamb (Revelation 6:15–17). The Lord's people will then enjoy everlasting joy in God's wonderful kingdom of glory (Romans 8:18; 2 Thessalonians 1:7–10; Revelation 21:2–5).

There is a promise in verse 32 for everyone who wants to be saved. *'Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved'* (32). Calling on the name of the Lord to be saved must involve repentance (cp. Acts 2:38) and trusting in God (Isaiah 50:10; John 1:12). We soon realise after calling on the name of the Lord, that he first called us (32; Acts 2:39). **Have you called on the name of the Lord?** God promises that whoever calls on him will be saved and that they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (28–29; Acts 2:38–39). All Christians have the gift of the Holy Spirit, not just a select few (cp. Romans 8:9; Galatians 4:6)! If you call on God and trust in him to save you, he will accept you. He will deal wondrously with you (26).

*The LORD has done marvellous things*

This is a tremendous passage of Scripture which is full of hope and encouragement. God has called on the priests and the people to repent of their sin and he now shows how he will respond to them if they obey his call and turn to him. Here are the blessings that he promises:

- Restoration. *The LORD will be zealous for his land, and pity his people* (18). The army of locusts would be driven into the barren wilderness and then to destruction in the eastern sea (the Dead Sea; 20). The land which had mourned would again be blessed and would rejoice (21; cp. 1:10). The beasts of the field which had languished for pasture would now find pasture springing up (22; cp. 1:20). Abundant rain would be followed by a great harvest (23–24) and the years of lost harvests would be balanced by plenty (25–26).
- Rejoicing and praise — The locust army had also done great things (*'monstrous'*; 20 = *'great'*) but God would overturn their destructive work with his great things. *'The LORD has done marvellous things!'* (21; the word *'marvellous'* means *'great'* as it is translated in the Authorised Version). His people will praise his name because he has *'dealt wondrously'* with them (26). The abundance would be a token of God's blessing after his people had turned to him with all their heart (26; cp. verse 13).
- Knowing God's presence among them and an end of reproach from those who had asked, *'Where is their God?'* (17, 27).

What message does this passage of Scripture have for us in the twenty-first century? — **If you are in a backslidden state, I urge you to repent of your sin and to return to the Lord.** The wasted wilderness months or years away from God will be compensated by future blessing and usefulness. You will then rejoice in the Lord and know his presence with you.

*Go again, love ... like the love of the LORD for Israel*

Gomer had sunk into such a wretched state that it led to her being sold as a slave (possibly to pay off debts accumulated since deserting Hosea). She fully deserved to be in such a sorry condition because of her wickedness but God is merciful and has compassion for the sinner. He said to the prophet, *'Go again, love ... like the love of the LORD for the children of Israel'* (1). Gomer was no longer attractive. Her sin had scarred her and had made her ugly and repulsive, but Hosea was to go after her and love her like the Lord Israel. The prophet purchased Gomer for fifteen shekels of silver (half the price of a slave) plus one and one-half homers (one homer = one donkey load) of barley.

Hosea did not have the attitude that says, 'I am prepared to forgive, but not to forget.' Gomer was lovingly restored to her husband and home, but there was a condition – she was never to go back into prostitution. She was to be for Hosea alone (3). Hosea's message of the steadfast love of God for his people would have gone home to many a person as they observed such love mirrored in the prophet's own life. We too are to love those who have hurt us, we are to love those who are difficult, *like the love of the LORD* for us. Yes, there is a price to pay; it is difficult, but think of the price that Christ paid to redeem us.

Israel would be deprived of her political independence and her own religious institutions. *Without king ... without sacrifice ... without ephod*, but she would also be without idolatry (*sacred pillar ... without teraphim*) (4). The expression *'many days'* refers to the period until the coming of the Lord Jesus, the promised Messiah from the line of David. Verse 5 speaks of the time when many Jews repented of their sin and came to Christ (eg. Acts 2:5–17, 38–41).

Have you been wandering away from the Lord? Like Israel, you too must return and seek the Lord, and fear him (5). **Why continue to wander in a spiritual wilderness or to wallow in the mire of sin when God is ready to bring you home and restore to you the joy of your salvation?**

*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge*

God now brings his charge against Israel and begins with the things found lacking (sins of omission) in the life of the nation. — *‘There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land’* (1). This dreadful situation led to a breakdown in law and order and in family life (Israel’s sins are described in verse 2). When God is rejected, men cast off restraint and there is an appalling harvest of wickedness.

What lay behind the moral collapse of Israel? Their religion lacked in godliness and in power (4–10). *Like people, like priest* (9). The religious leaders had rejected the knowledge of God and he charged them, *‘My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge’* (6). When truth is despised, people will turn to other religions. In Hosea’s day, the people turned to idolatry (12–19). In our day, the people are turning to New Age beliefs and other occult forces such as astrology and tarot cards, and false religions are flourishing.

**Knowledge of God and his Word are vital in the life of the church and our nation (1; cp. 6:6).** The teaching and preaching of the Bible is essential in our services. We must also exercise personal discipline in reading and learning the Bible. We must have family worship in our homes each day. Are you seeking to know God and his Word? Our nation is being *‘destroyed for lack of knowledge.’* Are you shining as a light in these desperately needy times?

*When nations are to perish in their sins,  
‘Tis in the church the leprosy begins;  
The priest, whose office is, with zeal sincere,  
To watch the fountain and preserve it clear,  
Carelessly nods and sleeps upon the brink,  
While others poison what the flock must drink.*

(These words are found in William Cowper’s ‘Expostulation’ in which the poet bemoans the desperate spiritual state of England in the 18th Century, likening it to apostate Israel. How true these words are today of many nations that have known God’s blessing in times past.)

*Turn to me with all your heart*

The Lord now appeals for a genuine and heartfelt repentance from the priests and the people. God sees the state of our hearts and he is not deceived by outward show. He says, *‘Turn to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning’* (12). Joel urged the people, *‘Rend your heart, and not your garments’* (13). The tearing of garments is a sign of grief, but it may be nothing more than outward show as it was with the wicked, scheming high priest, Caiaphas (Matthew 26:65–66). True repentance involves more than tearing clothes; it results in sorrow over sin which tears our hearts (13).

Joel did not take God’s forgiveness for granted. He asks, *‘Who knows if he will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him?’* (14; cp. Amos 5:15). The priests are urged to *blow the trumpet in Zion* (125; cp. verse 1), to lead the people in a solemn fast and to cry out to God to spare his people (15–17; cp. 1:13–14). When true religion is at a low ebb, God is reproached and the people ask, *‘Where is their God?’* (17).

This passage of Scripture is very relevant for us today. We live in very uncertain times. We have the threat of ongoing terrorist atrocities and we have suffered several natural disasters. There are wars and threats of wars and men and women are fearful for the future. We do have heartfelt sympathy for all those whose lives have been shattered by these terrible events and their aftermath. Very few people have considered, however, that the Lord may be saying something to our godless generation and visiting judgment upon us.

Many professing Christians are taken up with the gods of materialism or pleasure-seeking. Let us repent of any spiritual lethargy that may lurk within our hearts. **Do we yearn to see God’s name glorified in our churches and honoured in our nation? Do we really want to see his kingdom extended?** Let us be more prayerful, for *God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness ... Who knows if he will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him?* (13–14).

*The day of LORD is great and very terrible*

Joel continues to describe the trail of destruction brought about by the locusts. A ‘*Garden of Eden*’ had become ‘*a desolate wilderness*’ which had been devoured by fire (3). Pusey, in his commentary on Joel, described a locust-plague in the 19th century – ‘Wherever they settled it looked as if fire had devoured and burnt up everything.’ It is important to understand that God is always in control of his instruments of judgment. The locusts are described as ‘*his army*’ (11).

The prophet declared, ‘*The day of the LORD is great and very terrible; who can endure it?*’ (11). Whenever God visits us with judgment, we should remind ourselves of *the day of the LORD* which will usher in Christ’s return. A. B. Davidson writes, ‘Now unquestionably the day of the Lord is connected by the prophet with the other plagues but it is not confounded with them. These plagues are not the day of the Lord; they are but heralds and omens of it. The day of the Lord is the moment when he grasps the reins which he seems to have held loosely before, when the currents of his moral rule, which have been running sluggishly, receive a mysterious quickening and the Lord’s work upon the earth is at last fully performed.’ (the quotations from Davidson and Pusey are taken from the NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY, second edition 1954, page 694).

The language of these verses in Joel is echoed in Revelation 9:7–10. That final ‘*day of the LORD*’ will be a dreadful day for all who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 1:7–10). *In those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will desire to die, and death will flee from them* (Revelation 9:6). Any suffering and misery of the ungodly on earth is only a small foretaste of the relentless torment that they will endure for ever in hell, the place prepared for the devil and his angels (Revelation 20:10,15; cp. Matthew 25:41,46). *The day of the LORD is great and very terrible; who can endure it?* (11,31). We should be filled with gratitude to the Lord Jesus for saving us and driven to prayer for those who are lost. **If the Lord Jesus returned today, would you be ready to meet him?**

*Joined to idols*

The people of Israel imagined that they were free, having cast off their obedience to God’s holy laws. In reality, they were enslaved by their addiction to sexual immorality, wine and idolatry (11). Their unfaithfulness to God was spiritual adultery. The Lord said, ‘*My people ask counsel from their wooden idols, and their staff informs them. For the spirit of harlotry has caused them to stray, and they have played the harlot against their God*’ (12). The ‘*staff*’ probably refers to the occult practice of using a divining stick to obtain guidance. Idol worship often involved the male worshippers having sexual intercourse with one of the sacred prostitutes serving at the idol temples or shrines. Israel was in a dreadful mess! Immorality was rife and the men could not expect God to punish their immoral wives and daughters when they themselves were guilty of the same sins (14).

There is also a warning to Judah. The southern kingdom had not fallen away from God to the extent found in Israel but she must beware of becoming involved in her neighbour’s wickedness. The Lord said, ‘*Let not Judah offend. Do not come up to Gilgal, nor go up to Beth Aven*’ (15). Gilgal had been associated with God’s dealings with his people (Joshua 5:9; Judges 2:1). The same could be said of Bethel where Jacob had met with God (Genesis 28:10–22). Jeroboam I had turned this sacred place into a place of idol worship where a golden calf was worshipped (1 Kings 12:28–33). Bethel which means ‘house of God’ had become ‘*Beth Aven*’ which means ‘house of vanity.’ **How dreadful that ‘the house of God’ had become ‘the house of vanity’ and how this is true of many places of worship where God’s Word was once faithfully preached and taught.**

Hosea often used the name of Ephraim (the largest of the northern tribes) to describe Israel (eg. 17; 5:3,11–14; 6:4). Judah must not join in Israel’s sins. — ‘*Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone*’ (17). We cannot with good conscience join with those who have forsaken the gospel and do not trust or obey the Word of God. We must let them alone and never compromise the message of the gospel.

*I will return again to my place*

The Lord now denounces the priests, the royal household, and the nation. They had been a snare to the unwary, they had slaughtered the godly, they had committed spiritual prostitution by forsaking the Lord to serve idols, and they were proud. The northern kingdom was not alone in its sin – *Judah also stumbles with them* (1–5). They had all the outward trappings of obedience to God in their religious ritual through which they appeared to seek the Lord. Their sacrifices to Jehovah were in vain because they had dealt treacherously with him (6–7). An alarm was to be sounded as a warning of judgment (8).

*The princes of Judah are like those who remove a landmark* (10). ‘Landmarks’ protected land boundaries and it was a wicked act of theft to steal a neighbour’s land by removing them (Deuteronomy 19:14; 27:17). The spiritual landmarks had also been set aside in both Israel and Judah. Ahaz who ruled over Judah at this time *had been continually unfaithful to the Lord* (2 Chronicles 28:19).

Both Israel and Judah were sick, but they did not recognise that a spiritual malaise lay at the root of their instability and trouble (this has always been true in the life of any nation). King Jareb (meaning ‘the great king’) of Assyria could not possibly heal them because they were under God’s judgment (cp. 7:11; 10:6; 2 Kings 15:19). The Lord was like a destroying moth and like a tearing lion to them (12–14). God warned, ‘*I will return again to my place*’ (15). He had withdrawn himself (6)! The withdrawal of God’s presence is a terrible thing to happen to an individual or to a church. The Lord had once dwelt among Israel and Judah, but his glory had departed (cp. 1 Samuel 4:21–22). His absence would be felt *till they acknowledge their offence*.

Is your Christianity barren, cold and lifeless? Could it be that God has withdrawn his presence from you because you are grieving the Holy Spirit? What must you do? — You must acknowledge and confess your sin, and diligently seek the Lord (15). **There is a way back to God from the dark paths of sin, through Jesus our Saviour!**

*Cry out to the LORD*

The word of the Lord came to Joel at a time when the land had been devastated by a plague of locusts (4–7). The prophet vividly describes the plague with its effects on the land, the people and the animals. Verse 4 may describe locusts in their various stages of development from larva to fully grown insect. These grasshopper-like creatures advance in massive and dense swarms eating up everything in their path. One such swarm which crossed the Red Sea in 1889 was reckoned to cover five thousand square kilometres.

The plague spoken of in Joel was so severe that it would be remembered for many generations (2–3). The locusts were like the army of a powerful nation, advancing and laying everything waste. There should be lamentation like that of a young woman whose husband has died (8). Its effects on three groups of people are described:

- The drunkards who were called on to weep because the vineyards and the fig-trees had been destroyed so depriving them of wine (5–7).
- The farmers who should wail because they faced ruin (10–12).
- The priests should wail because they were unable to make the daily grain and drink offerings to the Lord (9, 13–14). The Lord called on them to lead the nation to repentance (*sackcloth* was a sign of repentance, 13). They were to consecrate a fast and gather the people to a sacred assembly. God urged them through his prophet to *cry out to the LORD*’ (13–14) and Joel also cried out to the Lord (19).

**The problem in Judah was that its leaders and people failed to see that the plague was a judgment from God. Is not this the problem today?** Any suggestion that God would visit us in judgment is scorned and many religious leaders fail to give a spiritual lead. They emphasize the love of God but rarely speak of his holiness and wrath against sinners. Could it be that God is judging our nation for our rebellion against his holy law? Let us *cry out to the LORD*. He is gracious and merciful and he may be pleased to visit us with revival.

# JOEL

12 DECEMBER

Hosea 6:1–11

We know little about Joel (which means ‘Jehovah is God’) except that he was the son of Pethuel (1:1). We do not know when he exercised his ministry; many evangelical scholars reckon that he prophesied during the reign of Joash, king of Judah (shortly after 835 BC).

The land had been devastated by a plague of locusts (ch. 1) which God had sent in judgment. Joel urged the people to repent of their sin and he speaks of ‘*the day of the LORD*’ (1:15; 2:1,11,31; 3:14). ‘*The day of the LORD*’ refers to those times when God brings judgment upon sinners such as the plague of locusts in Joel’s time (1:15), the destruction of Jerusalem (Zephaniah 1:4,7), and when Christ comes again to judge the world (1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10–13). H.L. Ellison writes, ‘The prophet’s lesson is that there are natural calamities so terrible and so surpassing the limits normally imposed by God, that they can only be explained as divine interventions in judgment. Whether or not such a calamity is inaugurating the final judgment is of little importance, for it is a guarantee that there is a final judgment.’ (MEN SPAKE FROM GOD – STUDIES IN THE HEBREW PROPHETS, Paternoster Press, page 21).

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost was a fulfilment of prophecy by Joel (2:28–32; Acts 2:16–21).

## Outline of Joel

1. Devastation in the day of the LORD (1:1 to 2:17)
  - a. The plague of locusts – 1:1–12
  - b. An appeal to the priests – 1:13–14
  - c. The Lord’s devastating army – 1:15 to 2:17
2. Deliverance in the day of the LORD (2:18 to 3:21)
  - a. Blessing following repentance – 2:18–27
  - b. Blessing at the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit – 2:28–32
  - c. The destruction of all God’s enemies – 3:1–21

## *Your faithfulness is like a morning cloud*

The paraphrase in our hymn-books, ‘Come, let us to the Lord our God with contrite hearts return’ is based on the first three verses of this chapter. Israel and Judah may have uttered these words, but their repentance was not genuine. What was wrong with them?

- Though they were aware of their hurt and of God’s judgment (1) they did not grieve over their sin or acknowledge their offence against God (cp. 5:15).
- They were complacent and believed that time would heal their sin. God would make everything right in two or three days (2). They thought that they could obtain God’s blessing them by going through an outward show of seeking him (3).
- Their faithfulness to God was short-lived. He asked them, ‘*What shall I do to you? For your faithfulness is like a morning cloud, and like the early dew it goes away*’ (4).

God had sent his prophets to warn them of his judgment, but they were like Adam (same Hebrew word for ‘*men*,’ verse 7). They were covenant-breakers who had prostituted themselves with idol worship and had dealt treacherously with God (7–10). Religious ritual and is no substitute for real repentance (6). The Lord Jesus used the words of verse 6 to condemn the self-righteous Pharisees (Matthew 9:13; 12:7). **Let us beware of shallow repentance. God is not deceived by temporary ‘*morning cloud*’ faithfulness. He knows our hearts!**

Question 87 – *What is repentance unto life?*  
Answer – *Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience.*

The Shorter Catechism  
published with the Westminster Confession of Faith

*They do not consider in their hearts*

There are two pictures of Ephraim (Israel) in these verses. The Lord said that they were like:

- ‘*An oven*’ – burning with passion and adultery (4) and aflame with murder, devouring their judges and their kings (6–7; see introduction to Hosea, page 6, showing the list of kings and assassinations).
- An unturned cake (8). As flour is mixed with oil, Ephraim had mixed with heathen peoples to become corrupted by their wickedness and paganism. The result was that Israel was like a cake which was underdone on one side, but burned on the other and only fit to be thrown out. We must never yield to the pressures coming from the multi-faith society around us. The Lord Jesus Christ is the only way to God the Father (John 14:6). This truth must never be compromised!

What lay behind the dreadful state of Israel? God said:

- ‘*They do not consider in their hearts*’ that he sees and remembers their wickedness (1–3). Their sinful ways may have delighted their king, but such wickedness invited punishment from the King of kings. When men and women do not think about judgment for sin, they become careless in their behaviour.
- They did not realize that corruption had set in and was sapping their strength (9). We also may be unaware of the beginning of spiritual decay in our lives.
- They were proud and stubborn, refusing to return to the Lord or to seek him (10).

The Lord was ready to heal Israel, but he would not heal when wickedness was a way of life (1), when they refused to forsake their sin and to call on him (10). **How are things with you? Are you like an unturned cake with a compromised religion?** Do not be like Israel of Hosea’s day, but come to the Lord who will gladly restore you to himself.

*Who is a pardoning God like thee?  
Or who has grace so rich and free?*

(Samuel Davies)

*Hast thou heard him, seen him, known him?  
Is not thine a captured heart?  
Chief among ten thousand own him,  
Joyful choose the better part.*

*What has stript the seeming beauty  
From the idols of the earth?  
Not a sense of right or duty,  
But the sight of peerless worth.*

*Not the crushing of those idols,  
With its bitter void and smart;  
But the beaming of his beauty,  
The unveiling of his heart.*

*‘Tis the look that melted Peter,  
‘Tis the face that Stephen saw,  
‘Tis that heart that wept with Mary,  
Can alone from idols draw:*

*Draw and win and fill completely,  
Till the cup o’erflow the brim;  
What have we to do with idols  
Who have companied with him?*

(Ora Rowan)



*I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely*

Chapter 13 contains sombre warnings of judgment but this chapter is full of consolation and hope. How could there be hope for a nation which was to be destroyed and its people transported to exile in Assyria? There was a remnant whom God graciously kept, just as there was in Judah which later went into captivity in Babylon. This remnant came to worship God in Judah early in the reign of Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 30). These were probably those who heeded the passionate plea of the Lord recorded here, ‘*O Israel, return to the LORD your God*’ (1).

How should backsliding Israel pray? They should say, ‘*Take away all iniquity; receive us graciously*’ (2). Repentance for sin and a renunciation of trust in anyone but the Lord is essential. Israel had been looking to political alliances with Assyria or Egypt, which had superb horses for riding into battle, to guarantee her survival (3). Restoration to God brings grateful praise to him (*the sacrifices of our lips*). The Lord gives a wonderful promise to any repenting backslider, ‘*I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely*’ (4). The Lord also promises spiritual refreshment (*like the dew*, 5), beauty and fragrance (*like the lily*, 5–6), and stability (*roots like Lebanon*, 6). The Christian should enjoy stability and show the beauty of the Lord Jesus in his life.

When a backslider returns to the Lord, he discards those ‘idols’ that enticed him away from God. Like Ephraim, he says, ‘*What have I to do anymore with idols? I have heard and observed him*’ (8). Idol worship was purged from the Jews following their return from captivity. In New Testament times, idol worship was widespread throughout the Roman Empire (eg. Acts 17:16), but the Jews were preserved from it. ***The ways of the LORD are right (9). Let us always walk in them!***

*The dearest idol I have known,  
Whate’er that idol be,  
Help me to tear it from thy throne,  
And worship only thee.* (William Cowper)

*They did not cry out to me with their heart*

Ephraim is now pictured as *a silly dove, without sense* calling to Egypt for help and protection and also going to Assyria, but she did not trust in the Lord (11). King Menahem submitted to Assyria and paid tribute to him (2 Kings 15:17–20). King Hoshea changed his nation’s allegiance from Assyria to Egypt (2 Kings 17:3–4). The Lord said, ‘*Wherever they go, I will spread my net on them; I will bring them down like birds of the air*’ (12). The sinners of Israel imagined that they could flee from divine judgment, but there would be no escape. We are *without sense* if we do not believe that God will punish us when we persist in sin and rebellion against him.

Their ingratitude to God for his goodness in times past is seen in the Lord’s words, ‘*Though I redeemed them, yet they have spoken lies against me*’ (13). God had redeemed Israel from bondage in Egypt (Exodus 15:13; Deuteronomy 7:8) but was not honoured with the love, loyalty and obedience of the people. They had instead, given their praise to useless, dumb idols, while pretending to follow the Lord.

Israel’s behaviour not only lacked sense, but it also lacked feeling. God said. ‘*They did not cry out to me with their heart, when they wailed upon their beds*’ (14). They wailed under chastisement, but they did not return to *the Most High* (16). The statement, ‘*They assemble together for grain and new wine*’ (14) is translated in the English Standard Version, ‘*For the sake of grain and wine they gash themselves.*’ They cut themselves in seeking the favour of the god Baal for good harvests (cp. 1 Kings 18:25–28). They were ‘*like a deceitful bow*’ which appeared fine, but sent its arrows off course (16). Sin is a falling short, a missing of God’s holy standards, like arrows despatched from a deceitful bow.

We must learn from God’s Word, using our minds to apply it to our own lives. We must not be *like a silly dove, without sense* (11). ***If we have a religion which lacks sense and feeling, which lies against God, we are heading for trouble.***

*The great things of my law*

The trumpet blast was a sign of the judgment which was to descend suddenly on Israel, just as an eagle swoops on its terrified prey. Israel's cry, 'My God, we know you!' would carry no weight in the day of judgment (2). Matthew Henry comments, 'But what stead will it stand a man in to be able to say, "My God, I know thee," when he cannot say, "My God, I love thee, and my God, I serve thee, and cleave to thee only."' Judgment was inevitable because Israel had rebelled against God's law, transgressed his covenant and 'cast off the good' (1,3). The Lord said, 'They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind' (7).

Idolatry had become widespread in Israel since Jeroboam 1 had set up golden calves for them to worship. The folly of this idolatry is seen in the words, 'A workman made it, and it is not God; but the calf of Samaria shall be broken to pieces' (4–6; 1 Kings 12:25–33). As the altars multiplied, so did the sin (11). Israel turned to useless idols (6) and hired 'lovers' such as Assyria and other godless nations (9–10) because they had forgotten their Maker (14). God said that he had written for Ephraim (Israel), 'the great things of my law, but they were considered a strange thing' (12).

God is not silent! He has given us his written Word, the Bible, *the great things* of his law – words of truth, purity, beauty and life. **Oh, let us read God's Word prayerfully and carefully with a determination to obey it. If we do this, we will never forget him!**

*O thou my soul, forget no more  
The friend who all thy misery bore;  
Let every idol be forgot,  
But, O my soul, forget him not.*

*Jesus, for thee, a body takes,  
Thy guilt assumes, thy fetters breaks,  
Discharging all thy dreadful debt;  
And canst thou e'er such love forget?*

(Written by Krishna Pal — William Carey's first convert from Hinduism).

*They were filled ... therefore they forgot me*

Israel (Ephraim) was a great nation until they forsook the Lord. *When Ephraim spoke, trembling, he exalted himself in Israel; but when he offended through Baal worship, he died (When Ephraim spoke, there was trembling; he was exalted in Israel – ESV)*. Those days of greatness had passed because of their increasing sin and idolatry (1–2). God had earlier likened the faithfulness of Ephraim and Judah to a morning cloud and the short-lived morning dew (6:4). He now warns them that they would also vanish in the same manner (3).

The Lord declares, 'There is no saviour besides me' (4; cp. Isaiah 43:11). Other religions cannot save us; there is no other saviour but God. What lay at the root of Israel's idolatry? They had forgotten God when all was going well for them and they became proud: *They were filled and their heart was exalted; therefore they forgot me* (5–6; cp. Deuteronomy 8:11–20; Judges 3:7). They had forgotten, despised and forsaken God. How could they expect anything but judgment (7–16)? The name 'Ephraim' means fruitful, but his people were not fruitful to God. They would be devastated by the east wind of judgment (15; cp. 12:3). Samaria, capital of the northern kingdom, had rebelled against God and would suffer terrible atrocities from the invading Assyrian army because of her wickedness (16).

Some translations (eg. ESV) render the opening words of verse 14 as a question rather than a promise: 'Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from death'? This appears to be better as the verse closes with the words, 'Pity is hidden from my eyes'. Verse 14 is repeated in the New Testament as a promise for believers (1 Corinthians 15:54–55). The Lord Jesus has conquered death for us and he will take all his people to be with him for ever. When Jesus comes again, the dead will be raised from their graves and the bodies of those Christians still living will be transformed. We shall be caught up and we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18). **Can we ever forget such a glorious Saviour?**

*Ephraim feeds on the wind*

Israel was foolish to trust in political alliances with Egypt and Assyria rather than trusting in the living God: *Ephraim feeds on the wind, and pursues the east wind* (1; cp. 8:7). The wind is a symbol of vanity (Ecclesiastes 2:11; 5:16) and the east wind is a symbol of destruction (cp. 13:15; Exodus 10:13; Jonah 4:8). Ephraim was bent on a course of destruction! The Lord reminds us of his dealings with Jacob (2–5,12) and with his descendants, Israel (9–14). Jacob returned to Bethel and the Lord called on Israel to return to him: ‘*So you, by the help of your God, return; observe mercy and justice, and wait on your God continually*’ (6).

Jacob was a man who readily resorted to deception (eg. Genesis 27:35) and his descendants were guilty of the same sin (7). G. Campbell Morgan observes, ‘God called Israel and gave them Canaan. Israel was to make Canaan, Israel, but the time came when Canaan had made Israel, Canaan’ (‘HOSEA: THE HEART AND HOLINESS OF GOD’). God had raised up a prophet (Moses) to bring them out of Egypt and to preserve them. He warned his wayward people by the prophets and by visions, but they provoked him to anger with their idolatry (10–14).

The Lord Jesus died to save us from our sin and from this evil world. We are to be salt and light in society about us (Matthew 5:13–16). If we do not live for the Lord and stand firm, we will soon become like the world. God says, ‘*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God*’ (Romans 12:2). **To go back to a worldly lifestyle is to feed on the wind and to lose the smile of God upon us.** Remember, the believer who refuses to come under this world’s influence will have the greatest Christian influence upon the world!

*I thirst, but not as once I did,  
The vain delights of earth to share;  
Thy wounds, Emmanuel, all forbid  
That I should seek my pleasures there.*

(William Cowper)

*Their glory shall fly away like a bird*

This is another chapter of judgment which foretells the captivity of Israel. There may have been rejoicing in a season of prosperity, or in a sense of security following Menahem’s peace treaty with Assyria (2 Kings 15:19–20), but there was no good reason for such optimism. Divine judgment brings great loss, and for Israel this meant:

- Famine (1–2). The Baal idols were supposed to bring prosperity to their worshippers but gave nothing in which Israel could rejoice. She would find to her cost that turning from the Lord to Baal brings poverty and barrenness (10–14).
- Loss of land and exile. There would be no feast days to the Lord in Assyria or in Egypt (3–6).
- Loss of spiritual discernment. The prophet of God would be considered a fool and the spiritual man insane (7). On the other hand, this could refer to the false prophets. Scoffers have existed in all ages (cp. Acts 17:32; 26:24; 2 Peter 3:3–9). They accuse us of folly because we believe what God says in the Bible. Do not be intimidated by the scorn of the ungodly. They are the fools who lack in spiritual knowledge!
- Israel was once a delight to God just as grapes refresh a thirsty traveller, but because of their idolatry, they became an abomination to God (10). He warned, ‘*Their glory shall fly away like a bird*’ (11).
- Childlessness and early death (11–14). The Lord said, ‘*Yes, woe also to them when I depart from them!*’ (12).
- The Lord would no longer love them because of their wickedness. He would cast the Jews away and they would *be wanderers among the nations* (15–17; but see the promise in Romans 11:1–6).

Many western nations have despised the Lord and the consequences are only too obvious for those who have eyes to see. We see the breakdown of family life, permissiveness and immorality on a huge scale, and increasing wickedness. **As with Israel, *Their glory shall fly away like a bird* (11).** *Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people* (Proverbs 14:34).

*Break up your fallow ground*

Israel is here likened to a vine as it is elsewhere in the Old Testament (1–4; cp. Psalm 80:8–14; Isaiah 5:1–7). They should have ‘emptied’ or produced righteous fruit to the Lord but they had brought forth a harvest of wickedness. He said, ‘*Their heart is divided*’ (2); they still had an outward allegiance to God but they worshipped idols. They lamented the loss of their king, but on second thoughts, what would he be able to do for the nation (3)? The loss of their king probably refers to the time of instability after the death of Jeroboam II when one king after another was assassinated.

God’s prophets often poured scorn on the folly of idol worship (cp. Psalm 115:4–8; Isaiah 46:5–7). The useless calf at Bethel (*‘Beth Aven’*) had been carried off *‘as a present for King Jareb’* (a reference to the king of Assyria; cp. 5:13). Its priests shrieked with dismay and the people mourned for it (5–6). What kind of god is it that can be carried off in helplessness? Sophisticated modern men may also scoff at idolatry but millions today are gripped by all kinds of superstition such as trusting in lucky charms, horoscopes and new age therapies.

The terrifying words describing the judgment of Israel (8) are repeated in Revelation 6:16–17 with reference to the second coming of Christ. Israel had a history of sinning against God (9; cp. Judges 19:14–30). She had ploughed wickedness and reaped iniquity and deserved the terrible judgment that was to come upon her (13–15).

There was still a message of hope for Israel if only she would repent of her sin. God appealed to them, *‘Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the LORD’* (12). **This word is also for us! If there is fallow ground in our lives where sin is being entertained, we must plough it up, putting to death the sinful deeds of the flesh (Romans 8:12–13).** We have to sow for ourselves righteousness. We must not say to ourselves that we will deal with this sin tomorrow or next week. The fallow ground must be broken up now *for it is time to seek the LORD.*

*My heart churns within me; my sympathy is stirred*

This chapter is full of pathos as it reveals the love and the yearning of God for his wayward people. He had bestowed his love on the infant nation of Israel and had called them out of Egypt, delivering them from tyranny and bondage (1; cp. Deuteronomy 7:7–9). How had the people responded to such love? – They sacrificed to idols (2)! The love of God is likened to that of a father for his son, patiently teaching him to walk, comforting him in his arms and healing (3). Israel had not realised that their healing came from God. The Lord is also pictured as a gentle herdsman, lovingly drawing his people to himself, removing the yoke of bondage and stooping down to feed them (4).

How did Israel respond to the goodness of God? The Lord said, *‘My people are bent on backsliding from me. Though they call to the Most High, none at all exalt him’* (7). God is holy and just and must punish sin. Ephraim would go into exile because he *refused to repent* (5–6). Verse 8 is moving and beautiful in showing God’s compassion for his backsliding people: *‘How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim?’* (cities which were destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah – Deuteronomy 29:23). *My heart churns within me; my sympathy is stirred.* They deserved judgment, but God shrunk from pouring out his wrath upon them and promised that there would be restoration from exile (10–11). Oh, Christian, we belong to such a glorious, marvellous loving God! He is worthy of our heart’s devotion.

**Christian, have you been disobedient to the Lord and bent on backsliding from him? He yearns over you, he will always love you! You will never know real satisfaction until you are again enjoying the warmth of sweet fellowship with your God!**

*Mine is an unchanging love  
Higher than the heights above;  
Deeper than the depths beneath,  
Free and faithful, strong as death.*

(William Cowper)