

**Wade Street 10.12.06am**  
**Hosea 13: 1-11 God's Initiative**

The book of Hosea has really made pretty gloomy reading up to now. We've heard how Ephraim or Israel has so often got it wrong. Among other things we've seen how God's relationship with his people can be compared with marriage to a prostitute, we've seen that there are issues of God's justice and that there has been a serious lack of moral leadership and spiritual emphasis within Israel, we've seen that Ephraim has offered empty sacrifices in an attempt to pay lip service to God. And we get to chapter thirteen, only one more week to go, and maybe we're tempted to think, oh no ! Not more doom and gloom. Because at first reading this chapter doesn't really seem to be much different from all the others. But stick with it and we'll eventually get to see light at the end of the tunnel.

This chapter is described as 'a crescendo of the predictions and warnings that comprise the bulk of the book'. In other words, this is the chapter where all the doom and gloom seems to come to a head. This is what Hosea has been revving up to. And there are lots of references to themes that Hosea has already addressed in the book. For example, in the first three verses alone, Hosea revisits the themes of Baal worship, sin, idolatory and judgement. He says...when Ephraim spoke, men trembled; he was exalted in Israel. BUT he became guilty of Baal worship and died.

Now they sin more and more;

They make idols for themselves from their silver

Therefore they will be like the morning mist,  
Like the early dew that disappears,  
Like chaff swirling from the threshing floor,  
Like smoke escaping through a window.

Earlier on in the book, in chapter six, God had likened the goodness of Ephraim and Judah to a morning cloud (or mist), and to the short-lived dew of dawn.

Now this theme is returned to, arranged in a way particular to Hebrew poetry, where four lines are used.

Each describes something easily observable and understandable....that will in time disappear. The images of mist, dew, chaff and smoke combine to emphasize that Israel will disappear. Israel as a nation will vanish from the world scene, it will no longer occupy the promised land.

Hosea was probably prophesying in the final years of the Northern Kingdom. When Samaria fell in 722 BC and the people, God's chosen nation, were carried off into exile, all that he had spoken about came to be. Israel no longer existed as an independent entity among the community of nations.

The theme for today in our plan as we work through Hosea is 'God's Initiative'. I don't know about you, but the word 'initiative' always strikes fear into my heart. It conjures up ideas of having to solve impossible tasks in the effort to demonstrate that

it is something I actually possess. As part of the interview process for training for Baptist ministry I had to formulate a plan to build the tallest lego tower in the shortest possible time using the smallest number of bricks. Clearly an excellent basis for deciding whether God had indeed called me to ministry !!

A quick search on the internet found a great test, supposedly used by a leading I.T. company:

You are driving along in your two-seater car, on a cold, stormy night. You pass by a bus stop, and notice three people waiting for a ride home. A gentleman who is obviously ill and needs to get to hospital, an old friend who once saved your life, and the perfect partner you have spent many years dreaming about. Knowing that you only have room for one person in your car, who do you give a lift to.? Pick up the ill gentleman and save his life, select your old friend who once saved yours, or choose the perfect partner you may never find again.

And while you're pondering that, back to Hosea !!

In Hosea chapter 13 we see God's initiative demonstrated. I did promise light at the end of the tunnel following all the doom and gloom that's present yet again in this chapter, and now we arrive at that light in verse four. This really is a glimpse of the hope to come. And the final chapter that we'll look at in a fortnight's time outlines that much more fully.

Verse 4 says, 'but I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt. You shall acknowledge no God but me, no saviour except me'

The New Revised Standard Version says it somehow more poetically:

Yet I have been the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt;  
You know no God but me, and besides me there is no saviour.

Isn't that a wonderful line – besides me there is no saviour.

God took the initiative. He, and he alone promised and brought about salvation.

But for the people of Hosea's time their understanding of saviour was not ours.

Like a favourite film or book, when you know the ending, everything is read or seen in a different way –even the beginning is interpreted in the light of the ending. Crime thrillers are particularly interesting to read again when you know the final outcome –when you already know "who dun it".

We understand the saviour to be Jesus because we know how the story ends, if you like. And so we read earlier parts of the story through the lens of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

But even before God had come as vulnerable baby, suffering servant, Christ on the cross – he had taken the initiative and been saviour to Israel.

He had brought them out of slavery in Egypt and set them free.

This verse refers back very clearly to the first commandment given to the people at Mount Sinai. 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.'

God had already taken the initiative and saved his chosen people. But their survival depended upon keeping the commandment. Unless Yahweh was Israel's only God, they would have no salvation, since as Hosea says 'there is no saviour apart from him'.

The tragedy of Hosea's time was that by participating in the worship of idols and other gods, Israel (God's people) had turned their back on the saviour, the covenantal God; the one with whom they had this unique relationship.

But this verse from Hosea also fits perfectly with our advent theme as we prepare to celebrate once again the coming of a saviour, Jesus, into the world. God's wonderful act of initiative. And we shouldn't be surprised at that, because isn't this God's living Word, able to speak to us as the Holy Spirit inspires?

So what does all this say for us today ?

We've seen in the last few weeks how the words spoken by a prophet of God, getting on for 3000 years ago are actually so appropriate for us today. The moral and spiritual problems that exist now are really not so different from the ones that troubled Ephraim, or Israel.

It would seem that the obvious conclusion to draw today is that society has gone badly wrong, turned its back on God and worshipped anything it likes ( particularly materialism), but God has taken the initiative and again acted as saviour.

I think that **is** the right application for today. But I want to highlight a trap that we may be in danger of falling into. And that is that Ephraim (Israel) gone wrong, for want of a better description , is society OUT THERE. And that actually we're not part of it, so we're okay. We're not in need of any sorting out. Hosea's message, if it has any relevance for today, is for all those who have no notion of God as saviour.

Yet, Israel (Ephraim) *were* God's chosen people and it had all fallen apart for them. Could we really be so different that there's no danger of it happening to us ? Maybe the message of Hosea is one for us to take on board as God's people– not just to tut tut at society but to think seriously about whether in any way we have turned our backs on the saviour.

For those of you who are still puzzling over that initiative test, here are the answers. (No, I'm not so mean as to leave you wondering...)

The smart answer is:

Give the car keys to your old friend and get him to drive the gentleman to hospital. Then remain behind with the man or woman of your dreams. This shows commonsense, compassion, and the fact that you are able to grasp opportunities as they arise.

The wrong answer is to take the gentleman to hospital, and leave your perfect partner in the hands of your old friend. This shows that you are easily sidetracked from the main task at hand, fail to grasp opportunities as they arise, and allow rivals to get one up on you.

The alternative answer is to lend your car to your friend to take the ill gentleman to hospital, get on the bus with your dream partner to ensure that he or she gets home safely and obtain his or her mobile phone number in the process. This shows strategic thinking and compassion, and demonstrates that you are able to see a task through to completion.

It seems to me that God's initiative would spectacularly fail any test devised to identify the smart, strategic, commonsense or opportunity grasping. Instead, God's initiative demonstrates incredible compassion, wonderful love, mind-blowing perseverance and unbelievable faithfulness, all at enormous personal cost. God brought salvation to his people as he led them out of Egypt. He offered and brought salvation to Israel in Hosea's time, and he offers salvation to our world through the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus.

'I have been the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt.  
You know no God but me, and besides me there is no saviour.'

**House group notes. 10.12.06**  
**God's Initiative Hosea 13:1-11**

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As we celebrate the season of advent, we are aware that we read the message of Hosea through the lens of our Christian faith, knowing Jesus to be our saviour. Hosea's prophecy continues to be relevant for us as we consider whether we have in any way turned our backs on the saviour.

**For Discussion.**

Hosea's message for Israel in the eighth century BC was a tough one.  
If you were to re-write it for today's society, what would it say ?

God has demonstrated his salvation through history, from the time of the Exodus onwards. Think through familiar Bible passages to help you identify saving acts. (eg Jonah, Daniel, etc) Which speak to you most powerfully, and why ?

If God's chosen people could turn their backs on him, then there is potential for us to do so too.

What circumstances make it easier for you to turn away from God ?

What would help you ?

How can we effectively communicate the message of Jesus as Saviour this Christmas?