

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of Hosea

Our original Notes on the book of the prophet Hosea were first issued in August/October 1964, and reprinted without alteration in October-December 1976. Since then, we have made an extensive study of the book in our Sunday evening services in the Spring of 1990 with, we trust, new and fresh insights into its teaching, and the Notes that follow represent the fruit of that study.

d) 1:1

Hosea was a contemporary of Amos, prophesying a little later than he did, but before the mighty Isaiah, in the 8th century B.C., and during the reign of Jeroboam II.

We saw in recent Notes on Amos that during the reign of Jeroboam II Israel had risen to a state of unprecedented wealth, prosperity and affluence, dark and sordid as had been the history of the northern kingdom, and marked by the judgments of God. And Amos' message of impending doom was simply not credible to the complacent and luxuriating princes and nobles in Jeroboam's court. Nothing could have seemed less likely to them than Amos's doom laden prophecy. And with disdain and contempt they spurned the prophet and his message, dismissing him from Bethel. That was one feature of Amos's ministry; another was that he had prophesied 'two years before the earthquake'. There was in fact a literal earthquake, severe enough to be remembered as an historical landmark 2 centuries later in the prophet Zechariah's time (Zech 14:5); but there may also have been a metaphorical cast to that phrase, suggesting that a grim nemesis was just 'round the corner', however unlikely it may have seemed at that time. A few years later, when Hosea began to prophesy, that 'round the corner' situation had in fact come to pass. This prompts the reflection that those who disdain the Old Testament prophetic message as being harsh, forbidding and doom-laden tend to forget that what they so grimly prophesied actually happened. The philosophy of our modern age, that 'things will work out alright in the end', is a facile, naive and falsely optimistic one that is not borne out by history. And this is borne out by what will be said in tomorrow's Note.

2) 1:1

The unprecedented wealth and prosperity that Israel, the northern kingdom, enjoyed under Jeroboam II was only the flare-up of a dying flame, and in Hosea's time that flame was already beginning to flicker. In the second half of the prophecy, which belongs to a time after Jeroboam's death, we have a state of affairs indicated which can only be described as confusion and anarchy. When Jeroboam died, his son Zechariah succeeded him and within six months was assassinated. The assassin, Shallum, seized the throne, and was himself assassinated within a month by Menaham, who a few years later was succeeded by his son Pekahiah. The latter was assassinated, after reigning little more than a year by Pekah. The seething political unrest and turmoil inherent in such a state of affairs can readily be imagined, and indeed seems to be reflected in Hosea's turbulent writing in the later parts of his prophecy. The picture presented is of a nation disintegrating and falling to pieces, rushing headlong like the Gadarene swine to its doom.

Well! Who would have thought within a few short years the situation would have - could have - so dramatically changed! Could anyone at Jeroboam's court have dreamt that all that wealth, that 'never-had-it-so-good' pattern, should so soon be shattered beyond remedy? It was an extraordinary situation indeed - and one mirrored in the past two or three years when tyrannical rulers all over Europe have been toppled from their seemingly impregnable positions into ignominy and obscurity. When one thinks of the destabilising of the whole of Eastern and Central Europe, in virtually the twinkling of an eye, one is given some idea of the turbulent period in Israel that followed hard upon the death of Jeroboam, fulfilling the prophetic utterance of Amos, the herdsman of Tekoah. We should beware of ever saying that such a debacle, such an overthrowing of a national situation could never take place. Let us learn from what we have seen in our time, and begin to think soberly about our own situation in the U.K.

3) **Chronology****THE KINGS OF THE DIVIDED KINGDOM**

(after the death of Solomon)

<u>ISRAEL</u>	<u>THE PROPHETS</u>	<u>JUDAH</u>	
931-910	Jeroboam	Rehoboam	931 915
910 909	Nadab	Abijam	915-912
909-886	Baasha	Asa	912-871
886-885	Elah		
7 Days	Zimri		
885-874	Omri		
874-852	Ahab	Jehoshaphat 875-850	
852-850	Ahaziah	Jehoram	850-843
850-842	Jehoram	Ahaziah	843-842
842-814	Jehu	Q.Athaliah	842-836
817-800	Jehoahaz	Jehoash	836-797
800-785	Joash.....	Joel	Amaziah
797-768			
785-745	Jeroboam II.....Amos Jonah	Azariah	791-740
		(Uzziah)	
6 Months	Zechariah	Jotham	751-736
1 Month	Shallum		
744-735	Menaham	Ahaz	736-721
735-734	Pekahiah		
734-730	Pekah		
730-722	Hoshea	Hezekiah	727-693
Captivity to Assyria		Mannasseh	693-639
		Amon	639-638
		Josiah	638-608
		Jehoahaz	3 Months
		Jehoiakim	608-597
		Jehoiachin	3 Months

Zephaniah. Nahum
Habakkuk

Jeremiah

Zedekiah 597-586
Captivity to Babylon

12 13

4) I:I

The dating of the prophecy given in its first verse - the reigns of Uzziah, Jothan, Ahaz and Hezekiah in Judah, and Jeroboam II in Israel - indicates that Hosea was a younger contemporary of Amos but with a longer ministry, reaching beyond the reign of Jeroboam - indeed almost beyond the actual captivity of Israel, at the hands of Assyria, if he saw Hezekiah's reign (727-693 BC). He was a considerable historical figure throughout a major part of the 8th century B.C. in Israel, just as Isaiah was in Judah, the southern kingdom.

In many ways the book is very different, not only from Amos's, but any of the other prophets - in this regard, that there is embedded in it, and entwined in the action of the book throughout, a man's personal, intimate experience in his home and family life. And this personal story conditions the whole prophecy, and becomes the medium through which God reveals Himself both to the prophet and to the people. G. Adam Smith has some very fine things to say in this connection. Speaking of Hosea's life in Israel he says:

"Just as the Love which first showed itself in the sunny Parables of Galilee passed to Gethsemane and the Cross, so the love of Hosea, that had wakened with the spring lilies and dewy summer mornings of the North, had also, ere his youth was spent, to meet its agony and shame. These came upon the prophet in his home, and in her in whom so loyal and tender a heart had hoped to find his chiefest sanctuary next to God. There are some of the ugliest facts of human life about this prophet's experience; but the message is one suited to our own hearts and times. Let us read this story of the Prodigal Wife as we do that other Galilian tale of the Prodigal Son. There as well as here are harlots; but here as well as there is the mirror of the Divine Love. For the Bible never shuns realism when it would expose the hatefulness of sin or magnify the power of God's love to redeem. To an age which so often treats infidelity either as a matter of comedy or as a problem of despair, the tale of Hosea and his wife may still become, what it proved to his own generation, a gospel of love and hope."

5) I:I

At this point it may be useful to suggest an analysis of sorts for the prophecy as a whole. It comprises two unequal parts, chs 1-3, and chs 4-14. Thus:

1. The personal tragedy chs 1-3

- (i) 1:1-9 The marriage breakdown
- (ii) 1:10-2:1 The promise
- (iii) 2:2-23 The lovers and the Lover
- (iv) 3:1-5 The restoration - 'Love...as the Lord loves'

2. The national tragedy chs 4-14

- (i) 4:1-6:3 Religious and moral degradation
- (ii) 6:4-11:11 Persistence in idolatry, and consequent
judgment, deserved and condign.

'The love that will not let them go'

(iii) 11:12-14:9 Ripeness for judgment and the grace of restoration and covenant renewal.

- with each of these three sections rounded off by the promise of grace.

6) 1:2-9

At the outset of the prophecy we come up against a difficulty: Does the statement in 2 mean that God commanded the prophet to marry a harlot? This has exercised commentators down the history of the Church. Many, because of the moral issues that the words raise, have taken them as an allegory or parable invented by the prophet to illustrate through familiar human figures what was at that period the difficult conception of the love of God for sinful men. As G. Adam Smith says: "This theory is well-intentioned, being an effort to avoid imputing to the Deity a command so inconsistent with His Holiness and to the prophet such a violation of his lofty ethical ideals. But surely it is as derogatory to God and His prophet to describe this of them by parable as to impute it to them as actual fact." Others have taken this view of the story as the literal account of actual facts, including many of the early Fathers, some of the Puritans and also present day commentators (including Derek Kidner in his commentary in 'The Bible Speaks Today' series). Others, however, including G. Adam Smith, maintain there is nothing in the story to compel us to read it in this literal way, and they point out that the only interpretation consistent with the analogy the prophet draws between his own experience with Gomer and the Lord's experience with Israel is that she was a pure woman when he married her, and continued thus till after the birth of her first child. As another commentator says, "The struggle of Hosea's shame and grief, when he found his wife unfaithful, is altogether inconceivable unless his first love had been pure and full of trust in the purity of its object". This interpretation would mean that the statement in 2 'foreshortens the picture, leaping ahead to what this woman would become, as God could see', and concedes that this is not as arbitrary a way of taking it as it may look, since this is evidently how the children are mentioned - they were future, as the unfolding story shows, yet God's command in 2 runs literally "Take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms", as though the children already existed. More thoughts on this in tomorrow's Note.

7) 1:2-9

A possible and likely reconstruction of the story would be that at first Hosea's marriage was happy and that happiness was crowned by the birth of a son. Then God's purposes began to be made known to the prophet: God gave the child a name (4), Jezreel, with a particular significance (names with meanings were common among Hebrews). The name of the child was a prophecy against Jehu's household, and its then representative, Jeroboam II. But this prophecy had little to do with the subsequent shame and heartache that Hosea experienced. That begins at 6, where we are told that Gomer bore a daughter. There is a significant difference between 6 and 3: in the earlier verse we are told that Gomer bore him a son, but in 6 there is no 'him'. Hosea does not claim the second child. The name given to the child - Lo-ruhamah - has been variously translated as 'that never knew a father's pity or love' or (as NIV, 2:23) 'Not my loved one'. We see here that Hosea has become aware of the tragedy within his home and marriage, and this is further underlined in 8, when a second son was born, named Lo-ammi, which means 'not my people', or 'not kin of mine'. This must mean that once at least, and probably oftener, Gomer had been forgiven by Hosea and had again proved unfaithful. For perhaps five or six years he had lived with this unfaithful woman, forgiving again and again with his heart being broken afresh by further instances of infidelity until he was either forced to disown her or she deserted him finally to play the harlot in an orgy of abandonment. One hesitates to say much about this terrible tragedy. The book is full of it, with every reference he makes concerning Israel filled with his personal grief. In what follows in the remainder of the prophecy we see how Hosea's grief became his gospel. We are not told of the terrible wrestling he must have had in the secret place, where he laid his sorrows at the feet of God, but it was undoubtedly there that God spoke to him. It is an easy transition from the thought of his own bride to that of Israel as the bride of Jehovah, and God reveals the sorrow of His own heart over His people to the sorrowing prophet.

8) 1:10-2:1

These verses tell of a time of restoration. From the point of view of historical sequence these verses point to the end of the section, at 2:23, and the sense of the story is maintained when read at that point. But this is not to say, as many commentators say, that the verses have been misplaced by scribes in the course of copying. Indeed, as we have been seeing in our studies in Jeremiah, glimpses of restoration came to that prophet also in the context of the dark days of impending doom, when the eye of faith was able to see beyond that doom to the triumph of grace over judgment. And it may well be that in the very anguish that Hosea was experiencing, hope was born in the crucible of despair that evil did not have the last word, either for him or for the people of God. The mention of 'the sand of the sea...' echoes the promise that God made to Abraham, and must surely have been an assurance to the prophet that, in spite of everything to the contrary, God's promise still held good and would be fulfilled. It is a message of reversal, the reversal of the tragedy of inevitable judgment and the restoration of the fortunes and status of the people of God. Kidner in his commentary writes: "The prophecy, in fact, after touching-down in the post-exilic age, leaps into the present and names us who are believers 'the Israel of God', whether we are Jews or Gentiles. Such is the New Testament's unfolding of the oracle; and such a consummation was the joy that drew Jesus to the cross, 'to die....not for the nation only, but to gather into one' (of our verse 11) 'the children of God who are scattered abroad' (Jn 11:52)".

9) 2:2-13

We have already made reference to the veil drawn over the deep personal anguish that Hosea must have undergone and to the fact that it was in that 'dark night of the soul' that God revealed His message to him. It would be true to say that Hosea, by reason of his own personal grief, entered into fellowship with the suffering heart of God, and what he writes to us is the revelation of that suffering heart in all the mystery of its agony and hurt. There is nothing in all the Old Testament more akin than this to the spirit of the cross at Calvary. We have said that Hosea's grief became his gospel: but it is even truer to say that the grief of God becomes our gospel, the gospel we are called to proclaim. And when a man so identifies with the sufferings of the Saviour for the sins of the world - and what a challenge this is for the believer! -when he is able to say, as Paul said, "I bare in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus", there is a man who can speak with grace and power to men.

As we read through the verses now before us, we need to remember that God has in effect said to Hosea, "What Gomer has done to you, My people have done to Me. She played the harlot and broke your heart; they have played the harlot and broken My heart". This is the background, against which we need to understand what is said here, and it explains why there are so many echoes of Hosea's pain and grief in the pain and grief God expresses about His sinning people.

10) 2:2-13

These verses give an exposition of God's 'case' against His people. The word 'plead' in 2 refers not to a 'beseeching', but rather has the meaning of 'plead my cause' - it is a court of law idea and describes what would be done 'in the gate', i.e. the forum where 'cases' were dealt with. We need to understand what is implied also in the words 'she is not my wife'. God is not disowning His people, and there is no thought of this here. Rather, He is saying, "She has not been a wife to me, and I have not been allowed to be a husband to her". Hence the challenge to put her evil ways from her and be what she was supposed to be. Interestingly, Hosea represents the Lord addressing Himself to individual Israelites here, and calls them to argue and plead with their mother, the nation as a whole. It is a significant procedure, and underlines the truth that it is still only through individual conviction and repentance that an impact can be made upon a nation, and national restoration made possible. This should serve as a corrective to the defeatist notion sometimes expressed in words such as "What can we individuals do, we are insignificant, and do not matter?" The truth is, as individuals, we can often do a very great deal by the integrity of our lives to make significant changes in society. Our Lord's parable about the leaven that leavens the whole lump makes this point very well. The amount of leaven is not very great, and it is hidden in 'three measures of meal'; but its effect is out of all proportion to its size. We should not forget that God's way is to use 'the weak things of the world' to do His appointed work.

11) 2:2-13

The words in 5, "lovers that give me my bread and my water" provide the clue to an understanding of what is being said in these verses. This is a reference to Baal-worship. When Israel came up from Egypt to Canaan, she came into the midst of peoples with gross, heathenish beliefs. The Canaanites believed that every tract of land owed its productivity to the supernatural being that dwelt in it; they were gods of fertility who provided their worshippers with the produce of the earth, corn, wine and oil.

It was the shame of the Israelites that they defected from their true worship of the Lord and absorbed such heathenish notions. They thought that the God Who had led them up out of Egypt could not have the power also to prosper them in an agricultural community, and they therefore embraced the Canaanite cults and sought the help and blessing of Baalim. This is what 5 refers to. It would not be true to say that Israel had forgotten Jehovah altogether, but in order to have her field and orchards blessed, she had gone after false gods. This had gone on repeatedly, in face of repeated warnings and entreaties through Elijah and Elisha, then Amos and now Hosea. Israel had in fact sold herself for gifts; to ensure the fruits of harvest, she had given herself to Baalim. It was the action of a harlot, and was an exact parallel to Hosea's experience with his unfaithful Gomer.

12) 2:2-13

We should notice the three 'therefore' in 6, 9 and 14. The first two are 'judgment' statements, the third is one of sheer grace. The first, in 6, speaks of things going wrong. We should bear in mind that Hosea is prophesying in Jeroboam's reign, before the cracks began to appear in the affluence and prosperity of the time. And here, in 6, is a promise that things would begin to go very wrong: Judah's way was to be hedged with thorns - in defiance, as it were, of the Baalim who were supposed to give fertility. This is to interpret the prophet's words very literally; but there is also a metaphorical sense in which they can be taken, for God does hedge up our way with hindrances and frustrations when we are out of joint spiritually. And it is in our best interests that He should do so, for if thereby we are brought to an end of ourselves there is some possibility of repentance and new obedience. The parable of the Prodigal Son makes this point very clearly: it was when he began to be in want that he came to himself, and this was the means of his coming back to his father. The 'I' in 8 is emphatic: "She did not know that it was I who had given her corn, wine and oil. This is the point made in the second 'therefore' in 9: God would take away these gifts of corn, wine and oil, to prove they were His to give or withhold and Israel was to learn the hard way: they would be reduced to utter desolation (11 ff). Captivity is in view in these verses this was the judgment that was to come upon them.

13) 2:14-23

The third 'therefore' in 14 introduces a different picture full of hope and restoration. But - and we need to see this - it will be after the captivity, on the other side of the judgment, punishment is not the end, nor is it the final word in the situation. For the Divine love is a love which, even if it will not let its people off, will also never let them go. Restoration will take place. And this is the note that rings out throughout Hosea's prophecy. It is the triumph of grace over sin and faithlessness. The word 'allure' in 14 is a love term. God will woo His people as a lover wooers his loved one. The 'wilderness' is not meant to be taken literally, but has reference to the desolation of the coming Exile, in which God's people wept the idolatry out of their hearts by the rivers of Babylon. But there is an association of ideas in the use of the word, for all that, because the Divine intention is to "surround her penitence with the associations of her innocence and her youth" (G A Smith), in the time of the wilderness wanderings. There is to be a return to the old days and the old ways. God always covenants with us in our wilderness. It was when we were in need, and desolate and helpless that He first saved us, taking us out of sin into fellowship with Himself. But we have often drifted and wandered from God. And what has He done? He has brought us back to the wilderness again, stripping us of everything we hold dear, brought us to an end of ourselves until we could scarcely lift our heads; then, in our extremity, He has come to us afresh, as the Lover of our souls, and wooed us back to Himself.

14) 2:14-23

'Achor' (15) means 'trouble' (the reference is to the story of Achan in Joshua 7) and the meaning here is very beautiful. The valley of trouble will become a door of hope for Israel, that is, the very sin which has devastated her is that which opens the fountain of grace in the heart of God. Sin and sorrow can be turned to good account by His sovereign power and will. Christ's own illustration of this is the best one: the mighty famine in the far country became a door of hope for the prodigal son, and started him on the way back to his father's house. By the wonderful and mysterious alchemy of the Spirit, blight can be turned to blessing, sorrow into joy. This wonderful vision of the future rises above and beyond the vicissitudes of the 'troubling' mentioned in 15. It is as if we were given a glimpse of the blessedness that lies through the 'door of hope'. The terms of 18 echo once again what we have already seen in Amos, the covenant with creation itself, which shall be restored and rejuvenated in the regeneration of mankind.

The nuptial language of 19, 20 is full of beauty and poignant power. We must bear in mind Hosea's personal feelings as he spoke this great and moving word of the Lord to His people, particularly the reference to faithfulness. For he had forgiven Gomer many times, yet she had repeatedly fallen. She seemed to be incapable of remaining faithful to him. And then, this great and comforting word, bright with hope. If God could do this for His erring people, surely His power could change an erring wife, and heal the tragedy of a broken home! This is a promise that can legitimately be taken out of its immediate context of Israel's and Gomer's infidelity, and applied to the spiritual life in general. What balm, this, to a heart that has felt the plague of sin, and mourns before God for the grief it has caused Him, for it assures us that there is no fatal weakness or evil propensity in the nature of man over which this covenant grace cannot, and will not, prevail.

15) 2:14-23

The last words of 2:23 bring round the full circle of the story of Israel's fall and restoration. 'Not-my-people' echoes 'Lo-amni' in 1:9, as 'had-not-obtained-mercy' echoes 'Lo-ruhamah' in 1:6. But the story does not end there, with the glorious picture of the restoration of a whole people. It goes back to the one lost individual with whom it first started, Gomer, the faithless wife of Hosea. From the prodigal nation, it turns back to the prodigal wife. The whole nation has been saved; it remains now to save this hopeless and helpless outcast. As G.A Smith puts it, it is the shepherd leaving the ninety and-nine in the fold to seek the one lost sheep. It is significant that although in the first chapter the story of Gomer's unfaithfulness comes before the story of Israel's apostacy, Gomer's restoration follows Israel's. This means that although Hosea learned God's sorrow out of his own heartsore experience, it is not his forgiveness of his wife that sets the example of Divine forgiveness, but rather the opposite. Hosea's reaction humanly speaking must necessarily have been to divorce his erring spouse. But God reveals to the prophet that this is not His way, for He is God, not man (see 11:8, 9). And His treatment of His erring people, rich and tender in its unaccountable grace is set before Hosea as an example of his personal situation. 'Go yet', says God, and what volumes that yet speaks; what a wealth of grace it contains. It is the measure of the Divine grace; in spite of everything, God loves and cares; no sin can weary His exhaustless mercy. And this is the criterion by which our love is to be defined and inspired. Behold, what manner of love....

16) 3:1-5

The background to this chapter, in which the story turns full circle and the nation and the prophet's erring wife are alike restored, is seen in the words of 'betrothal' in 2: 19, 20, which are matchless in their beauty - "in righteousness, judgment, loving kindness and mercies, and even in faithfulness". What a wonderful picture this presents of the gospel of redeeming grace. This is what grace can do, for broken, soiled, damaged lives that have plumbed the depths of sin and shame and despair. The old hymn says,

I've wandered far away from God,
Now I'm coming home;
The paths of sin too long I've trod,
Now I'm coming home.

Ah, salvation is a coming home, coming home to our true roots, our true destiny, where we belong.

The combination, in this chapter, of the two restorations - the nation Israel and the erring wife of Hosea has its own message to teach us. It is the contrast between John 3:16, "God so loved the world...." and Gal 2:20, "The Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me...." We sometimes speak - and as we believe rightly so, and with some justification - of the slow and steady transformation of the national scene so far as our own denomination in Scotland is concerned, with the increase over the last three or four decades in evangelical ministries being established up and down the land. But within that national pattern there has undoubtedly also been the experience of salvation for many, many individual lives. Within the great movements of grace down the course of history, there has always been room for the individual - and, thank God, it will always be so. A practical illustration of this is seen in Acts 8, which records the ministry of Philip the evangelist in Samaria, when a great spiritual work was accomplished with great joy in that city, but Philip was taken away from that remarkable work and sent to the Gaza road to minister to one needy soul, the Ethiopian eunuch, with what glad results we know very well. As another of our hymns puts it,

While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.

17) 3:1-5

"Go...love...according to the love of the Lord towards the children of Israel". What a commission, and what a message! "Love like that", says God, pointing to Calvary. Nothing could underline more clearly that this is not a human possibility at all, but something possible only for a heart indwelt and controlled by Divine love. Hearts that would labour for the salvation of the lost, and especially the obviously lost, need to be baptised into the love and compassion of Christ, for nothing else, no merely human emotion, however great, or pure or patient - is big enough or strong enough to accomplish it. It is significant that the Lord does not say to Hosea, "Go, restore..." It is love that restores, nothing else, and it is well that we should be reminded of this, for it is so easy to separate the two in practice. To interest ourselves in people with a view to winning them to Christ is to have mixed motives that conflict with the highest and most disinterested claims of love. Emil Brunner writes, in this connection, of Christ, the mediator joins himself to the lowest dregs of the population, to those doubtful characters from whom others turn away in disgust and loathing. He bears the title of 'Friend of publicans and sinners'. He is their 'Friend', not the one who 'converts' them. It is possible they may be 'converted', but this is not why He seeks them. He seeks them simply because He wants to belong to them "Today I must abide at thy house". Well, can we see the distinction between being the 'friend of sinners' and 'the one who converts them'?

18) 3:1-5

In this spirit of God-like compassion, then, underlined in yesterday's Note, Hosea went to Gomer. And these brief verses unfold how harrowing and costly this going was for the broken-hearted prophet. We should not miss the sense of utter degradation conveyed in 2. Gomer has sunk so low that she is scarcely human any more. With what agony of distress must Hosea have sought her out in the gutters of sin, with what horror and heartbreak did he pick her up for half price (fifteen pieces of silver, not thirty!) in the market-place. Ah, the degrading and dehumanising power of sin is very, very great indeed! The long discipline involved in any rehabilitation of that broken home is indicated in 3, which Kidner maintains is translated best and most accurately from the Hebrew by the NEB, in the words "and have no intercourse with a man, nor I with you". We have to learn, and often do at bitter cost, that not even in the grace and comfort of Divine forgiveness can things ever be quite the same again - at least for a long, long time - when sin has wreaked its fearful havoc in human relationships. Something was lost forever, to Gomer and to Hosea, through this tragedy. There are some things that can never be undone. When the vessel is marred in the hands of the potter (Jer 18:4), he makes it again another vessel; the original creation is no more, and will be no more. There is something very final about sin. Readers of Tennyson's 'Idyls of the King' may recall King Arthur's moving words to Queen Guinevere at their final parting as an illustration of that finality.

19) 3:1-5

This is the last word that Hosea utters about his family circumstances. But he is now a man to whom God has revealed His heart, and he has a message to proclaim to the nation, a message of judgment and love to a nation that had been unfaithful to its God. From this point to the end of the prophecy what we read deals entirely with the apostasy of Israel, yet it is full of the most poignant and agonising glimpses of the prophet's own tragic experience. G. Campbell Morgan sums up the teaching of the first section of Hosea in four statements of general import which are substantiated by the whole of the rest of the Scriptures, (a) God suffers when His people are unfaithful, and the suffering man brings on himself by his sin is most keenly felt in Heaven; (b) God cannot tolerate and will not condone sin; (c) God still loves, in spite of sin; (d) God seeks the sinner, in order to restore. These are gospel statements, they constitute a summary of the Good News; they gleam and flash like precious stones in this Old Testament book. Is it mere coincidence that Hosea's name means salvation? He is the prophet of salvation, the evangelist who proclaims grace to those who have no fitness to plead, no claims to advance in the sight of a holy God. His message is the message of a love that is greater than sin.

20) 4:1-5

This chapter, then, begins Hosea's message to Israel. It is disturbed and tumultuous writing, which reflects the turbulent days through which Israel was now passing. Jeroboam II was now dead, and as we have already seen, this heralded an extremely unsettled, even anarchic time, with six monarchs coming to the throne and being disposed of within as many years, several by assassination. There was a total breakdown in society and - as chs 4-6 show the people were in decay morally in a tragic and ominous way. All the seeming affluence and prosperity which had greeted Amos's prophecy with such contempt was already crumbling before Hosea's eyes, and all the signs of the end of an age were upon Israel. There are two things we should note in particular in these verses: the first is that what we read here is remarkably up-to-date and relevant for our own day, with some of the verses reading almost like the national dailies' headlines on a Monday morning after a typical weekend of violence and disturbance in our cities. There is a well-known verse in Proverbs which says, "Where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint". The second point is the association of cause and effect in what is unfolded here. Where there is no 'knowledge' of God - or 'acknowledgement' of Him – the moral life and fabric of a nation collapses. This Hosea lays fairly and squarely at the door of Israel's religious leaders, priest and prophets alike. This is a grim indictment, but it is nevertheless true that where knowledge of God is obscured, and the religious life of a nation is at a low ebb, there follows inevitably the break-up of standards of truth, honesty and integrity, in business, commerce and in the home. And our own day matches Hosea's in this, and this is the Lord's controversy, now as then, with the inhabitants of the Land.

21) 4:6-11

The Lord's plaint against His people, voiced in 6 echoes again and again throughout the prophecy. 'Lack of knowledge' is a term of wide significance (see 2:3, 2:20, 4:1, 5:4 and 6:6, 11:3), and it is clear from the many varying contexts in which it is found on the lips of the prophet as a charge against Israel that it lay at the root of her faithlessness. The Lord had made Himself known to His people in His law (6), yet through the neglect of the priests and scribes that Law had been forgotten, and the people were strangers to its teaching and to the God they might have met in it. He had made Himself known, however, in history also, in the mighty acts He had wrought on their behalf (see 12:3-6, 12:12,13, 11:1, 9:10) and in forgetting Him they were turning their backs on what had in fact made them a nation and a people, refusing their election as the chosen race. This rejection of Him is answered by His rejection of them (6). What 8 refers to seems to be the fact that the priesthood lived on the vice of the day, thriving on the fines and sin-offerings, and encouraging the people to sin so that all the more might come into the treasury. This vested interest in sin is some indication of how very far the priesthood had departed from its true origins in the service of God. It is little wonder that the anger of the Lord was kindled against them. The reference in 11 is to the intelligence, rather than to 'heart' as we are accustomed to use the word, and what Hosea means is that their sin has so clouded their minds that they are no longer able to think clearly or discern moral issues. The end of this terrifying road is that the distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, tends to disappear altogether. This is the final issue of sin.

22) 4:6-11

Significantly, some of the most perceptive writing and comment today is underlining the solemn reality expressed in our last two Notes. In our earlier studies in Amos we quoted Alexander Solzhenitsyn as saying in explanation of the great disasters that had befallen Russia, "Men have forgotten God; that is why all this has happened". Dr. Edward Norman, Dean of Peterhouse, Cambridge, writing in the Times under the title 'Four Wrong Roads to God', concludes his article with the words "The end result is a tendency for the churches to act more as moral agencies and propagandists for social reform than as the authentic vehicles of spiritual ministries. This may also be a key to their spiritual decline. Many people simply do not find churches religious enough! What is lacking is transcendence for its own sake, as a necessary feature of existence, and an impression of the awful majesty of God". And the former Bishop of London, Dr Graham Leonard, further underlines the effects of lack of knowledge, or acknowledgement, of God in Britain today, speaking at the Cambridge Union, against the background of relativism in morals and pluralism in politics and social affairs, on the subject of conscience, loyalty and freedom, and pointing out that there is no longer a moral consensus in our society today by which conscience can be corrected and enabled to assess the moral propriety of possible legislation, or by which loyalty, whether in the context of public life (e.g. in the matter of the leaking of documents), in the sphere of marriage and family life (where loyalty, in the shape of promises and faithfulness, is regarded as expendable), or by which freedom is qualified and controlled by personal responsibility. But then, these are areas where the voice of the church has failed to give a lead, in a day in which preaching is increasingly given the brush-off and set at a discount. This is where the rot has set in, in this land of ours, and this is where the only hope can lie - in a renewal of the knowledge of God. The Church, if it is wise, will take a long hard look at this and recognise its real priorities, and get back to its proper task to proclaim the Word of God in the Name of God and in the authority and unction of the Holy Spirit.

23) 4:12-19

The darkening of heart and blurring of moral distinctions is evidenced unmistakably in 12 ff. Idolatry becomes rife in the land. There are two points in particular worthy of comment here. The first is that Hosea's preoccupation is different from Amos's in his denunciation of the people. Amos's burden was the social unrighteousness and injustice, and idolatry scarcely comes into his indictment. But Hosea concentrates almost exclusively on it; it was the evidence par excellence of Israel's spiritual adultery. The second point is that we see how mistaken is the notion, too often lightly assumed to be true, that the evolution of religion was from the worship of many gods (polytheism) to the worship of one God (monotheism). The exact opposite is the truth; man fell from the knowledge of the one true and living God, and in his fall became hopelessly enslaved to idolatry. Idolatry is not the source from which true religion finally flowed, but the declension to which true religion sank, because men did not like to retain God in their knowledge. This is also underlined in 16, where 'backsliding' has at the root of its meaning the idea of stubbornness - the picture is of an unwilling beast sitting on its haunches refusing to be drawn in the direction the herdsman wishes it to go. Backsliding does not happen by accident, as if it overtook some hapless soul without warning. It is a moral issue, a question of a will that refuses to be crucified unto the will of God.

24) 4:12-19

The point of 14 seems to be that it was vain for men to be impure and expect nevertheless that their women should be chaste; 'themselves' refers to 'men' or 'fathers and sons', being a masculine pronoun, and this makes the verse read with this particular meaning. The reference is to the sensuality of the religious rites, as represented by the women who dedicated themselves to these impurities. In the midst of the grim indictment there rings out in 15 a warning to Judah to consider Israel's peril and eschew the idolatries of Gilgal and Bethel. 'Joined' in 17 is a nuptial word, used both of the marriage of a wife to her husband and of an idolator to his idol. Ephraim (Israel) is to be let alone, not so much in the sense of "Come out from among them, and be ye separate" (2 Cor 6:17), as in the sense that because Ephraim has turned to idols, it is futile to try to persuade her to return. She is left of God (see 5:15) in a judicial sentence of excommunication. This is echoed more than once in the New Testament - see Rom 1:24, 26, 28; 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20; Tit 3:10; 1 John 5: 16b. Sometimes, men have to be left to go their own way, and learn the hard way, in sorrow and shame. This balances what we read in Amos 7:1-6, where we learned the duty of praying and interceding for the nation until it was past the point of no return. This had now come, it would appear, for Israel, in Hosea's time, and the tempest from the north, the Assyrian invasion, was soon to sweep them away (19).

25) 5:1-7

Hosea now turns to a more specific indictment of the political and spiritual leaders of the people. Those who have hitherto been the judges of the nation are now themselves to be judged. This echoes the earlier stricture in 4:4. The responsibility of leaders for the declension of their people is always stressed in the Scriptures, and this applies equally to spiritual leaders, political and royal. Nothing is more impressive in the history of Israel and Judah than to see how their fortunes and well-being were conditioned by the moral and spiritual state of their kings. A dissolute monarchy and an effete leadership have always spelt disaster, and this should be remembered in our time, as to both Church and nation, more than it often is. We should read 4 as, "Their deeds will not let them return to God"; the meaning is that sin has gained such a dominion over them that they have been rendered incapable of turning in repentance to God, and this may be linked with 4:16 (see yesterday's Note), in the sense that their sin had reached such a pitch that they were trapped in a prison of their own making. (Remember the man in the iron cage in the House of the Interpreter, in Pilgrim's Progress!) To change the metaphor, once the Gadarene swine have begun to move with speed down the slope, they no longer have power to stop themselves from rushing headlong into the sea. It is significant, in reference to the Gadarene story, that Hosea speaks of 'the spirit of whoredom' in the midst of the people - spirit indeed it was, a deadly, demonic spirit that had gained control of them as it did the swine. This is the only adequate explanation of Israel's disastrous decline and downfall.

26) 5:1-7

Two further points call for comment in these verses. The first, in 6, gives the picture of a people stabbed into alarm and concern in face of imminent danger, running panic stricken to God with their offerings, to no avail, for He has withdrawn Himself from them. God is not prepared to be 'used' by His people as a convenient 'escape-hatch' from the consequences of their sins, especially when their turning to Him was motivated by panic rather than by true repentance. The second point in 7 refers to 'strange children', indicating that a generation had grown up in the land that did not know God, unfamiliar with His ways and with the things of the Spirit. This is the deepest note in the indictment against the political and spiritual rulers of Israel - to have so neglected the truths of the law and the covenant, and allowed them to become obscured, that the rising generation had no opportunity to learn of the grace of God. What a charge to give account for at the judgment bar of God! And does not this have something to say to the Church in our own day, which has for so long obscured the true message of grace, and substituted a simple moralistic exhortation to 'do the best you can'? Is it surprising that there should be a continuing decline in church membership, especially among young people, in our day?

27) 5:8-15

It is the sense of the imminence of doom that the opening words of this passage convey, but even more tense is the contrast between the overt evil of Israel and Judah and the hidden, secret working of the Divine nemesis in 12, 14, 15. It is a sorry picture indeed that is presented: Ephraim is desolate, and Judah takes advantage of his weakness during the conflict with his enemies, to make some easy conquests at his expense on the borders (10). Ephraim for his part is also in the toils. 11 may be rendered either passively, as in the AV, in which case the meaning would be "Ephraim is in agony and crushed in judgment because his mind is set on following false gods" (see J.B. Phillips); or actively, in which case the rendering would be "Ephraim oppresses, he breaks down right, he has wilfully gone after vanity". And, over against this, there is the silent, unobtrusive work of judgment going on, as the moral fibre and spiritual resources of the nations gradually are sapped and weakened. The dry-rot is that the damage they do is generally widespread and extensive before it is ever detected. On, on, it goes heedlessly until occasion demands that some stocktaking be done – then to our utter dismay the devastation is discovered. So it is in the moral and spiritual realm. The secret inroads of sin are in the making long months, even years, before a sudden crisis reveals just how great and how fatal the undermining has been. It is the insidious nature of sin that makes it so deadly.

28) 5:8-15

It is not difficult to see a progression from moth and rottenness (12) to lion (14) and finally to withdrawal (15). This was in fact the course of the Divine visitation on Israel. The tragedy, however, is that when the judgment of the blight was exposed, and Israel made conscious of her weakness and of the devastation of her national life, she turned not to the Lord in contrition and repentance but to Assyria (13). This is what brought on the judgment of the lion and finally the withdrawal of the Lord's presence and power from them. Nor is it difficult to set this progression alongside the course of modern, 20th century history. Indeed, the parallel is very startling. Was it not in the pre-1914 years that men spoke of the impossibility of war and of the steady progression towards a better and better world? The first world war broke upon a people utterly stupified and stunned with horror and amazement that it should have happened at all. It was the shattering discovery of the moth and the rottenness. The lion came later, when "that maniac of ferocious genius" as Churchill called Hitler, bestrode the Western world and laid it under tyranny for six years. But there has been no turning to God. Is it surprising that the confusion and anarchy of our distracted post-war civilisation should be intensifying rather than being resolved? What if we should have been left of God for want of seeking Him? Is this a picture of our day, or a warning of what is yet to be?

29) 6:1-4

The commentators think that the last verse of chapter 5 is linked with what follows, and that we should supply the word 'saying' after 'seek Me early'. Read thus, a very different construction is placed on these famous words (6:1-3) than that immortalised in the wonderful Scottish Paraphrase, "Come let us to the Lord our God". For taken as above, the words constitute a plaint from the heart of God against the superficial, facile attitude of His people. "In their affliction" He says, "they will seek me early, saying, Come, and let us return unto the Lord...O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee?...for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away". It is the lightness of their attitude that stuns and appals the heart of God. It is as if they had said, after such a prolonged history of sin and declension, "In a couple of days or so God will make things all right". "God will pardon, it is His job" mocked one French blasphemer - such is the spirit in which Israel came before God, not in any hatred or abhorrence of their sin, but simply because they were now feeling the weight of their sins' consequences upon them too heavily for their comfort. And such shallow feelings God is not prepared to countenance. He reacts against them in impatience and anger as 5 ff will make clear.

30) 6:1-4

The interpretation given of these verses in yesterday's Note should not, of course, blind us to their beauty when taken by themselves, and out of the manifest insincerity with which Israel used them. If only they had meant them as the Paraphrase construes them! It would have been a time of new beginning for them, and all would, even at that late stage, have been remedied. But alas, they were far from this hopeful state, and the downward movement went on gathering momentum until nothing could stop it. The metaphors used here should be studied carefully. It is almost as if God were represented as having a problem, in 4. As G. Campbell Morgan puts it, He can deal with gross sin, but His difficulty is what to do with goodness that passes away so soon as Israel's did. Evanescent goodness, fitful and short lived, was the problem. The morning cloud is a thing of beauty, tipped by the rising sun and radiant with loveliness, and the dew brings a fragrance and freshness, making every blade of grass glisten. But they are things of a moment, they vanish and are gone. They have no permanence. This was how it was with Israel's goodness, - lovely as far as it went, and as long as it lasted but neither far enough nor long enough by a long way. It is one thing to feel sorry for sin, and doubtless the people had often felt thus; but the feeling did not last, nor did it do anything to them. This was their tragedy.

31) 6:1-4

The word 'goodness' deserves close study. Its derivation indicates the meaning of 'bending the neck' as an animal does under the yoke, and this makes it clear that the idea of submission to the will of God is at its heart. "Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me" said Christ. This is what was so lacking in the attitude of Israel towards the Lord. They may have been sincerely sorry for their sin, but they were not prepared for the submission of will and the new obedience that real, effectual sorrow for sin demands. This is something that is always relevant in the spiritual life. It is lack of this element of submission, for example, that leads to spurious conversions. The mere stirring of the emotions, however impressive a psychological change it may effect for the time being, is no substitute for the surrender of the will to the good and perfect will of God which alone bears the impress of the Holy Spirit's working. In the same way, objections to belief, however plausible intellectually, however seemingly sincere, may serve but to conceal the opposition of a will that is not prepared to yield to the claims of Christ. Not only so; it is this fundamental lack of submission that explains much of the unsatisfactory experience of believers in the life of sanctification. Ultimately, there is only one compelling reason why God's people are not more holy than they are; it is that they have no real intention of being so. There is a submission of heart and will that they are not prepared to make, a death that they refuse to die. Their goodness stops short of the cross.

32) 6:5-11

The shallowness of their turning is shown in the fact that they thought to win forgiveness by multiplying sacrifices. How easy it would be if men could 'buy' Divine favour in this technical, non-moral way. This is 'cheap grace' with a vengeance, but God will have none of it. It is always a temptation to substitute the ritual for the moral in religion, and this is aided and abetted by the deceitful heart of unbelief within us that is prepared to go to any lengths in hoodwinking us and obscuring the basically moral and spiritual issues at the heart of the biblical faith. When this happens, the resultant caricature is an offence both to God and man. We have only to think of the Pharisaism of our Lord's day (remember, He quoted these very words against the Pharisees) to realise how true this is. What Israel needed, and did not have, was a belief that behaved. The phrase 'like men' in 7 may be translated 'like Adam'. This would make the meaning that their sin is the primal sin of covenant-breaking. 'There' in 7 is emphatic, and could be rendered, "It was there that..." i.e. in the covenant. 'Dealt treacherously' means 'proved false to the marriage contract', and what follows in 8-11 underlines the extent of Israel's unfaithfulness to the Lord. The picture is one of unrelieved anarchy and lawlessness in politics and priesthood alike reminiscent of the worst orgies and excesses of heathenism. It was to this depth that the covenant people sank!

33) 6:5 - 7:2

The word 'goodness' in 4 has, etymologically, in it the idea of 'bending the neck' as an animal does under the yoke. Submission to the will of God lies, therefore, at its heart. It is this that was lacking in Israel's attitude. They may have been sincerely sorry for their sins, but they were not prepared for the submission of will and the new obedience that real, effectual sorrow for sin demands. It is this that is taken up in 7:1, 2, which really belong in spirit between 3 and 4 in chapter 6. This is what proves their repentance unreal. Their sinfulness is unending, and every desire on the Lord's part to restore and renew them is foiled by the discovery of fresh unfaithfulness. It is almost as if in the very midst of their approach to Him for pardon they were involving themselves in more acts of sin. It is not difficult to see the reflection of Hosea's own personal tragedy in these words. How eagerly he would have watched for any sign in Gomer that might indicate a change of heart, how willing to forgive and restore, only to discover further and deeper proof of her continuing infidelity. What heartbreak to have hopes dashed so cruelly after being raised! It will be seen, in reading on a bit in the book that the next few chapters are very confused and difficult to read and grasp. There is a turbulence and turmoil about them which certainly reflect the moral confusion of the time and the attendant political disintegration. Yet, turbulent and fraught with confusion as they are, they are interspersed with striking phrases and metaphors which serve to illuminate the condition of the land. To look at these, as we shall be doing in the Notes that follow, will enable us to grasp the essential message that Hosea is conveying to us in this tense and dramatic prophecy.

34) 7:3-7

The first of the metaphors, referred to at the end of yesterday's Note, is that of the oven, mentioned three times in these brief verses. The scene depicted seems to be the royal palace, as Kidner points out in his commentary, making the comment that the king and his courtiers were "not only doing nothing to stem the tide of evil, but reveling in it, titillated by it, relishing the prevailing graft and trickery (3), and letting their lusts take over. The picture of the oven that needs no stoking once the fermentation has begun, tells its own story of self-propagating passion....Now the banked up fire of v. 4, that pleasurable build-up of shared lust, bursts into a frightening blaze, as passions flare not merely into lechery (as in v. 4) but into murder (6-7) for when passion reigns there are no limits or loyalties. With such a fever running at every level of society, it was no coincidence that Israel's last three decades were a turmoil of intrigue, as one conspirator after another hacked his way to the throne, only to be murdered in his turn. Of the six men who reigned in those thirty years, four were assassins, and only one died in his own bed". What a devastating - and desolating - picture! It is a sad and terrible indictment, with no redeeming feature to be seen anywhere, with the sinful excesses of the people viewed with approval by the king himself and his court. This is perhaps more indicative of their abandoned state than anything else, for it reveals a complete breakdown of ancient ideals which in earlier times had ordained the ruler as the shepherd of the people. How far removed Israel had become from David's words in 2 Sam 23:3 ff, "He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God...."!

35) 7:8-10

From moral decay, Hosea turns next to the political decay to which the former inevitably leads. In this fresh indictment the prophet uses a number of extraordinarily vivid metaphors which yield fruitful insights when studied closely. The first of these, in 8a - "he hath mixed himself among the people" - uses a word generally associated with the mixing of oil in the flour used for sacrifice and also employed in the story of Babel, with its confusion of tongues. One of the inevitable results of moral declension, Hosea indicates, is the loss of the distinctive calling to be a peculiar people unto God. Israel had lost her 'separation' and could no longer be distinguished from other nations. This is always noted in the history of God's people with great foreboding, as a precursor of judgment (of the earlier days of Israel's history when in Samuel's time the people were determined to have a king so that they could be 'like other nations'). There is a lesson here for the Church which, like Israel, is called out from the world, to be different from it, to be in the world but not of it. It is when we forget that Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world" and carnally adopt the world's standards and the world's expedients in the service of that kingdom that we lose our distinctive testimony and indeed the whole reason for our existence as a people called of God, contemptuously tolerated, if not openly despised, by men, and held of no account. There can be little doubt that one of the compelling reasons why the Church in our time has little appeal to the unchurched masses is that it is so little different from them in life and attitude, in standards or in behaviour. It is one thing to speak of 'getting alongside' people, but to what purpose is this if in so doing we lose our identity as God's peculiar people? We are simply won to the world's side (sometimes with very unfortunate results!) instead of the world to Christ. The tragedy is that so many in the Church do not seem to know that there is a difference between the two!

36) 7:8-10

The next metaphor, 'a cake not turned' is even more graphic and suggestive. 'Half-baked' would be a literal, though scarcely adequate translation of the phrase, in view of the colloquial and semi-humorous association of that word in modern times. It is capable of several applications. It could refer to the community one half of which was too rich, the other too poor. This would be in line with Amos's strictures on the social injustices of his day, when the rich became rich at the expense of the poor. It could also, however, have reference to the religious life of the nation, in which sacrifices were multiplied on the religious side while the moral was neglected and their hearts were far from God. Again, the prophet could be referring to the remarkable progress in worldly advancement that had not been matched by corresponding spiritual development.

The possibilities of interpretation are very wide, and still today very topical - one side of the cake burned to a cinder, the other cold, damp and heavy, which the fire has never reached; an overdose of religion on the one side, and on the other a life that the fire of God has never been allowed to touch. Put thus, the picture becomes startlingly relevant. F.W. Boreham in one of his books says, "If at the end of the day my life is like that spoiled cake, it will be little satisfaction to me that I am able to account for my neglect. A man does not correct a thing by explaining it. Hosea's graphic parable may assist me to prevent such a calamity. Cure there can be none. The careless cook may be penitent, but his tears will never restore the burnt cakes." Quite. What do we do with burnt cakes? What can we do? We cannot remake them; they won't remake. They are thrown out. This is Hosea's point.

37) 7:11-16

The picture of the dove fluttering helplessly from one refuge to another (11) suggests two thoughts. One is that spiritual degeneracy has brought with it the inability to think. 'Heart' means 'brains' and the idea expressed is lack of perception and the ability to think rationally. The other thought is the remarkable combination of the wayward and purely pathetic with the wilful and rebellious in the attitude of the people. What we mean is this: the spectacle of a silly pigeon fluttering helplessly hither and thither is certainly one to awaken compassion and pity in those who behold it, and this in fact is the element in sin which calls forth the compassion of God for the wayward and the erring. But this is only one element in sin; there is another. It is open to the distracted people to 'flutter' towards the one true refuge, and this they fail to do. "They return, but not to the Most High" (16). This is the mark of their revolt against God. "All we like sheep have gone astray" (Isa 53:6) is one thing; but "we have turned everyone to his own way" is another, and both belong, in greater or lesser degree, to every act and attitude of sin. We have not understood the mystery of iniquity aright if we discount the second as an integral factor in the tragedy of Israel's sin. 16a reminds us also that remorse is not repentance and reformation is not salvation. A renewed relationship with God is the one thing needful, and this was far from Israel's thoughts. The 'deceitful bow' (16b) adds yet another graphic picture. The arrow from a deceitful bow cannot be relied upon to go to its aim, and Israel cannot be relied upon by God to fulfil her God-appointed mission in the world. All that He might plan to do through her is thwarted and frustrated because she herself is not true. This is the ultimate explanation of so much fruitless service in the work of the gospel. The bows that fire the Lord's arrows are not true, and therefore they fly wide of the mark.

38) 8:1-3

The trumpet of alarm with which this chapter begins ushers in a series of charges made by the prophet against Israel, and for which judgment must be inevitable. The first of these is transgression and trespass (1) and the casting off of the good (3). The interjection of "My God, we know Thee" (2) - in panic when the signs of doom are ominously near? - echo the false, superficial knowledge already mentioned in 6:1-3, and remind us of our Lord's words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Not everyone that saith unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven" (Matt 7:21). There almost seems to be a suggestion of a yoke being cast off in 3, and we should remember the meaning given to the term 'goodness' in 6:4 as containing the idea of an animal bending its neck under the yoke. To cast off the Lord's yoke, however, is to withdraw oneself from the protection of His grace, and this is grimly underlined in the next words, "the enemy shall pursue him". It is part of the blindness that sin causes in heart and conscience that men so little realise this and are so unwilling to accept it as the explanation of the misfortune and disaster that came in the train of their sin and rebellion against the will of God in their lives. We sometimes have to learn the hard way that the only safe place for us is in the centre of His Will anywhere else is fraught with complication and peril.

39) 8:4-6

The next charge against Israel is that her throne had been occupied by a succession of puppet-kings that bore no mark of the Divine anointing upon them. The reference is to the very turbulent period which followed the death of Jeroboam, when five kings succeeded one another in rapid succession in a time of near-anarchy and deep confusion. G.A. Smith very pertinently and shrewdly remarks, "The curse of such a state of dissipation as that to which Israel had fallen is that it produces no men. Israel would have produced a leader, a heaven-sent king, if the national spirit had not been squandered on foreign trade and fashions. But after the death of Jeroboam every man who rose in Israel rose, not on the nation, but on the fevered and transient impulse of some faction; and through the broken years one party monarch after another was lifted to the brief tenancy of a blood-stained throne. They were not from God these monarchs; but man-made, and sooner or later man-murdered". If this is a valid observation, it forces us to think of our own time, and the lack of stature in the leadership of our own nation. Who can compare in calibre or vision today with Churchill in the war years. It is impressive to realise that the really big men of recent years have been beyond the iron and bamboo curtains. But then, the prophets would make out a very convincing case for their having been ordained of God as instruments of His judgment. It makes you think, doesn't it?

40) 8:7-10

The idolatry of Israel (5,6) was a constant pre-occupation with Hosea, far more than with Amos, and it is in relation to this that he now speaks of the whirlwind of Divine judgment that is about to sweep them away into captivity. The precise intention of this graphic metaphor (7) is not quite clear as to detail, and perhaps it is straining the poetic form of the prophet's words to look in them for anything so specific, but it may well be that what he refers to is the 'wind of change' that had been blown through Israel's national life and driven her from her position of separation unto God into complicity with the heathen nations around her. Having cultivated this seemingly warm and pleasant wind, she was at last to find that it had assumed the force of a whirlwind that was to drive her into an enforced captivity among the heathen. It is surely part of the devil's strategy that sin never looks really dangerous, only pleasant and attractive, when first we make dalliance with it. It is later, sometimes much later that its fangs strike into us with all the ruthless savagery and mercilessness of hell itself. This is how it was with Israel. She paid very dearly for her interest in the ways of other nations and her adoption of them. These things, says Paul, are written for our learning and admonition. May this not have been in his mind when he urgently warned the Corinthians (2 Cor 6:15-17), "What part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you."

41) 8:11-14

A similar thought to that expressed in C is now given in 11. Because Ephraim has multiplied altars, altars will be given him to sin further. One of the awful penalties of sin is that it brings a greater facility for sinning. To tell one lie leads to telling of many others to 'cover up' until the whole fabric of life is riddled with falsehood. Sin starts off something which it is soon no longer ours to control. As Jesus indicated, he who commits sin becomes the slave of sin. There is a great pathos in 12 and 14. We may gather from these two verses that to neglect the great things of His Law (12) is to forget Him (14). Hosea's words bear testimony to the fact that it is possible even within the context of an elaborate religious and ecclesiastical life to mislay God and leave Him out of the reckoning. In this connection the words spoken of Joseph and Mary in the story of the boy Jesus in the temple have an arresting symbolic significance, "But they, supposing him to have been in the company, went a day's journey" (Luke 2:44). This is how it was with Israel; their mistake was in supposing that the presence of the holy Lord was necessarily guaranteed by the practice of an elaborate ritual. And she was to learn the hard, costly way that it was not so. Back to Egypt she was to go - that is, into the wilderness (see 2:14, 15). It was there, in the crucible of suffering, that she found His presence again. The story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel 3 is the true parable of this experience in the burning, fiery furnace there stood with them one like unto the Son of God. And better the furnace with Him, than temple and sacrifice without Him!

42) 9:1-6

Hosea gives a description of the effects that the coming exile would have on Israel's life. "This is what it will be like for you", he says. In graphic strokes of the pen the prophet reminds them that out of their own land, there will be no possibility of making sacrifices (4), no days of solemn assembly or feast days (5), for all these were inextricably associated with the temple-worship, and the temple would be destroyed and people removed far from it. It is doubtful whether at that point the people could have taken this in, so completely unthinkable such a deprivation must have been to them ('It can never happen to us:'), but there is no doubt that when captivity did come, it must have come home to them with shattering force. The most poignant expression of this sense of woe and outrage is found in Psalm 137, descriptive of the later captivity in Babylon - "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" Perhaps this is one decisive factor in the lesson that was to be learned by God's people in their wilderness experience of captivity, that true religion has a moral basis, that to obey is better than sacrifice and to hearken than the fat of rams (1 Sam. 15:22) and that doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God is His sovereign requirement. It may be that it was possible for them to learn it only by being removed from the empty sacrificial religion in which they had allowed themselves to be beguiled from true righteousness. God does sometimes have to remove us from all that seems to mean so much to us - in order to expose to us just how little reality there has been in our experience. Than which nothing can be more shattering or salutary, or more conducive to bringing us into true depth of experience.

43) 9:7-10

There are two possible interpretations of 7. One is that the prophet and the spiritual man are driven mad by sorrow on account of the sins of the people. The other is that the people regard God's spokesmen and mouthpiece as mad when they speak out in His Name. They have sunk to such a depth that they are no longer capable of receiving or grasping spiritual truth. This latter is the more probable of the two, and accords well with the teaching of other parts of the Scripture, as for example 2 Tim 4:3, where Paul speaks of a time when men will not endure sound doctrine, but after their own lusts men shall heap to themselves teachers having itching ears. It is in fact a sign of impending judgment when the true Word of God is refused, and His true servants despised and counted fools and madmen, for this is to come dangerously near the sin against the Holy Ghost for which there is no forgiveness. To call good evil and evil good (see Mark 3:28-30) is to approach the point of no return in spiritual darkness, and to this Israel had well-nigh come.

The picture given of Israel in earlier days in 10 is all the more poignant by contrast. The Lord pictures Himself as a weary traveller in the desert coming upon a vine laden with its fruit, and finding nourishment and refreshment in the grapes it provided. It is a remarkable metaphor. Like grapes to a thirsty man, Israel at the beginning of her national history had been infinitely precious and sweet to her God. And now! - the contrast is devastating and complete!

44) 9:11-17

The departure of God from His people (12) is here said to be attended with the direst social (if that is the word!) consequences. The A.V. translation of 11 scarcely does justice to the thought expressed by the prophet. Combining J.B. Phillips' and G.A. Smith's translations we may render, "Ephraim's glory has taken wing like a bird - no more birth, no more motherhood, no more conception". That this is the true rendering is further borne out by what is said in 14 and 16. What Hosea is saying is that the long practice of sin, as Smith puts it, "leads to the decay of the national vigour, to barrenness, and a diminishing population". This is sufficiently startling when we think of it in terms of Israel - the course of history surely proved it true in her case, and in subsequent empires where moral rottenness undermined their foundations and brought them crashing down - but it is a hundred-fold more so when we venture to apply it to our own day and our own nation. We have only to think of the declension of Great Britain from the status of the greatest world power in modern history to its present unenviable position as of comparatively second rate importance to realise with dismay that a nation cannot live on its spiritual capital forever, and that sooner or later the tell-tale signs of moral and spiritual decay begin to appear, like grey hairs, in the life of what was once a great power. The present state of our society, with its growing crime rate and increasing violence, accelerating marriage-breakdown and the steady erosion of moral standards does little to dispel the disquiet that Hosea's words cause in our hearts. And there may be much worse to come yet before many more years have passed.

45) 10:1-15

Derek Kidner's introduction to this chapter is a useful guide: "There is great variety in this chapter, for all its insistence on a single theme of warning. It draws now on early history (9), now on more recent memories (14); it bombards us with lively metaphors (4, 7, 11), ominous predictions (7, 8), common-sense logic (13), snatches of current talk (3); it is always changing its angle of attack. But its thrust is positive: to spur the reader, not to stun him. The one gleam of light, the invitation of v.12, is the *raison d'être* of the whole chapter." The metaphor of the vine in 1-4 is a common one in the Old Testament for Israel, and Hosea's use of it would inevitably awaken certain trains of thought in all who heard him (of Ps 80: 8 ff and Isaiah 5). The word 'empty' in 1, rendered 'spreading' in NIV, and 'luxuriant' in RSV, is better-translated 'wanton' or 'degenerate'. Hosea is saying that Israel has borne bad fruit or, to change the metaphor, has gone to seed, and the wild, rank produce of her sinful ways is expressed in the increase of her altars (Isa 5:1-7 gives the same idea, speaking of the 'wild grapes' of violence and injustice - in both cases the fruit of the vine has rapidly gone rotten). What Hosea is mourning is that the resources which God had bestowed upon His people for the service of the world had been basely prostituted and consumed on selfish, adulterous interests. And now the reckoning time had come - the phrase in 2, rendered in the AV as 'now shall they be found faulty' is better translated 'now they must pay for it' or 'now they must bear their guilt' (NIV, RSV). Sin was really coming home to roost in this God-forsaken land.

46) 10:1-15

The words in 3 seem to mean that in place of impending doom the people are beginning to see the consequences of their evil days, putting two and two together, and alas, too late, recognising that the empty throne (remember, kings came and went in rapid succession following the death of Jeroboam) was due to their sinful neglect of the Lord - too late, indeed, since the momentum of the approaching doom had reached an irresistible level and nothing could now stop the final disaster. The graphic metaphor of the weed which takes over a farmer's field (4) provides, as Kidner says, "a startling contrast to the majestic metaphors of height and depth and clarity associated with true, Divine justice". It provides a dramatic picture of the way in which unhallowed things strengthen their hold on a community, "choking the true values as a wild crop smothers the good growth under its spreading carpet". The AV scarcely conveys the scorn and contempt of the prophet's words in 5-8 depicting the fate of the idolatrous calf of Beth-aven, as it is carried off to Assyria to be offered as a present to 'the great king' (King Jareb, AV). The RSV refers to the idol as 'the thing itself'! So much, Hosea mocks, for the god in whom you put your trust! What kind of god is it, he asks, that can be given away as a present? And how vain to think they could buy off the approaching Assyrian army with such an empty gesture. In 7 the thought turns from the sin of idolatry to the curse of their upstart, man-made kings. In one graphic metaphor the prophet speaks the doom of the then king as being swept away 'like a ship on the face of the waters' (RSV). It is the flood of the advancing Assyrian armies that will carry everything before it, king and throne and people alike, like so much flotsam in the sea after a shipwreck. Grim and desolating picture indeed!

47) 10:1-15

The desolation of the judgment of the Lord is emphasised in 8a, but what is in view in 8b is its unbearableness, and Hosea's words are taken up in the Book of Revelation as dark enough to describe the last judgment, when men shall seek in terror to escape the wrath of the Lamb (Rev 6:16, 17). The reference in 9 to Gibeah goes back to the time of the Judges (see Judges 17:3 ff; 19:22). The ancient origins of Israel's sins are traced, as if to underline the fact that the Lord has shown long patience with them. There can be no question of His anger being sudden and arbitrary against His people; rather it is His amazing forbearance and long suffering patience that is indicated. The reference may also, however, be meant to emphasis that where evil roots remain, there will always be the possibility of the resurgence of evil practices, and that once the seeds of idolatry have been sown in the hearts of a people, it is extremely difficult to extricate them. Prevention is better than cure, in this as in other matters.

Another graphic metaphor meets us in 11. The point it makes, as Kidner observes, is that 'threshing was a comparatively light task made pleasant by the fact that the creature was unmuzzled and free to eat (Deut 25:4) as it pulled the threshing-sledge over the gathered corn. But before there can be grain on the threshing floor, there must first be the hard work of ploughing and harrowing the ground. The suggestion is that Israel was better at grasping at the privileges involved in her election of God than at rising to the responsibilities involved, hence God's determination that she should be yoked to the plough and made to toil in the fields, even if it means learning the hard way.

48) 10:1-15

Hosea continues the agricultural metaphor in 12 If, as he underlines the need for a new obedience to the will of God and a new repentance from heart's wickedness. But there is hope as well as challenge in these verses, for they remind Israel that the laws of the spiritual life are exact and scientific in their operation. They have been sowing the wind, and have reaped the whirlwind, ploughing wickedness and reaping iniquity (13). But Hosea reminds them that the eternal law which makes reaping an inevitable consequence of sowing can still apply in the other direction, and that a return to righteousness will retrieve the situation even yet. The phrase "It is time to seek the Lord" may be rendered "there is yet time to seek the Lord", and this is a moving evidence of the pleading love of God for His people even in the midst of the gathering storm of judgment. The 'fallow-ground' refers to the uncultivated, neglected parts of their national life, the long-forgotten obedience to the will of God that had allowed the Lord's vineyard to become overgrown with thorns and briars (see Isaiah 5:1-7). This is a word that has relevance for individual lives as much as for the corporate life of a nation. It is possible to leave whole tracts of our lives unattended and uncultivated by becoming pre-occupied with some issues to the neglect of others that require constant attention. It is possible to be immersed in the social implications of the Christian faith in such a way as to exclude any serious attention to spiritual and eternal issues; it is possible to be more interested in doctrine than in living; the contemporary obsession with the ecumenical movement has all but eclipsed the basic issues of salvation for many in our time and when this happens, certain areas of life are allowed to lie fallow instead of being submitted to the plough. But grace must be allowed to touch every part of our lives, not merely this or that compartment. Every field on the farm needs the plough, otherwise unbalanced, not to say, uneconomic, development is the result.

49) 11:1-11

What has already been said in the past two Notes provides a context and background for what we now read in this chapter, which, on any estimate, must be one of the most evocative and moving not only in Hosea but in all the Old Testament, unfolding and displaying the Fatherhood and humanity of God. It is certainly one of the highlights of Hosea's prophecy displaying the suffering love of God breaking through to bless His erring people, in spite of their sin - in spite of everything. Even with the ambiguous and sometimes problematic translation given by the AV (the Hebrew text that has come down to us has considerable problems for the translators) the general message stands out clearly but the modern versions - RSA, NIV and J.B.Phillips should be consulted, always recognising, however, what is pointed out in the RSA footnotes, that these translations follow the Greek Septuagint rather than the Hebrew text. Derek Kidner points out that "the quotation of 1 in Matthew 2:15 is far from arbitrary. Israel in its childhood was already set apart for the world's ultimate blessing, and was described to Pharaoh as God's 'first-born son' (Exod 4:22f). By God's providence it had taken refuge in Egypt, but must return to its own land to fulfil its calling. Therefore, although it had been threatened with extinction through (among other things) the massacre of its infant sons, it was miraculously delivered. Not surprisingly the infant Christ, who summed up in His Person all that Israel was called to be, was likewise threatened and delivered; and although the details differed, the early pattern was re-enacted in its essentials, ending with God's Son restored to God's land to fulfil the task marked out for Him".

50) 11:1-12

There are three movements in this brief chapter: Remembrance and reminiscence (1-4); The inevitable judgment (5-7); The love that would not let them go (8-12). As to the first of these (1-4) the Lord is represented as reminiscing, looking back over His covenant relationship with His people, from the beginning of His association with them in their history, indeed, creating their history. There is something inexpressibly moving about this backward look by God to the old days (there is a very similar emphasis in Jer 2:2 - "I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals." - a love affair indeed!). It is impossible not to catch the personal echo of Hosea's own domestic tragedy in these words, as he also would inevitably think back to the early days of his relationship with Gomer. It is significant that this reminiscence is also underlined in the New Testament, as witness Paul's own remarkable exhortation in Eph 2:11 recalling to the saints there what they once were, and what grace had made them in the gospel of Christ. It was a summons by the apostle to recall, almost re-live, the past. The reference to this in the Old Testament itself are numerous (cf Exod 13:3; Deut 5:15, 8:2, 15:15, 16:12, 24:18,22 - the references which are made, the claim upon the people of God to live, true, generous, compassionate lives, and the remembrance of which made the inspiration of such behaviour). There is a tremendous challenge in this, for what need there is today - as there was then, in Israel, for such true, generous and compassionate living!

51) 11:1-12

The Old Testament commentator, C. Adam Smith, speaks of the inexpressible tenderness in the picture of God given in 1. He insists that 'I loved' has the force of 'I began, I learned to love him'. It is as if God, in unaccountable grace, passed over the other nations of men, greater and more powerful by far, and chose this poor slave, Israel, and 'Out of Egypt called him to be My Son'. This is a note sounded elsewhere than in Hosea; we find something of the wonder and romance of it in Deut 7:7, "The Lord did not set His love upon you nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people; for you were the fewest of all people; but because the Lord loved you....hath He brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you." This simple first verse of the chapter is redolent of the tender, guardian care of God over the chosen family's fortunes, guiding, protecting, leading them step by step in His sovereign purposes for them. This is the meaning of grace. "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God".

52) 11:1-12

Verse 2 should read, "The more I called them, the more they went from Me". The reference is to Israel's failure to realise the responsibilities and disciplines involved in being called of God. It is this that the whole prophetic literature stands aghast at, the unaccountable perversity of heart that is shown at almost every stage of her history in face of the amazing grace and love of God. The picture of the Fatherhood of God continues in 3 in words of wonderful tenderness. The 'I' is emphatic - "It is I Who taught Ephraim to walk, picking them up in Mine arms; yet they never knew that it was I Who healed their bruises". The words of Hymn 26 in the Revised Church Hymnary, especially vv3-5, express the thought of these verses with remarkable insight and accuracy. It is the rash, impulsive days of thoughtless youth that are in view. But in 4, the metaphor changes; days of youth give place to the responsibilities of adult life, with its battles and struggles, and now the prophet's words picture the kindly herdsman helping the weary and toil worn beasts at the end of the day, giving them food and rest, easing their harness and leading them into their stalls for the night. It is the gentleness and humanity of God in His dealings with His people that are depicted in this wonderfully tender picture of the farmer and his animals. As Smith says, "The man is a god to his beast, coming down to help it, and it almost makes the beast human that he does so". Ah, how greatly we need this assurance, when life has grown toilsome, and perhaps more toilsome than it need have been, because of our sin! How good that there is a gentle hand to minister to us in our weariness, and a loving heart to understand what we need!

53) 11:1-12

As 5 stands in the AV it contradicts 8:13 which says the opposite, but a literal translation might be "He was not to turn back into the land of Egypt, but the Assyrian became his king, for they refused to return". J.B.Phillips and G.A.Smith, however, follow the Septuagint here, which reads "Ephraim shall return to Egypt". If we take the first alternative, the meaning would be that Ephraim was never meant to go back to Egypt (i.e. captivity) but his continuing sin, forced the issue, and back to captivity they had to go. The AV rendering of 2 is also unclear, apart from the first phrase; 'they' in the second clause of the verse refers to the prophets, and the Lord is mourning the fact that though the prophets one and all called Israel upwards to God, and to their high calling, not one of them could lift them or elevate them to higher vision. They were bent on backsliding. One can detect the sob of Hosea's own heart in this: in face of repeated wooings and forgiveness, Gomer had continued in her unfaithfulness until nothing could be done with her but leave her to the chastisement of the discipline and consequences that this would impose and inflict on her. Those who refuse to respond to goodness must in justice expect the rod of correction. In face of all the love of God, and their terrible and persistent backsliding, only this remains, the sword and captivity.

54) 11:1-12

As a further comment on the translation problems in 5 and 7, mentioned in yesterday's Note, it will be helpful to include Kidder's exposition of these verses: "Ever since chapter 7, with its picture of Ephraim flitting between Egypt and Assyria like a flustered bird (7:11), every chapter has named one or both of these great powers as her obsession and her downfall. In the comment on 8:13 we saw something of the reproach and irony in the thought of a return to Egypt; and now the word 'return' is taken up and used most tellingly in both its senses, literal and spiritual. Nowhere is it plainer than here that the unseen movement of the soul in turning to God (5b) or turning away (7a) is the decisive one, to be followed by inevitable consequences in the realm that we call practical. The physical return to Egypt - as refugees! - was certain from the moment of their refusal of a spiritual return to God.

"Likewise the rejection of God as king has to end not merely with the disappearance of the kings they chose instead of Him (the theme of 10:3, 7, 15) but with the iron rule of a foreign super-power. If RSV is right in verse 7b (but it is rather a big 'if), this 'yoke' stands in marked contrast to the one that was handled so gently in verse 4; and on any reading of the text there is now held out no prospect of relief."

55) 11:1-12

It will be instructive to look back over the verses we have looked at thus far to see the contrast between the Divine and the human reactions in the covenant relationship that existed between God and Israel. On the one hand, it is said of Israel, "They went from Me" (2), "They know not..." (3), "They refused to return" (5), "They are bent on backsliding" (6). This is how they dishonoured the covenant! On the other hand, God says, "I loved them", "I called them", "I comforted them", "I fed them" (4). Truly Isaiah is right when he says, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, said the Lord". It is this stark and amazing contrast that explains the heart cry of God in 8, "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?", and gives tremendous force to the repeated "I will not...I will not" in 9ff. Here is what Smith calls the anguish of Divine Love, and with what terrible fierceness does it throb throughout the passage! It is the voice of an infinite agony and there is possibly only one other place in all the Scriptures where as great and heart-rending a cry is heard: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together...and ye would not!" (Matt 23:3C). "O love that wilt not let me go....I give thee back the life I owe".

56) 11:1-12

It would be difficult to find a greater unveiling of the heart of God anywhere in Scripture than is given in these verses. The 'I will not's' in 9 issue from the Divine heart in which, so to speak, 'the fountains of the great deep' are broken up. J.B. Phillips translates the last sentence in 8 thus: "My heart recoils within Me, all My compassion is kindled", and this certainly conveys the sense of turbulent emotion in God's heart towards His people. It was not something in Israel, but something in God Himself that made God say, "How shall I give thee up?" This touches the deepest meaning of grace. God loves us not because we are lovable (we are not), but because He is Love.

Admah and Zeboim were cities of the plain, destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah in Abraham's time. The last phrase of 9, rendered in the AV as "I will not enter into the city" is better rendered "I come not to consume", or "I have not come to destroy" or "I will not come in wrath". This, in face of all the ominous thunderings of wrath throughout the prophecy, only serves to emphasise the unaccountable love and mercy of God in His covenant relationship with His people. He retreats into His sovereignty, so to speak, to find a way to pardon and restore, and this is as far as we can ultimately penetrate into the mystery of the gospel, and as much as we can ever know of the love that passes knowledge. Hosea could not see, as we now see, how this could be done; he leaves us trembling on the brink of full revelation, and from beyond the hills the glow of the rising sun casts its radiance over our sky.

57) 11:1-12

Although God's is a love that will not let us go, it is also a love that will not let us off. The protestation of Divine love in 8 and 9 does not, and cannot, mean that God will ignore their offences. Final casting off is unthinkable, but punishment there will be. God forgives our sins, but takes vengeance on our inventions (Ps 99:8). The two pictures in 10 and 11 of coming restoration must therefore be referred to after the Exile. In 10 it is the lion calling its cubs back to it (surely an apt illustration for Him Who is called the Lion of the Tribe of Judah!). In 11 it is the return of birds in the spring, after winter migration. Both metaphors convey the idea of the enduring bond between God and His people, even when they are banished from Him by their sin; the lion-cubs recognize and own their relationship in their response to the roar of the parent, and the migrant birds obey the deep-rooted instinct for home placed in the heart of their being. Even in our sin and revolt we do not cease to be destined for God; that is why we are often so deeply conscious of the conflict within us between the desire to escape from Him and the longing for His peace. We are made deeper than we know, and we cannot violate the 'homing instinct' within us with impunity. God will see to that.

58) 12:1-6

In our last few Notes, on chapter 11, we have been underlining the significance of God's backward look to the beginnings of Israel's history, as He reminisced about the early days when He first called Israel as His people. There is something of this backward look in this chapter also. G. Adam Smith puts it thus: "The call with which the last chapter closed was not assurance of salvation: How am I to give thee up, Ephraim? how let thee go, Israel? It was the anguish of Love, hovering over its own on the brink of the destruction to which their wilfulness has led them, and before relinquishing them it would seek some last way to redeem them. Surely that fatal morrow and the people's mad leap into it are not inevitable! Before they take the leap, let the prophet go back upon the moral situation of today, go back once more upon the last of the people, and see if he can find anything to explain that bias to apostasy which has brought them to this fatal brink - which may move them to repentance even there. So in chaps. 12 and 13 Hosea turns upon the now familiar trail of his argument, full of the Divine jealousy, determined to give the people one other chance to turn; but if they will not, he will justify God's relinquishment of them. The chapters threw an even clearer light upon the temper and habits of that generation. They again explore Israel's ancient history for causes of the present decline; and, in especial, they cite the spiritual experience of the Father of the nation, as if to show that what repentance was possible for him is possible for his posterity. But once more hope is seen vain; and Hosea's last travail with his obstinate people closes in a doom even more awful than its predecessors."

59) 12:1-6

What is underlined first of all, in 1,2, is the vacillating policy of Israel, turning now to Assyria and now to Egypt, instead of to the Lord. The purpose and significance of this introductory word seems to be that it reflects the vacillating and often scheming propensities seen in the life-story of Jacob, the father of the nation. He was one who always 'had his eye on the main chance' and this is what God was seeing in His people, as explaining all their chequered history. As the Apostle James says so trenchantly, "A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways". So the prophet, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, looks back once again - and it may be seen in 3-14 that two historical situations are reviewed, the experience of Jacob, on the one hand, and the experience of Israel, his descendants, in their being brought out of Egypt, on the other hand. These are the twin reminiscences that run through the chapter. Jacob's experience (see Gen 28-32) is a notable lesson in the Old Testament, and it is given a significant and penetrating interpretation in this chapter. It is as if the prophet were saying, "It is in the experience of the patriarch Jacob that we learn the reason for the continuing bias in his descendants, for Jacob's twisted and scheming nature is reflected in all his people's history". More on this in tomorrow's Note.

60) 12:1-6

Jacob's birth seemed to Hosea a significant pointer to his future to-be. Born with his hand clutching Esau's heel (Gen 25: 26), this gave him his name, Jacob ('he-is-at-the-heel'), and for so many years this characterised his whole attitude as one who steals up from behind to over-reach you and get the better of you. This is how it was with Esau, who was twice out-manoeuvred by his wily brother - "he has supplanted me ('Jacob' me) these two times...." - in his birthright and his father's blessing. Much the same pattern is seen in Jacob's association with Laban his uncle who, wily as he was, was outmatched by his still wilier nephew. Significantly, Jacob's experience at Bethel is past over by Hosea (except for the reference in 4, indicating that the re-making of the man, as Kidner says, "had its origin not in his own enterprise, but in God's initiative revealed at Bethel long before"), and Peniel becomes the central and significant consideration. This interpretation puts the seal on Jacob's experience at Peniel as being a legitimate experience for the people of God everywhere. We also may go that way - and indeed, when backslidden and manifesting the characteristics of duplicity and double-dealing must go that way. The point that the prophet is making is that what was possible for Jacob is possible also for the nation of Israel. And just as Jacob had to have the twistedness in him straightened out by severe and painful disciplines, so Israel must pass into the crucible of suffering to be purged and purified of her sin. And if such an one as he, Jacob, could be changed, so may the nation that descended from him – by going through the same 'breaking' experience. Jacob limped into the sunrise, a broken man, but he became a prince with God. This is the force of the 'Therefore' in 6, with the prophet's urgent appeal to follow the example of the patriarch and come to grips with God.

61) 12:7-14

But alas, Israel was not prepared to come to grips with God in any such way, and Hosea now returns to the situation as he saw it then, not in the ideal terms of Jacob's brokenness before God and subsequent transformation, but in the harsh, grim reality of Israel's continued twistedness. The word 'merchant' in 7 means 'Canaan', and could be translated 'Canaanite'. To use it of Israel was in fact a scathing denunciation of her failure as the chosen people of God. As Campbell Morgan says, Israel was created to make Canaan Israel, but the time had come when Canaan had made Israel Canaan. This is how far the nation was from coming to terms with the calling of God, as expressed in 6. There seems to be a further reference to Jacob's story in 7, 8. J.B. Phillips translates "Swindler! He loves to cheat with false balances in his hand. And does Ephraim say, Yes, but I have grown rich, I have made myself wealthy? All his gains can never outweigh the guilt that he has amassed". Read thus, the allusion seems to be to Jacob's very astute dealings with his Uncle Laban (Gen 29:31). It would have been easy for him to assume that it was God that had prospered him materially, but what of the fact that the name of God is scarcely mentioned in his story these twenty years he was away from home? In the same way Israel could certainly boast of material prosperity and the enlarging of her borders during the reign of Jeroboam II, but what of the moral deterioration which accompanied the 'never-had-it-so-good' affluence of that decadent and licentious age? Jacob had to be brought to heel, to prove to him that material prosperity was not necessarily the criterion of the blessing of the Lord, and so must sinning Israel. Back to the wilderness she must go (9), and dwell in tents, and be reduced to their ancient level of life in her days of wandering in the deserts of Sinai.

62) 12:7-14

One does not have to look very long for application of all this to God's people today. Indeed, a good case could be made for saying that the 'Israel of God', the Church, seems intent on becoming 'Canaan' all over again. Never have the 'this-worldly' interests and concerns been so much to the forefront of the Church's life and thinking - and never have the churches in the West been so deeply in decline as they are today. It is a supreme irony that although churchmen have doubts and misgivings about the cardinal doctrines of the Faith, to the extent of wanting to discard many of them in the interests of making (what would be left of) the Faith credible and acceptable to modern man, they are supremely confident about almost everything else, dogmatising with easy assurance on political, social and economic questions as if they stood ten feet above contradiction. We have quoted in former Record Letters the words of Dr Edward Norman, Dean of Peterhouse, Cambridge, who has given it as his view that the end result of this trend "is a tendency for the churches to act more as moral agencies and propagandists for social reform than as the authentic vehicles of spiritual mysteries. This may also be a key to their continued decline. Many people simply do not find churches religious enough (*italics mine*)". It would be much more to the point if the Church had the courage to say that the social, political, and above all, economic ills that are afflicting us in the U.K. today (this Note is being written on the day after the collapse of sterling on the money markets) have a moral and spiritual underlying cause, that as a nation we are under the judgment of God because we have spurned His ways and embraced a godlessness as great and extensive as at any time in our recent history and that the one great and urgent need is to turn back to Him. The tenor of Hosea's words here matches the anguished cry of the prophet Jeremiah, "O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord" (Jer 22:29)

63) 12:7-14

Kidner points out that "the close of this chapter has the broken, disjointed sound of agitation and distress. But the way verse 13 reverts to the opening theme (10), the role of the prophets, suggests that here at least is a unifying thread, a central emphasis. It is that God's dealings with man have always been directed to the mind and conscience, which are the prophets' great concern; and the nation will be judged on that high plane." Indeed, the fact that God had given His people open vision through the prophets increased their guilt (10). The implication inherent in this verse is significant. God's appointed way of leading on His people and shaping them to His purpose is by His Word, and that Word had come to them through the prophets. But when it was refused, He was obliged to have recourse to another, sterner method, by the disciplines of chastisement and pain. It is only when the one method is exhausted and proved ineffectual by long and continued unresponsiveness and disobedience, that the other becomes necessary and inevitable. How true this is to spiritual life! Sometimes the hard way is the only way we will allow God to teach us!

64) 12:7-14

The suggestion conveyed in these verses seems to be that as the patriarch Jacob was forced by his sin to leave his own land, and later obliged to go down with his family to Egypt, to be called out of it afterwards through Moses, so Ephraim would have to be plucked out of the Promised Land and made to languish in exile till idolatry was driven out of him. Both the earlier reference to Jacob's life, when he filched Esau's birthright from him and had to flee in consequence from the latter's wrath, and the later, when through his sinful indulgence of young Joseph he stirred up the evil passions of his other sons which led the family eventually down to Egypt to buy corn, had far reaching consequences beyond anything Jacob could have imagined. On the one hand, Rebekah, his mother had urged him to depart to Laban's for a few days (Gen 27:44) - a few days that became twenty long years and many vicissitudes in his turbulent career; on the other hand, his weakness with his favourite Joseph, and general laxity in parental discipline, seen throughout his story in Genesis, made it clear that this chosen family needed the discipline of these many years, for grave moral dangers were surrounding them that might have corrupted them beyond remedy and frustrated the purposes of God in them. Now history was to repeat itself, and Israel was again to pass through the fires of chastening that the Divine purposes might finally be enabled to come to fruition in them. Kidner astutely makes the comment: 'Verse 13's repetition 'By a prophet...by a prophet' makes a more important point than may appear at first sight. It is not simply that the prophets can trace their spiritual lineage back to Moses, though this is true. Rather, it insists that the exodus was above all a spiritual event, not just a liberation movement. Moses' greatness was not that he stood up to Pharaoh, but that he stood before God and knew Him face to face. Mount Sinai, first with the revelation of the burning bush, and subsequently with the giving of the Law and Covenant, gave the whole enterprise its point. It was no mere detour, no formal church parade on the march to victory. 'I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself'. Here, in knowing God, was Israel's *raison d'être* and true stability: 'by a prophet he was preserved' - for 'where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint.'

65) 13:1-3

Several times in these studies we have remarked on how relevant the words of the prophet have seemed to be to our present day situations, and how the turbulence and turmoil in these ancient days in Israel reflect in such a graphic way the events of our own time. The reason for this lies in the fact that there is a moral government at the heart of the universe. This is how the living, Creator God has 'set the whole system up', and ordained that there would be certain constant, unchanging factors that do not alter with the passing of the ages and centuries of time. This is why the prophets have a living word for us today, for they are dealing with, and identifying, and exposing principles which are true for every age. The moral foundations of the world are not variable factors, they do not change from age to age. Customs change, habits change, but the principles on which the world is founded do not ever change. They remain the same, and will remain so till time shall be no more. A notable comment was once made in the General Assembly by a Commissioner. He said: "We are told that the Church must move with the times; but what if the times are moving away from God? What then?" A good point indeed! This, then, is why these chapters have such timely relevance for the world of today, and speak an unequivocal word from the Lord to our situation, just as much as to Israel's in Hosea's day. Times may change, but moral issues do not!

66) 13:1-3

The AV in 1 needs to be amended, and this is done in the modern versions to read as follows: "There was a time once, that when Ephraim spoke, there was terror (all around). He was exalted (a prince) in Israel, but when he became guilty with Baal-worship, he died". What is in view is the history of the declension of a great people. When one looks back to the days of David and Solomon we see statements such as that made by the Queen of Sheba, "The half has not been told me..." The days of Israel's purity and faithfulness were days of her power! From the first sin, mentioned in 1, it develops more and more 2, and this is followed ultimately by the two 'therefore's' in 3 and 7, leading to destruction in 9. This is a sad and mournful spectacle. What Hosea means is that there was a time once when Israel, in fellowship with her covenant God and walking in obedience to His will, was listened to in the counsels of the nations. She was a people with a message, and men heard God speak to them through her. But now, the voice had been silenced by sin, and she had lost her ministry and her message and her usefulness. This is a solemn word, full of challenge, and it can be applied in two ways. For one thing, it is not difficult to see how apposite it is in relation to the decline of influence in world affairs that Britain has suffered in the past few decades, through the loss of spiritual capital and moral integrity. Time was when the British lion made the nations of the world tremble when it roared; but it has become almost a commonplace for other nations to speak contemptuously of twisting the lion's tail with impunity. For another thing, Hosea's words are even more solemn as a commentary on the decline in spiritual influence that the Church - and individual ministers within it - may suffer through loss of consecration to the Divine will. This latter point will merit further consideration, in tomorrow's Note.

67) 13:1-3

Loss of consecration, as spoken of in the previous note, is well illustrated in the story of Samson, in Judges 13 ff. That tempestuous judge lost the anointing of the Spirit of God by his carelessness, and his crass dabbling with forbidden things. And tragically enough, he was not aware of his loss - as the AV puts it, 'he wist not that the Lord was departed from him' (Judg. 16:20). Often, it is only when men look back, as Hosea does here, to earlier experience, that the terrible and terrifying difference is discerned. Only then, do we fully appreciate Cowper's words:

Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and His Word?

Let all of us who are called to God's holy work look back, and ask ourselves, "Is His blessing on our labours today as it once was? Is it with us today as it used to be?" How greatly we need to pray that the Lord will draw us ever more closely to Himself, and keep us true to the highest we know!

Kidner's comment on 3 is to the point: "Earlier in the book (6:4) God had likened the goodness of Ephraim and Judah to 'a morning cloud' and to the short-lived dew of dawn. Now he presses the point right home - for a nation is no more than its morals and its character. So not only their shallow resolves, but 'they' themselves, will simply vanish from the scene. What is said of them is said elsewhere of individual sinners ('like the chaff', Ps 1:4), and of all enemies of God (like 'smoke', Ps 68:2).

68) 13:4-8

Once again the contrast is made between the early days when Israel walked with God as a pilgrim people, and the time when, having entered the Promised Land, she went after false gods and corrupted herself. It is one of the things about spiritual life that this pattern should repeat itself so often in the lives of individuals. How many a man can look back to early days when God met him in grace and blessed his life - days when poverty in this world's goods meant a humble dependence and reliance on God - and compare them with later days when increasing affluence and prosperity beguiled him from his close walk with the Lord, imperceptibly drawing him into attitudes of worldliness and love of pleasure which finally blight and mar spiritual fruitfulness. This is one reason why our Lord said, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the Kingdom of God" (Mark 10:23). We should read 6 thus: "Whenever they were pastured, then were they satisfied and their hearts were lifted up; because of this they have forgotten Me". It is an easy step from this to making use of God - as we have often done - as a kind of universal Provide-All, to be approached only when something was needed. This is a prostitution of true religion which both grieves and angers the heart of God. He is God the Lord, Lord of men, not a celestial insurance policy to guarantee cover for man's every need; and faith in Him is obedience to His will, not a 'sure-fire device to get what we petulantly and peevishly crave'. Is it any wonder that this near blasphemous attitude evokes the stern and frightening response recorded in 7 and 8?

69) 13:9-13

As it stands in the AV, 9 expresses a real truth, for Israel had indeed destroyed herself by her sin. But it is better to follow J.B. Phillips, in a truer translation, "I will destroy you, Israel; who can help you? Where is your king now? Who can save you?", or G Adam Smith's rendering, "When I have destroyed thee, Israel, who then may help thee?" The reference in 11 is to the quick succession of kings in the last few years of the northern kingdom's existence, as it tottered and staggered to its destruction. The picture of the travailing woman in 13 is obscured in the AV by its rendering of the last part of the verse, which should read, "this is no time to stay in the mouth of the womb", or, as J.B. Phillips translates it, "(he) will not come out of the womb when the moment of birth is here". The meaning seems to be that in those days of crisis and opportunity Israel, by obedience to God, might have come forth to a place of destiny but instead, by her own folly, a still-birth has resulted. The years that might have been a new beginning, a rebirth, to Israel proved in the event to be her undoing and death. It is the same idea as expressed, in a different metaphor, by Shakespeare in the words, "There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune". It is possible for nations and for men to miss that tide, and when they do, opportunity passes never to return. That is how it was with Israel. And it is not difficult to think of critical occasions in our own nation's troubled history in recent years when decisions have been made, and legislation passed, that have seemed to be fateful points for the moral and spiritual welfare of our people. When the Embryo and Abortion Bills were passed some two years ago in Parliament, one public figure described the votes as indicating that the United Kingdom had opted to be a secular state, and that we could no longer be called a Christian country. Well!

70) 13:14-16

There are two different renderings and interpretations of 14, one taking the words as a promise, the other as a question and a threat. In the translations, the AV and the NIV take it as a glorious promise, and in this regard it is interesting that the Septuagint takes it in this way, and that Paul quotes the Septuagint version in his reference to the words in 1 Cor 15:55, in his triumphant challenge to death in view of the resurrection of Christ. The RSV, the NEB and J.B. Phillips all take it - with many of the commentators also - as a question, expecting the answer no, and - as Kidner points out, in his disagreement with this interpretation - thereby makes the rest of the verse merely a call for the weapons of death and do their worst against Israel. G. Adam Smith likewise interprets it in this way, as the following 'quote' makes clear: "To this simple issue has the impenitence of the people finally reduced the many possibilities of those momentous years; and their prophet leaves them looking forward to the crash which came some dozen years later in the invasion and captivity of the land. Horrible are the details, but at that period certain to follow every defeat in war." Kidner however feels very strongly that Paul's quotation of these words gives the right sense of them, and that they should be taken as a ringing challenge to 'the last enemy', signalling his doom. He points out that the Hebrew of 14a does not use the interrogative prefix, but has the form of a plain statement, and that what has been forgotten in the interpretation of these words is that one of the outstanding features of this book is its sudden changes of tone from the sternest of threats to the warmest of resolves (as cf 11:8). Indeed, says Kidner, "the over-all structure of the prophecy leads through judgment into the broad 'sunlit uplands' of the final chapter, just as in fact the disastrous history of Israel and Judah turned out to be the prelude to the very destruction of death that is promised here.

71) 14:1-3

Kidner's comment on the opening verses of the final chapter is very beautiful: "This little chapter of only nine verses, as quiet and gentle as its predecessors were tumultuous, leads us back again through the main areas of the book, this time on our way home. Israel is being beckoned, and the way is signposted with the landmarks which she passed on her spiritual journey into the far country." A fitting prelude to our study of what is a wonderful promise and prospect of restoration! This moving chapter corresponds to what Hosea wrote in 2:14-23, when he uttered the redeeming intention of the Lord with His erring and wayward people. Here, now, is how that intention – of betrothing His people to Himself in faithfulness - is to work.

Before going further, however, we have to address ourselves to a problem, which is this: Here is a chapter so rich in mercy and grace, and the promise of restoration and renewal. Yet ch.13 has given such a dark and grim picture. Indeed, as we said in studying it, the sins of Israel had brought them to the edge of disaster, and the might of Assyria was about to descend on the hapless nation to destroy it utterly, and without remedy. And the fall of Samaria did take place, in 721 BC, and the northern kingdom did disappear. To what, then, does the 14th chapter refer? There are several possible interpretations. One is to say that ch. 13 was merely an urgent threat of impending doom, and that ch. 14 was a final appeal to the erring people. As such, it would be construed as an 'eleventh hour' exhortation to Israel to turn to God before it was too late. This would make good enough sense as an interpretation, except that it does not do justice to the finality of what was said in ch. 13 about God refusing to have any further compassion on a people who had gone too far in their sin. Another possible interpretation is that this chapter speaks to a remnant that was left in the land after the main deportation took place in 721 BC. There is some evidence in 2 Kings 17:23 ff, and 2 Chron 30 that king Hezekiah sought to win over the remnant of Israel to the true worship of God, and this argues a presence in the northern kingdom of the remnant of Israel that were not deported. More on the further possibilities of interpretation in tomorrow's Note.

72) 14:1-3

Another interpretation of the problem mentioned at the beginning of the previous note is that of G. Adam Smith who thinks that this was a discourse that may have been addressed by Hosea at one of these many points when, as we know, he had hope of the people's return. Smith thinks it likely that Hosea's ministry closed with that final, hopeless proclamation in ch 13, and that no other conclusion was possible so near the fall of Samaria. But this is surely to wrest the Scriptures to suit a preconceived conclusion, and it can hardly commend itself to our minds. Indeed, it is to preclude the possibility of Hosea's looking forward beyond the captivity to a restoration in the fulness of the time, with mercy triumphing over judgment.

However we are to look at the question, however, there does seem to be a link, or echo, here with Hosea 6: 4, with its reference to the early dew that passes away at noon; for here, in 5 the Lord says, "I will be as the dew unto Israel" - the unchanging, unchangeable God, Who is evermore the same. That will preserve their 'goodness' and see to it that it will no longer pass away, but remain constant. In this regard it is also an echo of 2:20, "I will betroth thee unto Me in faithfulness". One also thinks in this connection of 7:16, and the words "They return, but not to the Most High". This time it is to be real repentance, not mere remorse. The reference in 2 to 'words' is not immediately apparent to us, since we associate words not implemented by action as being empty things ('words, words, words'). But this is not the point here; it is words as opposed to the empty, meaningless sacrifices that Israel had been offering for so long. The words were to be the expression of real penitence of heart, words of confession such as those given in 2b and 3. Confession indeed is the meaning, and significantly our English term has as its root idea the thought of speaking: to confess is to 'say the same thing as' God concerning our sin and to take the same attitude to it as God does. Significantly this confession in 2 and 3 is prompted by the Divine mercy, as the 'for' in the last phrase of 3 makes plain. It is the appeal of Fatherly love that woos and finally wins them from their idols.

73) 14:1-3

Something more should be said about the nature of true repentance. We said in yesterday's Note that to confess sin is to say the same thing about it as God says. And this involves, first of all, a recognition of the gravity of our sin and our plight. One commentator indeed suggests that in the words in 1, 'thou hast fallen by thine iniquity' the picture is given of a wounded man by the wayside and left for dead - 'sick and helpless, and ready to die' as the old hymn puts it. It is a biggish step for individuals or nations to take to recognize and concede that their case is as desperate as that; most of the time, we are like sick men who cannot be persuaded that they urgently need a doctor. There is a need, therefore, to come to terms with ourselves and accept the grim verdict as to the truth about us. Then, we are to call our sin by its proper name, call it what God calls it. This is something very unpalatable, and it takes some time before we are prepared to do so. This may be seen in the kind of words we use to describe it to ourselves - 'failings', or 'shortcomings', or such like. But the impression such words give is one which disguises the essential ugliness of sin. 'Failings' is almost a 'pretty' word, and socially quite acceptable. But when we use it to describe our sins we are saying something about them very different from the way God speaks of them.

Nor do we necessarily 'confess' our sins even when we 'own up' to them. We may say, "Yes, I did it, but I was provoked." There is a difference between admission and confession: admission can and frequently does avoid our basic responsibility for what we have done; we are putting the blame elsewhere - on circumstances, or on someone else (as Adam did in the Garden - 'the woman Thou gavest me gave me to eat...'). God does not accept such prevarications, such avoidance of responsibility. To say 'I have sinned' really means that we accept full responsibility for what we have done. Only when we do, will we really be prepared to take the same attitude to it as God does, namely abhorrence of it, and determination to turn from it fully, and once for all. That is the real issue, and we must be honest enough to recognize it to be so.

74) 14:4-6

The structure of the chapter suggests a dialogue between Israel and the Lord. To the confession in 2 and 3 He now replies the words in 4 and 5. The 'I will's' here are the counterpart of the 'I will not's' in 11:9. We should note the basis of the healing that is promised here - the turning away of the Divine anger, that is, atonement, propitiation. This can in fact be the only basis of salvation and blessing, and although Hosea does not here indicate how that atonement was to be made, and indeed could not have, yet his thought is reaching out across the centuries to the fulness of the time when Christ came to make His costly atonement on the Cross, to turn away the Divine anger from men. The root meaning of 'backsliding' (4) is stubbornness (see 4:16), and here we see it as a disease that requires healing. The word 'freely' bears witness to the fact that the ground of God's redemptive work is His sovereign love - it could not depend on any deserving they could show, for they had nothing in themselves to commend them. It is when there is nothing in men to love that God shows His love for them in Christ. The metaphors in 5 and 6 are so rich in content that we shall have to spend another day examining them. The profusion of thought in them is some indication of the wealth of the Divine love in its reconciling and healing work.

75) 14:4-6

The first of these metaphors is that of the dew (5). A dictionary definition describes dew as "the aqueous vapour or moisture which is deposited in small drops, especially during the night, from the atmosphere on the surface of bodies when they have become colder than the surrounding atmosphere". Notice particularly the phrase 'when they have become colder than the surrounding atmosphere', for this is how it had been with Israel. They had passed through the dark night of sin, and it was then that God gave this wonderful promise of refreshment and renewal. This for us can only symbolise the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life; it is He Who is the transforming 'mantle' resting on the regenerate life, giving it all its fragrance and sweetness. One of the wonderful characteristics of the dew is that it comes not once only, but day by day, night by night, renewing its life-giving ministry. So it is also with the Holy Spirit; fresh supplies of grace are required - and are available in Him - for daily needs. The reference to the lily and to Lebanon seems to be connected with the effect of the Divine dew upon Israel. Beauty on the one hand, strength on the other - these are the characteristics of a life under the control and blessing of the spirit of God. One recalls our Lord's own words about the lilies of the field in Matt 6:28, 29, which serve in this connection to amplify Hosea's metaphor, for they describe the glory and adornment that ought to rest on every believer's life. But the idea of strength is just as important; indeed there is an attractiveness in Christian life that is often the mark of fitful and changeful mood. It does not last, and it is not stable. The Spirit of God imparts strength in the sense of steadfastness and stability, a strength analogous to that of the immovable heights of Lebanon. These are the marks of true Christian maturity, the sign that the Spirit of God has done a deep work in the heart.

76) 14:6-7

Hosea's metaphor continues in 6, and the way in which he lovingly lingers over the picture conjured up makes it difficult not to see a reflection of his own aching hopes concerning his faithless wife Gomer. Beauty and strength these are the qualities of a faithful wife, not outward beauty (did Gomer have that kind of superficial attractiveness that is one of the marks of unstable character?) but inward, the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit which is in the sight of God - and of right men - of great price. Hosea's words speak as much of the beauty of character and the fragrance of true love, and the strength of a faithful heart, as of the moral and spiritual regeneration of the nation, and one is brought back to his earlier words in 2:20, "I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness". The true rendering of 7 should read, "They shall return and dwell in His shadow" - it is there, in fellowship with Him that all this renewal will take place. The opening words of the 91st Psalm comes to mind here, "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty". Renewal, growth and fruitfulness are all indicated as issuing from the new relationship established by grace. It is ever so, whether in the life of a nation or an individual. Everything worthwhile in spiritual life begins and is nourished in fellowship with God, nothing apart from it.

77) 14:8-9

The translation of 8 has difficulties in the original, the scholars tell us, and it is not certain whether it is God Who speaks, or Ephraim. It could read, "As for Ephraim, what hath he to do anymore with idols? I have answered him and look after him. I am like an evergreen cypress; from Me is thy fruit found". The difficulties of translation should not however blind us to the general sense of the words, which is plain. They express the resultant of victorious love, in that Ephraim is turned from his idols to serve the living and true God (of 1 Thess 1:9). Only Divine love can win men's hearts from idols, and if that should fail nothing else will succeed. The agony of love revealed in the book of Hosea finds its truest and deepest expression and fulfilment in the revelation of the Cross. "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). This is the love that woos, and wins, because it suffers and agonises and gives itself utterly for the objects of its love.

"What can strip the seeming glory
From the idols of the earth?
Not a sense of right or duty,
But a sight of peerless worth.

'Tis the look that melted Peter
'Tis the face that Stephen saw,
Tis the heart that wept with Mary,
Can alone from idols draw.

Draw and win and fill completely,
Till the cup o'erflows the brim;
What have we to do with idols,
Who have companied with Him?"