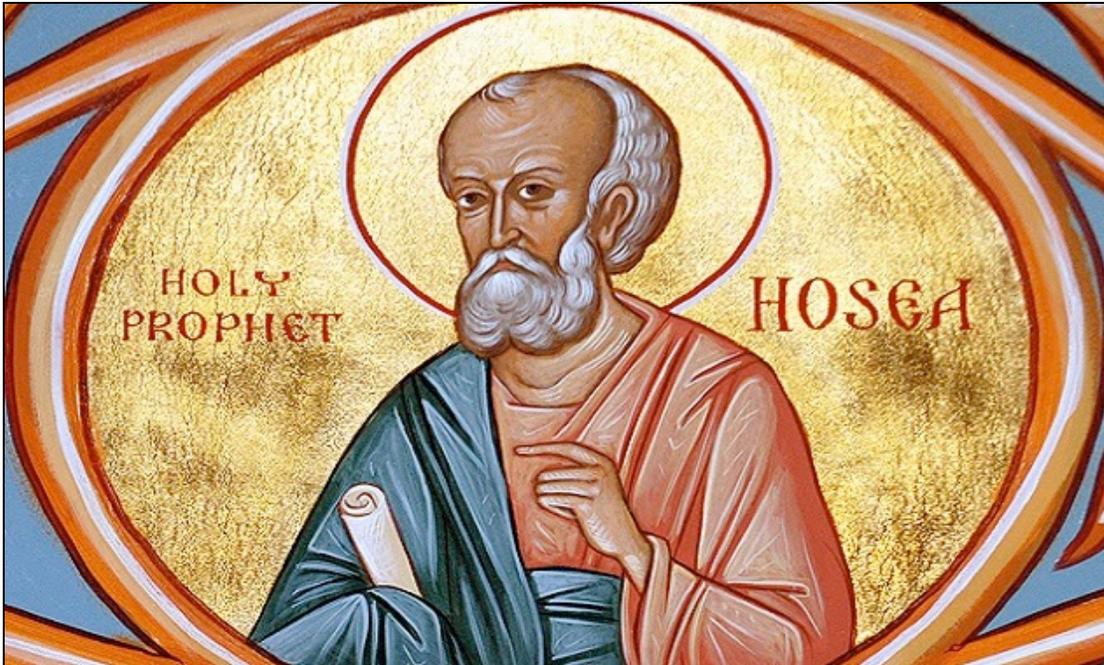


INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW



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A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Studies in Hosea: Introduction and Overview
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Hosea: Introduction and Overview

Hosea is the first of the Old Testament “minor prophets” – so-called because of the length of their writings in comparison with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Hosea is a good place to begin in understanding the twelve minor prophets, since he addresses nearly every theme broached in the remaining eleven.

Hosea brought the Word of God to the people of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, during the latter years of the 8th century BC. He condemned the sin and hypocrisy of the people, warned them of God’s judgment, and called them to return to Him through repentance and obedience.

Perhaps more than any of the other minor prophets, Hosea’s message exposes the heart of the matter between God and His sinful people: Though they worshiped God, after a fashion, but they did not know Him. Israel did not love God, but was an adulterous wife, seeking the companionship of false gods and following in their pagan ways.

In this first installment in our series on Hosea, we’ll examine the primary themes addressed in his book. Then we’ll take a closer look at his message, section by section, chapter by chapter.

We are happy to provide *Scriptorium* studies in PDF format at no charge. We hope you will find them helpful and encouraging as you press on in your journey toward spiritual maturity with the Lord.

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If you find these studies, or any of our other resources, helpful, we hope you will consider making a contribution to help support our work. You can do so by using the donate button at the website or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

We hope you find this study of Hosea instructive and helpful to equip you for your walk with and work for the Lord. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Tumult and Upheaval

Hosea 4.1, 6

Hear the word of the LORD,

You children of Israel,

For the LORD brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land:

“There is no truth or mercy

Or knowledge of God in the land...

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.

Because you have rejected knowledge,

I also will reject you from being priest for Me;

Because you have forgotten the law of your God,

I also will forget your children.”

Hosea is the first of the twelve “minor prophets.” We refer to these twelve as “minor” only because their writings are, in the main, shorter in length than the four “major” prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel). But there is nothing “minor” about their message, either as it was intended for ancient Israel, or as it remains in force for the people of God today.

A contemporary of Amos, Hosea began his ministry late in the 8th century BC, under Jeroboam II and continued into the reign of Hezekiah in Judah. Thus he began his work in a time of great headiness in Israel (cf. 2 Kgs. 14.23-29), but that headiness would soon give way to instability, upheaval, and national disaster. Many kings followed Jeroboam during the time of Hosea’s ministry, but he does not list them all (cf. 2 Kgs. 15-17). Hosea begins his prophecy by mentioning Jeroboam for perhaps two reasons. First, in so doing he invokes the memory of Jeroboam I, who led Israel into rebellion against the house of David, and set the nation on a course of drift from the covenant of God. Second, though his preaching began during a season of political strength, it served as a warning that political strength is no guarantee of stability when a nation has turned its back on God.

At the time Hosea’s ministry was coming to an end, Israel’s doom was sealed, and Judah was beginning to turn from God just as Israel had done (2 Kgs. 17.18, 19). Thus, while Israel is Hosea’s primary audience, the warning to persist in covenant faithfulness would also have been important for Judah. Hosea’s message from the beginning emphasizes the mercy and love of God to his adulterous people. And, while he promises that Judah will not fall like Israel did, at least, not during the time of his ministry (Hos. 1.7), still, they should not fail to heed his message and warnings about turning away from the knowledge of God.

Moreover, even though Israel is to be judged, they will be restored, and restored to Judah as one people of God under one Leader (Hos. 13.9-11; Hos. 14). So the Word of judgment carries with it the Word of hope (Hos. 1.10, 11), because it is the Word of God Who cannot deny His undying love for His people. Israel and Judah may be unfaithful to God, but God can never be unfaithful to His Word of promise or Himself. They are unfaithful, like Hosea’s wife; but God is faithful and forgiving, like Hosea.

Read Hosea 1, 2

Read these two chapters in a single sitting. Does this seem to you like a strange way for a prophet to begin his ministry? How was God using this situation to prepare Hosea for his ministry?

Glory to Glory

Even in the midst of sinful situations, God promises to show His glory. How does Hosea’s call and family situation encourage you to seek the glory of God today?

Closing Prayer

Remember me, O LORD, with the favor *You have toward* Your people.

Oh, visit me with Your salvation,

That I may see the benefit of Your chosen ones,

That I may rejoice in the gladness of Your nation,

That I may glory with Your inheritance.

We have sinned with our fathers,

We have committed iniquity,

We have done wickedly.

Our fathers in Egypt did not understand Your wonders;

They did not remember the multitude of Your mercies,

But rebelled by the sea—the Red Sea.

Nevertheless He saved them for His name's sake,

That He might make His mighty power known.

Psalm 106.4-8

Observations, notes, questions:

2 The Role of the Prophet

Hosea 1.1

The word of the LORD that came to Hosea the son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel.

God had promised through Moses that He would raise up prophets like Moses to minister His Word to the people of Israel (cf. Deut. 18.15-22). Ultimately, God was pointing ahead to the coming of Jesus Christ; however, until that day, He would send numerous prophets to the people of Israel and Judah, to remind them of His grace and goodness, counsel them in the path of obedience, and reproach and warn them when they strayed from Him.

Prophets were specifically called by God to their work; but we do not know in every case how this occurred. For some, like Isaiah and Ezekiel, God's call was very dramatic (cf. Is. 6; Ezek. 1, 2). Other prophets, like Hosea, report hearing God's Word in some form, preparing and directing them to proclaim His Word to the people (cf. Jer. 1; Amos 1.1, 2; etc.). Some outward token or summons, coupled with a deep inner conviction (cf. Amos 3.7, 8; 7.14-16) moved and sustained these men as they preached and taught the Word of God, often in the face of resistance and hostility.

The prophet's role in Israel and Judah was to bring the Word of God to the people, especially, as we shall see, to those who served in leadership roles – priests, rulers, and prophets. Thus, the prophets often engaged in confrontations of power with the most powerful people of their day. But their confrontations did not take the form of political, but of spiritual power. Their message was not always heeded, and, not infrequently, the Lord's prophets suffered injury or condemnation at the hands of those to whom the Lord sent them with His Word.

Certainly the Spirit of God was operative upon and within the prophets He sent to His people, especially those who left records of their ministry in the various books of the Bible that bear their names (cf. 2 Pet. 1.19-21). Moreover, because the prophets embodied, in a certain sense, the very Word of God, they anticipate in their lives, as much as in their message, the coming of the ultimate Prophet, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus, the words of the Old Testament prophets, like Hosea, have enduring significance. While intended for a particular people, living in a particular place and time, the *spiritual* message of the prophets remains important for God's people in all ages, including our own.

Read Hosea 3 and 4

What is the primary charge God brings against His people? In what sense did the people of Israel not "know" the Lord? What did they "know" instead of Him?

Glory to Glory

Eternal life is knowing God and Jesus Christ (Jn. 17.3). How does your "knowledge" of God differ from that of the people to whom Hosea prophesied?

Closing Prayer

Because you have made the LORD, *who is* my refuge,
Even the Most High, your dwelling place,
No evil shall befall you,
Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling;
For He shall give His angels charge over you,
To keep you in all your ways.

In *their* hands they shall bear you up,
Lest you dash your foot against a stone.
You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra,
The young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot.
“Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him;
I will set him on high, because he has known My name.
He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him;
I *will be* with him in trouble;
I will deliver him and honor him.
With long life I will satisfy him,
And show him My salvation.”

Psalm 91.9-16

Observations, notes, questions:

3 The Message of the Prophet

Hosea 14.9

Who is wise?

Let him understand these things.

Who is *prudent*?

Let him know them.

For the ways of the Lord are right;

The righteous walk in them,

But transgressors stumble in them.

The message of Hosea and all the prophets may be summarized as follows: remind, reprove, recall, and restore.

The first duty of the prophet was to *remind* the people of God and His grace. God dramatized the nature of His relationship with Israel in the case of Hosea, by showing how He pursued them, a discarded and sinful people, and continued to love them even as they turned from Him to (spiritual) adultery. The grace of God, and the historical peg of His covenant, provides the backdrop against which all the messages of the prophets come to His people.

As in the days of Hosea, so with all the prophets, the people of God had either *forgotten* His grace or *abused* and *scorned* it, preferring false gods and the convenient morality they endorsed, to the truth and holiness of God. It thus fell to prophets like Hosea to haul Israel's sins into the light of God's truth, to *reprove* the people and to show the many ways they had broken His Law and spurned His grace. The purpose of these reproofs was to shame the people into turning from their wickedness and to seek the Lord and His favor.

Thus, each prophet includes some specific call for repentance, to *recall* Israel to the grace of the Lord by insisting they turn from their specific sins, whatever they might have been, of which they were guilty. In Hosea's day, the worship of Baal, the pagan god of fertility, was the primary sin standing between them and restoration with the Lord.

Finally, the prophets held out the prospect and even the promise of restoration. A day is coming, Hosea insisted, when God would restore His people, pursuing and redeeming them from their sin as surely as he had gone to recover his fallen wife. God has called His people into being, in order to bless them, that He might be glorified in them throughout the earth. The prophets thus continued the message of promise, hope, and restoration which began with Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 and Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, and 17.

Read Hosea 5 and 6

In the midst of Israel's rebellion against the Lord, He declares the depths of His love for them. We are never so far removed from the Lord, that His love does not come seeking us in some way. For what specific sins does Hosea reprove Israel in chapters 5 and 6?

Glory to Glory

We turn away from the glory of God whenever we turn to anything other than Him as our hope, joy, confidence, and trust. Are any such "idols" present in your own life?

Closing Prayer

Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us,
But to Your name give glory,
Because of Your mercy,

Because of Your truth.
Why should the Gentiles say,
“So where *is* their God?”
But our God *is* in heaven;
He does whatever He pleases.
Their idols *are* silver and gold,
The work of men’s hands.
They have mouths, but they do not speak;
Eyes they have, but they do not see;
They have ears, but they do not hear;
Noses they have, but they do not smell;
They have hands, but they do not handle;
Feet they have, but they do not walk;
Nor do they mutter through their throat.
Those who make them are like them;
So is everyone who trusts in them.
O Israel, trust in the LORD;
He *is* their help and their shield.

Psalm 115.1-9

Observations, notes, questions:

4 God's Covenant

Hosea 8.1-4

*“Set the trumpet to your mouth!
He shall come like an eagle against the house of the LORD,
Because they have transgressed My covenant
And rebelled against My law.
Israel will cry to Me,
‘My God, we know You!’
Israel has rejected the good;
The enemy will pursue him.
They set up kings, but not by Me;
They made princes, but I did not acknowledge them.
From their silver and gold
They made idols for themselves—
That they might be cut off.*

The people to whom Hosea prophesied expressed shock that God had some complaint against them. Didn't they “know” Him? They worshiped Him, why, they even had *two* places to worship Him, as compared with only one in Judah. They brought Him offerings. They supported His priests and served His kings. Why was He upset with them?

The answer was simple: Outward appearances notwithstanding, they had violated the terms of God's covenant, and they were breaking His Law.

God's covenant is His special bond with His people. It was in effect in the Garden of Eden, though not mentioned by name. God engaged Noah in His covenant, and “sealed” its promises to him with the rainbow. He formally declared the broad and long parameters of His covenant with Abraham, then further elaborated it with Moses and David.

In His covenant God binds Himself to a people whom He has chosen, redeemed, and called by grace alone. He prepares a rich palette of blessings and promises for them, commanding them to believe Him, trust Him, and obey Him, so that they might enjoy all that He has in store for them. Especially, God intends His people to know, love, enjoy, serve, proclaim, and glorify Him. He promises to be their God and to make them His people.

But the people must remain faithful to the Lord, trusting in the reliability of His Word, remembering His grace and goodness, and walking within the parameters of love for Him and one another which He details in His Law.

In Hosea's day, the people of Israel were trying to have it both ways – a little bit of God and His covenant and a whole lot of the pagan world and its raw sensuality. It fell to Hosea to remind them that God alone decided the terms of His covenant with Israel, and if they wanted to realize the full and abundant life He had in store for them, they would have to quit their pagan ways and return to Him with all their souls and strength.

Read Hosea 7 and 8

How many of the Ten Commandments did Israel violate, as reported in these two chapters alone? How serious is God about His people keeping His Law?

Glory to Glory

We don't keep God's Law in order to *be* saved, but because we *are* saved. Explain. How does keeping the Law of God relate to His glory?

Closing Prayer

Deal bountifully with Your servant,
That I may live and keep Your word.
Open my eyes, that I may see
Wondrous things from Your law.
I *am* a stranger in the earth;
Do not hide Your commandments from me.
My soul breaks with longing
For Your judgments at all times.
You rebuke the proud—the cursed,
Who stray from Your commandments.
Remove from me reproach and contempt,
For I have kept Your testimonies.

Psalm 119.17-22

Observations, notes, questions:

5 A Religion of Convenience

1 Kings 12.26-31

And Jeroboam said in his heart, “Now the kingdom may return to the house of David: If these people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn back to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and go back to Rehoboam king of Judah.” Therefore the king asked advice, made two calves of gold, and said to the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!” And he set up one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Now this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one as far as Dan. He made shrines on the high places, and made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi.

The nation of Israel had, from its beginnings under Jeroboam, embraced a religion of convenience. Jeroboam (whose memory Hosea invokes in mentioning Jeroboam II, Hos. 1.1), understood that, in order to command the allegiance of the ten breakaway tribes, he'd have to cater to their ingrained religious sentiments. He calculated that the people of Israel were not very deep religiously, that is, that they were not all that committed to the covenant relationship God had established with His people, and which He had enlarged through David. After all, they followed him rather easily in rebellion against the Davidic heir.

Still, the people had a religious bent, and how better to employ the device of religion toward political ends than to make it easier and more “democratic” for the people to fulfill their religious obligations. Jeroboam made calves, like the one Aaron made while Moses lingered in the presence of the Lord. He created two centers of worship, so that it would not be “too much” for the people to travel and make their offerings. And he opened up the priesthood to all comers.

On this religious footprint, then, the nation engaged in all manner of compromises with the surrounding pagan religions, so that, by Hosea's day, while the people in Israel still maintained a form of worship of the one true God, their main religion was paganism, specifically, Baal worship. And how convenient was that? Baal was the pagan god of fertility and so one of the ways of coaxing him to “do his thing” was for people to engage in sexual intercourse as part of the worship of Baal. Temple prostitutes were employed – female and male – to facilitate “worship.” And to add to the people's convenience, places for “worship” were set up all over the nation – under trees, on high hills, even on rooftops (Hos. 4.11-19).

Naturally, the “demands” of this religion were merely formal; no binding ethic accompanied the worship of Baal, so the people were free to do as they thought best, whatever was convenient for them. Thus every one of God's commandments was set aside as the people indulged in all manner of transgression against their neighbors.

Spiritual adultery – “harlotry” – was Israel's great offense. They had been guilty of it from the beginning, and with each successive political administration, the situation only got worse. Hosea could see that God had had enough, and that His judgment was about to fall on His adulterous people.

Read Hosea 9, 10

Israel's rulers, prophets, and priests have not only failed her, they have betrayed her, and now the judgment of God will fall. Still, how can you see God's great longing for His people, even as He prepares to judge them (cf. Hos. 10.12)?

Glory to Glory

How might you be able to tell when you were being tempted toward a “religion of convenience”? How does Hosea 10.12 counsel you to break free of such a snare?

Closing Prayer

Remember this, *that* the enemy has reproached, O LORD,
And *that* a foolish people has blasphemed Your name.
Oh, do not deliver the life of Your turtledove to the wild beast!
Do not forget the life of Your poor forever.
Have respect to the covenant;
For the dark places of the earth are full of the haunts of cruelty.
Oh, do not let the oppressed return ashamed!
Let the poor and needy praise Your name.
Arise, O God, plead Your own cause;
Remember how the foolish man reproaches You daily.
Do not forget the voice of Your enemies;
The tumult of those who rise up against You increases continually.

Psalm 74.18-23

Observations, notes, questions:

6 The Shepherds of Israel

Hosea 5.1

“Hear this, O priests!

Take heed, O house of Israel!

Give ear, O house of the king!

For yours is the judgment,

Because you have been a snare to Mizpah

And a net spread on Tabor.

Israel had broken covenant with God, turning to pagan idols, practicing a religion of convenience, and engaging in all manner of transgression of God’s Law. Though all the people of Israel were guilty in the eyes of God, special blame lay at the feet of the shepherds of God’s flock – priest, prophets, and rulers.

The shepherds of Israel had become a “snare” to the nation, causing the people to stumble and become trapped in idolatry and wickedness. They were not leading the people to trust and follow the Lord (5.4), and they had cut the nation off from its heritage and history, teaching the ways of men rather than those of the Lord (5.10, 11). The priests presided at the wicked and lascivious worship of pagan deities (6.9). Their rulers were wicked, drunken, and politically pragmatic (7.3, 5, 11; 8.4). Their prophets were fools and liars (9.7-9). The result of such wicked leadership was that the entire nation had become ensnared in lies, deceit, and wickedness (11.12).

The wrath of God was about to fall on His people because they had become corrupt, disobedient, weak, and a byword to the nations. And, in large part, this situation was the result of wicked, self-interested leadership.

Leaders bear special responsibility before the Lord, because the people look to them to guide them in the paths of the Lord. Israel’s leaders, expedient and pragmatic from the beginning, set aside the plain teaching of God’s Word and embraced the practices and ways of the surrounding pagan cultures, thinking this would enable them to get along with their neighbors. Instead, their compromises led to the collapse of the nation under the hand of God’s discipline.

The leaders of God’s people today should pay special attention to the words of prophets like Hosea.

Read Hosea 11, 12

In the midst of judgment God holds out the promise of restoration, calling the people to remember His works in the past and the faithful words of His prophets. Look ahead, look back, return to the Lord: Does this suggest a pattern for our daily walk with and work for the Lord?

Glory to Glory

The people of Israel provoked Him to anger (12.14) because they would not listen to the words of His prophets. How could they know God in His glory and glorify Him in their lives if they would not heed His Word? How does such a warning apply to you?

Closing Prayer

We do not see our signs;

There is no longer any prophet;

Nor *is there* any among us who knows how long.

O God, how long will the adversary reproach?

Will the enemy blaspheme Your name forever?

Why do You withdraw Your hand, even Your right hand?

Psalm 74.9-11

Observations, notes, questions:

7 Restoration

Hosea 11.8

“How can I give you up, Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, Israel?

How can I make you like Admah?

How can I set you like Zeboiim?

My heart churns within Me;

My sympathy is stirred.”

As terrible as was Israel’s rebellion, and as dire as were the judgments God would bring against them, still, the prophet is never very far from a word of comfort and the promise of restoration.

After all, Israel was God’s people only because of His grace, only, that is, because of the kind of God He is. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not fickle and domineering, so that He has to be continually placated and cajoled, like the gods of paganism. He has spoken His Word and entered into His covenant with His people. He is faithful, and He does not change.

So while the people may rebel, and thus incur the discipline of the Lord, His promise will not fail. Though wrath and judgment must come, yet God will restore His people to Himself once again. Especially is the promise of restoration held out for a day when all the people of God will be united in one flock with a Leader to shepherd them Whom God Himself will provide.

Here’s an outline of the book of Hosea:

Part 1, Preparation: Hosea 1-3

God calls Hosea and gives an overview of His charge against the nation of Israel. God uses Hosea’s own experience to symbolize and emphasize the nature and importance of the message he must proclaim.

Part 2, Charge, Consequence, and Call to Repentance: Hosea 4-6

Hosea issues a broadside against the nation of Israel, in which he outlines God’s charges against them and calls them to turn in repentance to the Lord.

Part 3, God’s Charges Detailed: Hosea 7-10

Hosea provides more detail both of God’s charges against His people and of the judgment He is preparing for them.

Part 4, In the Midst of Judgment, Hope: Hosea 11-14

God wraps His people in His love and promises that, after they have suffered for their sin, He will restore them to Himself again.

Read Hosea 13, 14

How many different images can you identify by which God assures His people of His love? How can such images encourage us in our walk with and work for the Lord?

Glory to Glory

How and why does God discipline His people today (Heb. 12.3-11)? What forms might we expect this discipline to take? How can we know when we’ve come under the discipline of God? How should we respond to God’s discipline when it falls upon us?

Closing Prayer

O LORD God of hosts,
How long will You be angry
Against the prayer of Your people?
You have fed them with the bread of tears,
And given them tears to drink in great measure.
You have made us a strife to our neighbors,
And our enemies laugh among themselves.
Restore us, O God of hosts;
Cause Your face to shine,
And we shall be saved!

Psalm 80.4-7

Observations, notes, questions:

For reflection or discussion

1. By now you should have read the entire book of Hosea. What are some of the most important observations, insights, or questions you've recorded in your Bible or notebook?
2. What are God's primary complaints against Israel? Why is it important that we understand these in our day?
3. How did God use Hosea's life as preparation for and symbol of his message? What does this suggest about our work of *being* witnesses and *proclaiming* the Good News?
4. Christ is the answer to Israel's problem, and He is in focus, albeit dimly, in the book of Hosea. Which aspects of Hosea lead us to look forward to the coming of Christ? How is Jesus the answer to "what ails" the nation of Israel?
5. What are your personal goals for this study? What do you hope to learn? How will you know when you are gaining the benefit God intends from this study of Hosea?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.