

Introduction to Hosea Chapter 4

The Lawsuit of the LORD: No Truth, No Steadfast Love, No Knowledge of God in the Land

Hosea chapter 4 opens a new and dramatically different section of the book. Chapters 1 through 3 were organized around the governing metaphor of the marriage — the enacted parable of Hosea and Gomer, the indictment and pursuit of chapter 2, the compressed gospel of chapter 3. Beginning in chapter 4 and running through chapter 14, the book moves into the extended prophetic speeches that elaborate the indictment, the discipline, and the promise that the first three chapters established in biographical and metaphorical form. Chapter 4 is the formal opening of the legal case that the LORD brings against His people — a covenant lawsuit in the tradition of the ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaty, in which the great king calls the vassal to account for the violation of the covenant terms.

The chapter opens with the most comprehensive and most devastating summary of the covenant violation in the book: there is no faithfulness, no steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land. These three — faithfulness (*emet*), steadfast love (*hesed*), and knowledge of God (*da'at Elohim*) — are not a random list of virtues. They are the three most essential expressions of the covenant relationship from the human side: the truthfulness and reliability that covenant life requires, the covenant loyalty and love that binds the people to one another and to God, and the intimate personal knowing of the God of the covenant that the relationship is designed to produce and sustain. Their absence is not merely the absence of three virtues. It is the diagnosis of a community whose covenant relationship with God has collapsed at its most fundamental level.

The chapter moves through three interconnected diagnoses. The first (verses 1–3) is the summary indictment: the absence of the covenant virtues and the catalogue of the sins that fill the vacuum their absence creates. The second (verses 4–10) is the specific indictment of the priests, who bear the primary responsibility for the knowledge of God that is absent — the teachers of the law who have rejected knowledge, forgotten the law, and fed on the sin of the people rather than leading them away from it. The third (verses 11–19) is the description of the spiritual harlotry that has captivated the people — the wine and whoredom that have taken away the heart, the high places where the worship of the Baals has replaced the worship of the LORD, and the instruction to Judah to stay away from the contagion that Israel's unfaithfulness has become.

The theological contribution of chapter 4 to the book is the identification of the knowledge of God as the central diagnostic category of the covenant relationship. The absence of the knowledge of God in verse 1 is the diagnosis that underlies everything else in the chapter: the swearing and lying and murder and stealing and adultery of verse 2 are the symptoms; the absent knowledge of God is the disease. And the specific responsibility of the priests for the transmission and maintenance of that knowledge — and their catastrophic failure to fulfill that responsibility — is the chapter's most direct and most urgent pastoral indictment. The people are

destroyed for lack of knowledge, and the lack of knowledge is the failure of the ordained teachers of that knowledge.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We come to Hosea chapter 4 as people who live in a land that bears a remarkable resemblance to the land that this chapter diagnoses. We know what it is to live in a community where the faithfulness and the steadfast love and the knowledge of God are scarce — where the covenant virtues that should characterize the people of God are conspicuous by their absence, where the swearing and the lying and the violence and the sexual immorality of verse 2 are the water in which the culture swims. And we come as people who are aware that the primary diagnosis of this condition is not the moral failure of the population at large but the failure of the teachers of the knowledge of God to teach it, guard it, and live it.

Lord, let the indictment of the priests in this chapter fall first on those of us who are responsible for the transmission of the knowledge of God in our own generation. Let us not be the priests who have rejected knowledge, who have forgotten the law, who have fed on the sin of the people rather than confronting it. Let the my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge of verse 6 be the most urgent pastoral alarm in our ears — the alarm that drives us back to the knowledge of God itself, to the study and the proclamation and the embodiment of the truth that the people need in order to live the covenant life that the knowledge of God is designed to produce.

And let the chapter's description of the spiritual harlotry — the wine and whoredom that take away the heart, the high places where the wrong worship replaces the right one — be the mirror in which we examine our own devotional lives. What has taken away the heart that should be directed toward You? What are the high places of our own age where the worship of the things You give has replaced the worship of the One who gives them? Let the diagnosis of chapter 4 produce the return to the knowledge of God that is the only remedy for the condition it describes.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Hosea 4:1–3

The Formal Indictment: No Faithfulness, No Steadfast Love, No Knowledge of God

*(1) Hear the word of the LORD, ye children of Israel:
for the LORD hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land,
because there is no truth, and no mercy,*

and no knowledge of God in the land.

(2) By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery, they break out, and blood toucheth blood.

(3) Therefore shall the land mourn, and every one that dwelleth therein shall languish, with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven; yea, the fishes of the sea also shall be taken away.

The Context

The Hear the word of the LORD that opens verse 1 is the formal summons of the covenant lawsuit. The Hebrew term controversy — *rib* — is the technical legal term for a legal case or dispute, and its use here signals that what follows is not merely a prophetic speech of warning but a formal covenant lawsuit in which the LORD is the plaintiff, Israel is the defendant, and the land itself is the court. The form of the *rib* oracle is borrowed from the ancient Near Eastern legal tradition in which the great king summons the vassal to answer for violations of the treaty that established the covenant relationship. The LORD is bringing the case to court, and the charge sheet is the three-fold absence of verse 1.

The three absent virtues — *emet* (faithfulness, truth, reliability), *hesed* (steadfast love, covenant loyalty, lovingkindness), and *da'at Elohim* (knowledge of God) — are the positive content of the covenant relationship from the human side. *Emet* is the faithfulness and truthfulness that make covenant life possible: the reliability of the person who keeps their word, who does not deceive, who can be trusted. *Hesed* is the covenant loyalty that binds the community together in mutual obligation and care: the love that keeps the covenant even when it is costly. And *da'at Elohim* is the intimate personal knowing of the God of the covenant that is both the foundation of the other two and the goal of the entire relationship. Their absence is the collapse of the covenant community from the inside.

The sins of verse 2 — swearing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery — are the five violations of the Decalogue (the third, ninth, sixth, eighth, and seventh commandments), listed not in their canonical order but in the order of their social impact. And the blood touches blood is the image of crimes so relentless and so numerous that the blood of one victim has not yet dried before the blood of the next is shed — an unbroken chain of violence that has overwhelmed the social order. The sins are not the cause of the absent knowledge. They are the consequence: when the knowledge of God is absent, the Decalogue is violated, because the Decalogue is the social expression of the covenant relationship whose knowledge has been lost.

The consequence of verse 3 extends beyond the human community to the created order: the land mourns, its inhabitants languish, the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and even the fish of the sea are taken away. The ecological consequences of the covenant violation is one of the most distinctive features of Hosea's theology: the covenant between the LORD and Israel includes the land, and when the covenant is violated, the land suffers the consequences alongside the people.

This is not mere environmental observation. It is the theology of the creation order in which the human community's relationship with God and the non-human creation's flourishing are inseparably bound together.

Plain American English

Listen to what the LORD has to say, people of Israel! The LORD has a case to bring against the people of this land: There is no faithfulness, no love, and no acknowledgment of God anywhere in the land. There is only cursing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery. Violence is everywhere, and one murder follows right after another. That's why the land dries up, and everything living in it is wasting away — the wild animals, the birds of the sky, even the fish of the sea are dying off.

Key Observations

“There is no truth, and no mercy, and no knowledge of God in the land”: This signifies **The Three-Fold Absence Is the Most Comprehensive Available Diagnosis of a Covenant Community in Collapse — the Loss of Faithfulness, Steadfast Love, and the Knowledge of God Is the Loss of Everything That Makes the Covenant Community What It Is.**

The three absent virtues of verse 1 are not three items on a list of desirable qualities. They are the three constitutive elements of the covenant community from the human side: the faithfulness that makes covenant life possible, the steadfast love that holds the community together in mutual obligation, and the knowledge of God that is both the foundation and the goal of the entire relationship. Their absence is not the absence of three virtues among many. It is the collapse of the covenant community at its most fundamental level. And the order of the three is theologically significant: faithfulness first (the foundation of reliable human community), steadfast love second (the relational expression of the covenant bond), knowledge of God third (the ultimate ground on which the first two rest and toward which they point). When the knowledge of God is absent, the steadfast love erodes and the faithfulness collapses — and the community that remains is the community of verse 2: five violations of the Decalogue and blood touching blood.

“By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery, they break out, and blood toucheth blood”: This signifies **The Catalogue of Covenant Violations Is the Social Consequence of the Absent Knowledge — the Decalogue Is the Social Expression of the Covenant Relationship, and When the Relationship Collapses the Decalogue Is Violated.**

The five sins of verse 2 are five of the Ten Commandments listed in reverse social order: from the covenant with God (swearing falsely, violating the third commandment) through the covenant with the neighbor (lying, murder, stealing, adultery). Their listing is not the random accumulation of moral failures but the systematic tracing of the Decalogue's collapse when the knowledge of God that grounds it is absent. The Decalogue is not a free-standing moral code that functions independently of the covenant relationship with God. It is the social expression of the covenant relationship — the shape that a community takes when it lives in the knowledge of the God whose character the Decalogue reflects. When the knowledge is absent, the social shape collapses. The five sins of verse 2 are the debris of the collapse.

“The land shall mourn, and every one that dwelleth therein shall languish, with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven; yea, the fishes of the sea also shall be taken away”: This signifies **The Ecological Consequences of the Covenant Violation Are the Expression of the Theology of the Creation Order in Which the Human Community’s Relationship with God and the Non-Human Creation’s Flourishing Are Inseparably Bound.**

The extension of the consequences of the covenant violation to the non-human creation — the beasts, the birds, the fish — is one of the most theologically distinctive features of Hosea’s prophetic vision. The creation is not a neutral backdrop against which the human drama of covenant and violation plays out. It is a participant in the covenant order, responsive to the condition of the human community that is its steward and that is meant to mediate the blessing of the covenant God to it. When the human community violates the covenant, the creation suffers. When the covenant is restored, the creation flourishes — as the chain of hearing in Hosea 2:21–22 promised. The ecological theology of Hosea 4:3 is the dark side of the creation blessing of Hosea 2:21–22: the same creation order that produces the chain of blessing produces the chain of mourning when the covenant is broken at its human link.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Read the Three-Fold Absence as the Diagnostic Tool for Evaluating the Covenant Health of Any Community — Church, Family, or Society: The three-fold absence of verse 1 — no faithfulness, no steadfast love, no knowledge of God — is the most efficient diagnostic tool available for assessing the covenant health of any human community. The church that lacks faithfulness — whose members cannot be relied upon, whose leadership does not keep its word — is the church in which the first element of the covenant community has collapsed. The church that lacks steadfast love — whose members do not bear one another’s burdens, whose community dissolves under the pressure of conflict — is the church in which the second element has collapsed. And the church that lacks the knowledge of God — whose worship is formal and whose members do not know the God they are worshipping — is the church in which the third and foundational element has collapsed. Apply the diagnostic. The diagnosis reveals the treatment.

2. Recognize the Social Consequences of the Absent Knowledge of God as the Evidence That Theology Is Not Merely Academic but the Foundation of the Social Order: The movement from the absent knowledge of God in verse 1 to the five covenant violations in verse 2 to the ecological mourning of verse 3 is the most direct available demonstration of the thesis that theology is not merely academic but foundational to the social order. When the knowledge of God collapses, the Decalogue collapses with it, and the social consequences are the swearing and lying and murder and stealing and adultery that the Decalogue was designed to prevent. The contemporary culture’s assumption that morality can be maintained without the theological foundation that grounds it — that a society can have the fruits of the covenant without the covenant relationship that produces them — is precisely the assumption that Hosea 4:1–3 refutes. The absent knowledge produces the present violence. The restoration of the knowledge is the restoration of the possibility of the social order.

3. Take Seriously the Ecological Dimension of the Covenant Theology — the Condition of the Non-Human Creation Reflects the Condition of the Human Community's Relationship with the Covenant God:

The mourning of the land and the languishing of the beasts and the birds and the fish in verse 3 is not merely an ancient agricultural observation about the consequences of drought. It is the theological claim that the non-human creation is included in the covenant order and responsive to its condition. The contemporary church's engagement with ecological concerns — whether embraced with enthusiasm or dismissed with suspicion — is better served by the theology of Hosea 4:3 than by any purely secular environmental framework. The creation mourns when the covenant is broken. The creation flourishes when the covenant is restored. The ecological condition of the land is the barometer of the spiritual condition of the community that inhabits it.

How This Relates to Today

The three-fold absence of verse 1 reads, to the contemporary reader, as a description of the present condition of Western culture with an accuracy that is disconcerting. The erosion of truthfulness and institutional trust (no faithfulness), the collapse of the community bonds that sustained the social fabric of previous generations (no steadfast love), and the practical atheism of a culture that acknowledges God nominally while living without reference to His character or His claims (no knowledge of God) — these are the diagnostic markers of a society that has lost the covenant foundation of its social order. The prophetic diagnosis of eighth-century BC Israel is the diagnosis of twenty-first-century AD Western culture, because the collapse of the covenant community takes the same form in every age: the absence of the three foundational virtues produces the same catalogue of social consequences.

The ecological dimension of verse 3 is also one of the most urgently relevant features of the passage for the contemporary church. The connection between the spiritual condition of the human community and the ecological condition of the natural world is the theological framework that neither the secular environmentalist nor the religiously indifferent conservative tends to employ, but that Hosea 4:3 establishes with the full authority of the prophetic word. The mourning of the land is not unrelated to the absence of the knowledge of God. They are causally connected in the covenant theology that undergirds the entire prophetic tradition. The church that takes Hosea 4:3 seriously will engage the ecological crisis not as a political cause but as a theological symptom — the mourning of the land that is the creation's response to the covenant violation of the community that was meant to be its faithful steward.

Key Lesson: **The formal covenant lawsuit of Hosea 4:1–3 opens with the most comprehensive diagnosis in the book: no faithfulness, no steadfast love, no knowledge of God in the land — the three constitutive elements of the covenant community from the human side, whose absence produces the five Decalogue violations of verse 2 and the ecological mourning of verse 3, establishing the foundational thesis of the entire chapter that the knowledge of God is not merely one virtue among many but the ground on which the entire covenant community rests.**

The Indictment of the Priests: My People Are Destroyed for Lack of Knowledge

- (4) Yet let no man strive, nor reprove another:
for thy people are as they that strive with the priest.*
- (5) Therefore shalt thou fall in the day,
and the prophet also shall fall with thee in the night,
and I will destroy thy mother.*
- (6) My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge:
because thou hast rejected knowledge,
I will also reject thee,
that thou shalt be no priest to me:
seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God,
I will also forget thy children.*
- (7) As they were increased, so they sinned against me:
therefore will I change their glory into shame.*
- (8) They eat up the sin of my people,
and they set their heart on their iniquity.*
- (9) And there shall be, like people, like priest:
and I will punish them for their ways,
and reward them their doings.*
- (10) For they shall eat, and not have enough:
they shall commit whoredom, and shall not increase:
because they have left off to take heed to the LORD.*

The Context

The specific focus on the priests beginning in verse 4 is the most significant structural feature of this section. The general indictment of verses 1–3 has established the condition of the whole land. Now the LORD turns to the specific group that bears the primary responsibility for the condition: the priests, who were the ordained teachers and guardians of the knowledge of God in Israel. The word of verse 4 — with you is my contention, O priest — shifts the rib from the general population to the specific professional class whose failure has produced the general collapse. The priests are not merely among the guilty. They are the primary cause of the guilt, because their ordained function was to prevent it.

The charge of verse 6 — my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge — is the most quoted verse in the chapter and one of the most quoted in the entire book. Its force depends on reading it in its context: the knowledge that is absent is the knowledge of God, and the reason it is absent is not that it was never given but that the priests have rejected it. The rejection of knowledge is not passive ignorance but active refusal — the deliberate turning away from the knowledge of God that was entrusted to the priestly class for the benefit of the whole people. And the consequence

is the mirror of the rejection: because you have rejected knowledge, I will reject you from being priest to me.

The indictment of verse 8 is the most specific and the most devastating: they feed on the sin of my people; they are greedy for their iniquity. The reference is to the priestly system in which the priests received a portion of the sin offerings brought to the temple — a legitimate provision that has become an illegitimate incentive. The priests who are supposed to be confronting the sin and leading the people away from it have instead developed a vested interest in its continuation: the more sin, the more offerings, the more food for the priest. The corruption of the office has reached the point where the financial incentive of the priestly system is aligned with the perpetuation of the very sin that the system was designed to address.

The principle of verse 9 — like people, like priest — is the most concise statement of the reciprocal corruption of the priestly indictment. The priest was meant to be different from the people — set apart, consecrated, the guardian of the knowledge that would distinguish the covenant community from the surrounding nations. When the priest becomes like the people, the distinguishing function of the office has been lost. And the movement is bidirectional: the priest has become like the people, and the people have become like the priest. The corruption flows in both directions through the collapsed distinction that should have been the most important boundary in the covenant community.

Plain American English

But don't point fingers at one another or lay blame on each other — my complaint is with you, the priests. You stumble around in broad daylight, and your prophets stumble right along with you in the night. I'm going to destroy your mother nation. My people are ruined because they don't know me. And it's your fault — you priests have refused to know me, so I refuse to let you serve as my priests anymore. You have ignored my law, so I will also ignore your children. The more priests there were, the more they sinned against me. They have traded their glorious calling for something shameful. They feed off the sins of my people — they actually want my people to sin more, because they profit from it. And so it will be: like people, like priests. I will punish both of them for their ways and pay them back for their deeds. They will eat but never have enough. They will sleep around but never have children, because they have abandoned their devotion to the LORD.

Key Observations

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me”: This signifies **The Destruction of the People Is the Direct Consequence of the Priests' Rejection of the Knowledge They Were Ordained to Transmit — the Pastoral Responsibility for the Spiritual Condition of the Community Rests Primarily on the Teachers of the Knowledge of God.**

The my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge is one of the most quoted verses in the prophetic literature, and its most common misuse is the abstraction of it from its context: the reading of it as a general statement about the importance of Bible knowledge, divorced from the specific charge that precedes it — because you have rejected knowledge. The people are destroyed not because knowledge was unavailable to them but because the priests who were ordained to teach it have rejected it. The responsibility for the spiritual condition of the community is laid at the feet of the teachers, not the students. The pastoral indictment is directed at the professional class — the priests, the prophets, the ordained teachers — whose rejection of the knowledge they were entrusted to transmit is the primary cause of the community’s destruction. The knowledge that saves the people is the knowledge that the priests have refused to give them.

“They eat up the sin of my people, and they set their heart on their iniquity”: This signifies **The Corruption of the Priestly Office Has Reached the Point Where the Financial Incentive of the System Is Aligned with the Perpetuation of the Sin That the System Was Designed to Address.**

The feeding on the sin of the people is the most specific and the most damning charge in the priestly indictment. The priests who receive a portion of the sin offerings have allowed the financial provision of the system to become the motivation for its continuation. Instead of confronting the sin that generates the offerings, they encourage or ignore the sin because the offerings it produces are the source of their income. This is the corruption of the system from the inside: the mechanism designed to address sin has been captured by the sin it was designed to address. The priest who should be the most motivated to eliminate sin from the community has become the most motivated to perpetuate it. The contemporary equivalent is the religious professional whose institutional survival depends on the continuation of the spiritual problems the institution was founded to solve.

“Like people, like priest”: This signifies **The Principle of Reciprocal Corruption Is the Statement That When the Teacher Becomes Like the Student the Distinguishing Function of the Office Has Been Lost and the Corruption Flows in Both Directions.**

The like people, like priest of verse 9 is the prophetic inversion of the proper order of the covenant community. The priest was meant to be the model of the knowledge of God, the living exhibit of what the covenant relationship looks like when it is fully maintained. The principle that the teacher shapes the student presupposes that the teacher is different from the student — that the priest has a knowledge and a character and a devotion that the people do not yet have and that the priestly office is designed to transmit. When the priest becomes like the people — when the teacher is no different from the student — the transmission has stopped. And when the corruption flows back from the priest to the people, the community has entered a downward spiral from which it cannot rescue itself: the teacher who should be the source of the upward pull has become the agent of the downward drag.

“Seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children”: This signifies **The Mirror Judgment Matches the Specific Form of the Priestly Failure with Perfect Precision — the God Who Is Forgotten Does Not Abandon Arbitrarily but Mirrors Back the Abandonment That Has Been Directed at Him.**

The mirror judgments of verse 6 — you rejected knowledge, I will reject you; you forgot the law, I will forget your children — are among the most theologically precise statements of divine judgment in the prophetic literature. The judgment does not simply fall on the priest. It mirrors the specific form of the failure with exact precision: the rejection of knowledge is met with the rejection from the priestly office, the forgetting of the law is met with the forgetting of the children. This is not arbitrary retribution. It is the moral order of the universe in which the specific character of the action against God determines the specific character of the consequence that the action produces. The God who is forgotten mirrors back the forgetting with a precision that reveals the justice of the judgment: the punishment fits the crime because the punishment is the crime reflected back.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Receive the Priestly Indictment as the Primary Pastoral Warning for Everyone Who Bears the Responsibility of Teaching the Knowledge of God:

The specific targeting of the priests in verses 4–10 is the most direct available pastoral warning in the chapter for anyone who occupies a teaching office in the community of faith. The pastor, the theologian, the Sunday school teacher, the parent who is the primary transmitter of the knowledge of God to the next generation — all of these occupy the functional equivalent of the priestly office that the chapter indicts. The my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge is addressed to these people before it is addressed to anyone else. The most urgent question for the teacher of the knowledge of God is not whether the students are receiving the knowledge but whether the teacher has rejected it — whether the teaching has become a professional function disconnected from the living knowledge of the God being taught.

2. Examine the Incentive Structures of Your Ministry — Are the Financial and Institutional Rewards of the Office Aligned with the Confrontation of Sin or with Its Perpetuation:

The feeding on the sin of the people of verse 8 is the warning about the institutional capture of the ministry by the very problems the ministry is designed to address. The religious professional whose income depends on the continuation of the spiritual problems the institution was founded to solve, whose platform is sustained by the emotional needs the platform should be directing toward God rather than toward itself, whose institutional survival requires the maintenance of a dependent constituency rather than the formation of a mature and self-sustaining community — this is the contemporary equivalent of the priest who feeds on the sin of the people. Examine the incentive structures. Where the financial and institutional rewards are aligned with the perpetuation of the spiritual problems rather than their resolution, the corruption of verse 8 is operating.

3. Take Seriously the Principle That the Teacher Who Becomes Like the Student Has Lost the Distinguishing Function of the Office:

The like people, like priest of verse 9 is the warning against the accommodation of the teaching office to the expectations and preferences of the audience. The priest who has become like the people has done so through the incremental accommodation of the distinctive knowledge and character that the office requires to the preferences of the constituency that the office serves. The process is gradual: the confrontation of the sin is softened, the demands of the knowledge are reduced, the distinctiveness of the covenant life is minimized to maintain the approval of the audience, until the priest is indistinguishable from the people in knowledge and in character. Resist the accommodation. The

distinguishing function of the teaching office is the most important thing the teacher has to offer the community. When it is lost, the transmission has stopped.

How This Relates to Today

The priestly indictment of verses 4–10 is one of the most directly applicable passages in the prophetic literature to the contemporary crisis of pastoral leadership in the Western church. The crisis is not primarily the absence of gifted communicators or the lack of institutional resources. It is the crisis that verse 6 diagnoses: the rejection of knowledge by the people who were ordained to transmit it. The pastoral class that has substituted therapeutic skills for theological formation, that has replaced the knowledge of God with the knowledge of the audience's emotional needs, that has exchanged the confrontation of sin for the management of the congregation's preferences — this is the pastoral class that feeds on the sin of the people rather than addressing it, and the consequence is the my people are destroyed of verse 6.

The like people, like priest of verse 9 also addresses the contemporary tendency to measure pastoral success by the pastor's identification with the cultural preferences of the congregation. The pastor who is most like the people — who shares their entertainment habits, their financial aspirations, their political commitments, their therapeutic vocabulary — is celebrated in much of the contemporary church as the most effective communicator and the most culturally relevant leader. The principle of verse 9 suggests that this celebration is the celebration of the failure: the teacher who is indistinguishable from the student in knowledge and character has lost the thing that makes the teaching office valuable. The people need what the priest has that they do not have. When the priest has nothing they do not have, the office has been emptied of its most essential content.

Key Lesson: **The priestly indictment of verses 4–10 identifies the primary cause of the community's destruction as the failure of the ordained teachers of the knowledge of God to know it, guard it, and transmit it — the rejection of knowledge that produces the like people, like priest collapse of the distinguishing function of the teaching office, the feeding on the sin of the people that aligns the institutional incentives with the perpetuation of the spiritual problems rather than their resolution, and the mirror judgment that reflects back with perfect precision the specific form of the failure: you rejected knowledge, I will reject you; you forgot the law, I will forget your children.**

Hosea 4:11–19

The Spirit of Whoredom: Wine, Wood, and the High Places That Have Taken Away the Heart

(11) Whoredom and wine and new wine take away the heart.

(12) My people ask counsel at their stocks,

and their staff declareth unto them:

for the spirit of whoredoms hath caused them to err,

*and they have gone a whoring from under their God.
(13) They sacrifice upon the tops of the mountains,
and burn incense upon the hills,
under oaks and poplars and elms,
because the shadow thereof is good:
therefore your daughters shall commit whoredom,
and your spouses shall commit adultery.
(14) I will not punish your daughters when they commit whoredom,
nor your spouses when they commit adultery:
for themselves are separated with whores,
and they sacrifice with harlots:
therefore the people that doth not understand shall fall.
(15) Though thou, Israel, play the harlot,
yet let not Judah offend;
and come not ye unto Gilgal,
neither go ye up to Beth-aven,
nor swear, The LORD liveth.
(16) For Israel slideth back as a backsliding heifer:
now the LORD will feed them as a lamb in a large place.
(17) Ephraim is joined to idols:
let him alone.
(18) Their drink is sour:
they have committed whoredom continually:
her rulers with shame do love, Give ye.
(19) The wind hath bound her up in her wings,
and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices.*

The Context

The third section of the chapter moves from the specific indictment of the priests to the broader description of the spiritual condition that the priestly failure has produced in the population: the spirit of whoredom that has taken away the heart, the consultation of wooden idols, the high-place worship under the oaks and poplars, and the sexual immorality that the fertility cult worship has both licensed and produced. The whoredom and wine of verse 11 are the two great heart-takers of the ancient Canaanite religious world: the wine that was part of the Baal worship rituals and the sexual rites of the fertility cult that the worship incorporated. Together they take away the heart — the *leb* in Hebrew, the seat of the will, the understanding, and the moral direction of the person.

The consultation of wooden stocks and staffs in verse 12 is the most vivid and the most absurd description of idolatrous divination in Hosea's prophecy. The people who have lost the knowledge of God do not cease to seek guidance — they seek it from pieces of wood. The staff

that was perhaps a divining rod used for determining the will of the deity, the stock that was a wooden idol — these are the instruments of the guidance that should be sought from the living God. The spirit of whoredom that has caused them to err is the spiritual condition that distorts the seeking: the people still seek, but the spirit of whoredom has redirected the seeking away from the covenant God toward the substitute objects that the idolatry has provided.

The warning to Judah in verse 15 is the most direct address to the southern kingdom in the chapter: though Israel plays the whore, let not Judah incur guilt. Come not to Gilgal; go not up to Beth-aven — Beth-aven being Hosea's contemptuous renaming of Bethel (house of God) as Beth-aven (house of wickedness or house of nothing), the site of one of the two golden calves that Jeroboam I had set up as the alternative sanctuaries for the northern kingdom (1 Kings 12:28–29). The warning is the prophetic equivalent of the parental warning to the child who has not yet made the older sibling's mistake: Israel is already in the condition that the chapter has described; do not follow her there. The contagion of the unfaithfulness can spread, and Judah is being warned to stay away from the specific locations where the infection is most concentrated.

The Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone of verse 17 is one of the most sobering statements in the prophetic literature — the divine withdrawal from the pursuit of a people who have so thoroughly committed themselves to the idolatry that the pursuit has reached its limit. The let him alone is not the permanent abandonment of the covenant God — the rest of the book will make clear that the pursuing love of chapters 1 through 3 has not been extinguished. But it is the declaration of the present moment in which the commitment to the idols has become so thorough that the continued confrontation of the prophetic word has no purchase. The wind of verse 19 will sweep them away in its wings — the Assyrian conquest that is coming — and they will be ashamed of their altars.

Plain American English

Prostitution, wine, and beer have robbed my people of their good sense. They ask wooden idols for advice and expect sticks to tell them what to do. That spirit of prostitution has led them astray — they have been unfaithful to their God. They offer sacrifices on the mountaintops and burn incense on the hills, under oak and poplar and terebinth trees, where the shade is nice. And so your daughters turn to prostitution, and your daughters-in-law commit adultery. But I won't punish your daughters for becoming prostitutes or your daughters-in-law for committing adultery, because the men themselves are sleeping with prostitutes and making offerings with shrine prostitutes. A people without understanding will come to ruin. And even though you, Israel, are committing prostitution, don't let Judah become guilty. Don't go to Gilgal, don't go up to Beth-aven, and don't swear oaths there in the LORD's name. Israel is as stubborn as a young cow, so how can the LORD tend them like gentle lambs in open pastures? Ephraim is hooked on idols — leave him alone! Even when their drinking is finished, they keep right on prostituting themselves. Their rulers dearly love their shameful ways. A whirlwind is going to sweep them away, and they will be disgraced by all their sacrifices to idols.

Key Observations

“Whoredom and wine and new wine take away the heart”: This signifies **The Heart-Takers Are the Instruments by Which the Spirit of Whoredom Accomplishes the Redirection of the Will, the Understanding, and the Moral Judgment Away from the Covenant God Toward the Substitute Satisfaction**s.

The leb — the heart in the Hebrew understanding — is not primarily the seat of emotion but the seat of the will, the understanding, and the moral direction of the person. The taking away of the heart is the disabling of the person’s capacity for the covenant relationship: the removal of the will to choose the covenant God over the substitute satisfactions, the understanding to recognize the covenant God as the source of the provision, and the moral judgment to discern the difference between the right worship and the wrong. The whoredom and the wine are the instruments of the taking because they are the specifically pleasurable forms of the wrong worship — the fertility cult rites that offered sensory stimulation in the name of religious devotion. The heart is taken not by force but by pleasure: the satisfactions of the wrong worship are so immediately gratifying that the will and the understanding are gradually captured by them, until the capacity for the covenant relationship has been disabled.

“My people ask counsel at their stocks, and their staff declareth unto them: for the spirit of whoredoms hath caused them to err”: This signifies **The Consultation of Wooden Idols Is the Absurdity That the Spirit of Whoredom Produces — the Seeking Does Not Cease When the Knowledge of God Is Absent but Is Redirected Toward Objects That Cannot Satisfy It**.

The people who consult wooden stocks and staffs for divine guidance are not people who have ceased to seek the divine. They are people whose seeking has been redirected by the spirit of whoredom from the living God toward objects that are incapable of answering. This is one of the most important diagnostic observations in the chapter: the absence of the knowledge of God does not produce the absence of the religious impulse. It produces the misdirection of the religious impulse toward substitute objects. The people who have lost the knowledge of the living God do not become secular materialists content with no transcendence. They become idolaters — people who transfer the seeking and the consulting and the offering from the living God to the things they can see and touch and carry, whether ancient wooden idols or contemporary equivalents. The religious impulse cannot be extinguished. It can only be redirected.

“Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone”: This signifies **The Divine Let Him Alone Is the Most Sobering Statement of the Chapter — the Moment at Which the Commitment to the Idols Has Become So Complete That the Pursuing Love of the Earlier Chapters Has Reached Its Present Limit**.

The let him alone of verse 17 is theologically among the most disturbing statements in Hosea and must be read within the full theological context of the book. It is not the permanent abandonment of the pursuing love that chapters 1 through 3 have revealed — the book will return to the promise of restoration. But it is the declaration of a present moment in which the commitment to the idols has become so thorough that continued prophetic confrontation has no purchase. There is a point at which the sustained rejection of the pursuing love produces a condition in which the love, in its respect for the human capacity for self-determination, withdraws the active confrontation and allows the consequences of the choice to run their course. The Assyrian wind of verse 19 is coming. The shame of the altars will be the bitter fruit of the choice to be joined to the idols. The let him alone is the prophetic declaration that the consequences are now the teacher, since the word has been refused.

“Come not ye unto Gilgal, neither go ye up to Beth-aven”: This signifies **The Warning to Judah to Stay Away from the Specific Locations of the Northern Kingdom’s Worst Idolatry Is the Pastoral Wisdom That Recognizes the Contagion of Unfaithfulness and the Importance of Maintaining Distance from Its Most Concentrated Expressions.**

The warning to Judah in verse 15 is the pastoral equivalent of the parental warning to the younger child who has not yet made the older sibling’s mistake: the contagion of Israel’s spiritual condition is real, and maintaining distance from the specific locations where the infection is most concentrated is the wisdom that avoids the necessity of the discipline that Israel is about to receive. Gilgal was a major sanctuary site associated with the beginning of the conquest and the establishment of the covenant in the land — a site that had been corrupted by the syncretistic worship. Beth-aven — Hosea’s contemptuous renaming of Bethel — was the site of the golden calf worship that Jeroboam I had established as the alternative to the Jerusalem temple. The warning to Judah is not merely geographical. It is the warning to maintain the theological distance from the specific forms of the idolatry that have destroyed the northern kingdom, to recognize them as contagious rather than as merely the northern kingdom’s local religious customs.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Identify the Contemporary Heart-Takers — the Pleasures That Gradually Disable the Capacity for the Covenant Relationship by Redirecting the Will and the Understanding Toward Substitute Satisfactions: The whoredom and wine of verse 11 are the specifically pleasurable forms of the wrong devotion — the heart-takers that are effective precisely because they offer immediate, sensory gratification in the place of the deeper but less immediately gratifying relationship with the living God. The contemporary heart-takers are the pleasures of the digital age: the social media feeds that offer the stimulation of social approval, the entertainment platforms that offer the stimulation of narrative and emotion, the consumer culture that offers the stimulation of acquisition and display. None of these are inherently evil, but all of them can become heart-takers when they are pursued with the devotion that the covenant relationship requires, redirecting the will and the understanding from the living God toward the substitute satisfactions. Identify the heart-takers. The identification is the beginning of the recovery of the heart.

2. Recognize That the Religious Impulse Redirected by the Spirit of Whoredom Does Not Cease but Is Misdirected Toward Contemporary Wooden Stocks and Staffs: The people who ask counsel of wooden stocks and staffs are not people without the religious impulse. They are people whose religious impulse has been redirected by the spirit of whoredom toward objects that cannot satisfy it. The contemporary equivalents of the wooden stocks and staffs are the substitute oracles of the digital age: the social media influencers who tell us how to live, the market analysts who tell us where to invest our security, the therapeutic professionals who tell us who we are. None of these are without value in their proper place. But when they occupy the counseling function that belongs to the living God, when they are consulted with the urgency and the dependency that the covenant relationship requires, they are the contemporary wooden stocks and staffs. Redirect the seeking toward the One who can actually answer.

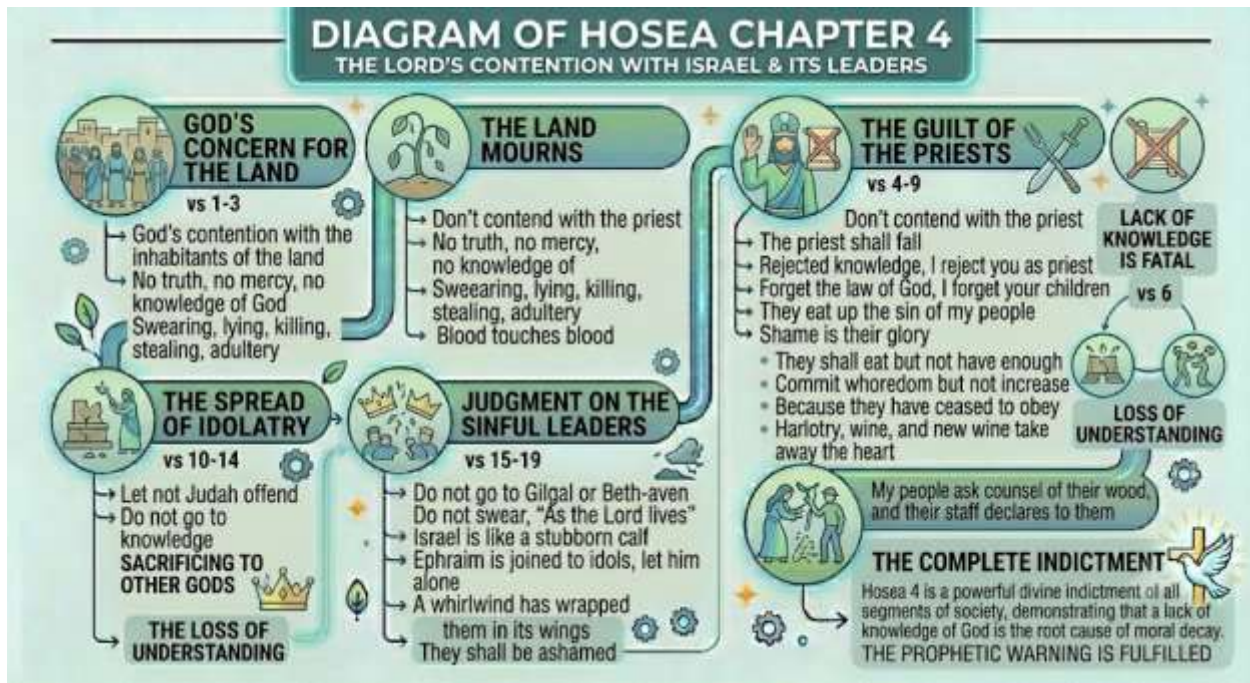
3. Take the Warning to Judah as the Pastoral Wisdom for Maintaining Distance from the Spiritual Contagions That Have Already Captured Other Communities: The come not to Gilgal, go not up to Beth-aven of verse 15 is the pastoral wisdom of maintaining deliberate distance from the specific spiritual contagions that have already done their damage in the communities around us. The church that watches the spiritual decline of its neighboring congregations — the accommodation to the therapeutic culture, the replacement of the knowledge of God with emotional experience, the adoption of the surrounding culture’s values as the church’s own — and concludes that it can engage with these things without being formed by them has not understood the warning of verse 15. The contagion is real. The maintenance of the distance is not arrogance. It is the pastoral wisdom of the community that does not want to need the discipline that the contagion produces.

How This Relates to Today

The spirit of whoredom of verse 12 is the most important diagnostic category in the third section of the chapter for understanding the spiritual condition of the contemporary church in its relationship to the surrounding culture. The spirit of whoredom is not primarily the spirit of sexual immorality, though it includes that. It is the spirit that redirects the religious impulse — the seeking, the consulting, the offering, the devotion — from the living God toward the substitute satisfactions that the culture offers. The church that has been formed more by the spirit of its cultural moment than by the Spirit of the living God is the church in which the spirit of whoredom has accomplished its work: the seeking and the consulting and the offering have been redirected, and the wooden stocks and staffs of the contemporary cultural oracles have been installed in the place of the living God.

The Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone of verse 17 is also one of the most theologically important statements in the chapter for understanding the relationship between the divine pursuit of the pursuing love chapters and the divine withdrawal of the present moment. The same God who went again and wooed in the wilderness and betrothed again in chapter 2 can, in the present moment of the sustained and thorough commitment to the idols, say let him alone. The withdrawal is not the permanent abandonment of the pursuing love. But it is the declaration that the consequences are now the teacher, and that the shame of the altars is the form in which the pursuing love will make itself felt in the season when the word has been refused. The wind is coming. The shame will teach what the word could not. And the latter days are still coming, when the return and the seeking will be the fruit of the long discipline.

Key Lesson: **The spirit of whoredom that takes away the heart redirects the religious impulse from the living God toward the wooden stocks and staffs of the substitute oracles, producing the high-place worship and the sexual immorality of the fertility cult and the consultation of idols that Hosea diagnoses as the condition of a people formed by the spirit of the surrounding culture rather than by the Spirit of the covenant God — and the Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone of verse 17 is the most sobering statement of the chapter, the moment at which the consequences become the teacher because the word has been refused, and the Assyrian wind of verse 19 becomes the instrument of the discipline that the pursuing love requires.**



Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We close Hosea chapter 4 having been indicted, warned, and sobered. We have received the most comprehensive covenant diagnosis in the book: no faithfulness, no steadfast love, no knowledge of God in the land. We have received the most direct pastoral indictment in the chapter: my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge, because the priests have rejected the knowledge they were ordained to transmit. And we have received the most sobering statement in the chapter: Ephraim is joined to idols — let him alone. The wind is coming.

Lord, let the three-fold absence of verse 1 be the diagnostic that we apply first to ourselves and to our own communities before we apply it to the culture around us. Where are we without faithfulness — without the reliability and truthfulness that covenant life requires? Where are we without steadfast love — without the covenant loyalty that holds the community together in mutual obligation and care? And where are we without the knowledge of God — without the intimate personal knowing of You that is both the foundation of the other two and the goal of the entire relationship? Let the diagnosis produce the remedy: the return to the knowledge of God that is the only cure for the condition that the chapter diagnoses.

And let the priestly indictment fall on all of us who bear the responsibility of teaching the knowledge of God in our generation. Let us not be the priests who feed on the sin of the people. Let us not be the teachers who have become like the students. Let us not reject the knowledge that the people need in order to live — the knowledge that, when it is absent, destroys them. Give

us the courage to confront the sin that the system of the teaching office is tempted to perpetuate, the wisdom to maintain the distinction between the teacher and the student that the transmission of the knowledge requires, and the integrity to hold the knowledge ourselves before we attempt to give it to others.

And keep us from the heart-takers — the whoredom and wine of our own age, the pleasures that gradually disable the capacity for the covenant relationship by redirecting the will and the understanding toward the substitute satisfactions. Keep us from the wooden stocks and staffs of the contemporary oracles that offer counsel without the living God. And keep us from the Gilgal and Beth-aven of the spiritual contagions that have already destroyed the communities around us. Let us maintain the distance that wisdom requires and pursue the knowledge of God that the chapter declares to be the only foundation on which the covenant community can stand.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
Glory to God Alone