

Introduction to Hosea Chapter 5

Hear This, O Priests: The Snare of Mizpah, the Spirit of Whoredom, and the Lion Who Will Withdraw

Hosea chapter 5 is the escalating indictment. If chapter 4 opened the covenant lawsuit with the summary diagnosis — no faithfulness, no steadfast love, no knowledge of God in the land — and moved through the priestly indictment and the description of the spirit of whoredom, chapter 5 tightens the focus and raises the temperature. The three-fold summons of verse 1 — Hear this, O priests! Give ear, O house of Israel! Listen, O house of the king! — calls the entire leadership structure of the northern kingdom to account simultaneously: the religious leaders, the people, and the political rulers are all addressed in a single sweep of the prophetic indictment.

The chapter introduces several new and theologically significant images to the developing argument of the book. The snare of Mizpah and the net spread over Tabor in verse 1 are the images of Israel's own leadership as the instruments of her entrapment — the priests and rulers who were meant to lead the people toward the covenant God have become the mechanisms by which the people are caught in the idolatry. The spirit of whoredom in verse 4 deepens the diagnosis of chapter 4 by adding the dimension of the internal bondage: the spirit of whoredom is not merely the external pressure of the surrounding culture but an inner disposition that has disabled the capacity to return to God. And the withdrawal of the LORD in verse 6 — He has withdrawn from them — is the most sobering development in the chapter: the seeking that Israel will undertake will not find the LORD, because He has withdrawn until the seeking becomes the genuine return that the disciplines of the chapter are designed to produce.

The political dimension of the chapter is also more prominent than in the preceding chapters. The reference to the removal of ancient landmarks in verse 10, the alliance with Assyria in verse 13, and the wound that neither nation can heal are all historically specific: the political maneuvering of the northern and southern kingdoms in the period immediately before the Assyrian crisis is the backdrop against which the theological indictment is delivered. The nations turn to political alliances and foreign powers to address what is in fact a theological wound — the consequence of the covenant violation that no political solution can reach. The sending to Assyria and the appeal to the great king is the most vivid illustration of the chapter's deepest diagnosis: a people whose spirit of whoredom has disabled the capacity for genuine return are a people who will seek every solution to their distress except the only one that can actually address it.

The chapter closes with one of the most startling images in the entire book: the LORD as the lion who tears and goes away, who returns to His place until Israel acknowledges its guilt and seeks His face. The withdrawal of the lion — the God who is both the most powerful and the most absent, who has torn and departed and will not be found by the seeking that does not include the acknowledgment of guilt — is the theological preparation for the beautiful but shallow repentance of chapter 6. The lion has withdrawn. The people will seek. And the seeking will reveal whether the discipline of the withdrawal has produced the genuine return or only the morning mist that chapter 6 will expose as insufficient.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We come to Hosea chapter 5 as people who recognize the condition it describes: a people whose leadership has become the instrument of their entrapment rather than their liberation, whose inner spirit has been captured by the whoredom that disables the capacity for genuine return, and who respond to the wound of the covenant violation by seeking every solution except the only one that can reach it. We know what it is to be ensnared by the very structures that were meant to protect us. We know what it is to have the spirit of whoredom disable the capacity to return even when the desire to return is present. And we know what it is to turn to the Assyria of our own age — the political alliance, the therapeutic solution, the institutional fix — for the healing of a wound that only the covenant God can address.

Lord, let the withdrawal of verse 6 — He has withdrawn from them — be the most clarifying statement in the chapter for the season of seeking that does not find. The seeking that will not find is not the seeking that has been abandoned by God forever. It is the seeking that has not yet included the acknowledgment of guilt that the lion who withdraws is waiting for. Let the withdrawal produce in us the acknowledgment rather than the redoubling of the wrong seeking. Let us not turn to the great king of Assyria when the wound is theological and the Assyrian king cannot heal it. Let us turn instead to the acknowledgment of verse 15: in their distress they will earnestly seek me.

And let the image of the lion who withdraws form in us the reverence for the God who is not domesticated by our religious performance — who will not be found by the seeking that is not accompanied by the acknowledgment of guilt, who tears before He heals, who withdraws before He returns, who is the most powerful and the most holy and the most present and the most absent of all the realities we encounter in our lives. Let us fear Him rightly, seek Him genuinely, and acknowledge our guilt honestly. This is the seeking that finds.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Hosea 5:1–7

The Snare of Mizpah: Leadership That Entraps and the Spirit of Whoredom That Disables Return

*(1) Hear ye this, O priests;
and hearken, ye house of Israel;
and give ye ear, O house of the king;*

*for judgment is toward you:
because ye have been a snare on Mizpah,
and a net spread upon Tabor.
(2) And the revolvers are profound to make slaughter,
though I have been a rebuker of them all.
(3) I know Ephraim, and Israel is not hid from me:
for now, O Ephraim, thou committest whoredom,
and Israel is defiled.
(4) They will not frame their doings to turn unto their God:
for the spirit of whoredoms is in the midst of them,
and they have not known the LORD.
(5) And the pride of Israel doth testify to his face:
therefore shall Israel and Ephraim fall in their iniquity;
Judah also shall fall with them.
(6) They shall go with their flocks and with their herds
to seek the LORD;
but they shall not find him;
he hath withdrawn himself from them.
(7) They have dealt treacherously against the LORD:
for they have begotten strange children:
now shall a month devour them with their portions.*

The Context

The three-fold summons of verse 1 — O priests, O house of Israel, O house of the king — is the most comprehensive address to the leadership structure in the book. All three groups are summoned simultaneously, and all three are charged with the same fundamental failure: they have become a snare on Mizpah and a net spread over Tabor. Mizpah and Tabor were both sanctuary sites — locations of religious activity in the northern kingdom. The snare and the net are the instruments of the hunter, used to trap the prey. The charge is that the priests and rulers who were meant to be the instruments of the people's covenant faithfulness have instead become the instruments of their entrapment in the idolatry: the religious sites have become the places where the people are caught rather than released.

The I know Ephraim of verse 3 is the most sobering statement of divine omniscience in the chapter. The whoredom that Israel believes is hidden, or perhaps does not recognize as needing to be hidden, is fully known to the covenant God. Israel is not hidden from me — the deficiency that might explain the shallow repentance of the surrounding chapters (if they really did not know that they were being observed) is removed. The whoredom is known, and the knowledge of it makes the continued pursuit of the wrong worship the more inexcusable.

The spirit of whoredom in verse 4 deepens the diagnosis significantly beyond chapter 4. In chapter 4:12, the spirit of whoredoms caused the people to err. In chapter 5:4, the spirit is described as an internal bondage that disables the capacity for the return: their deeds do not permit them to return to their God, for the spirit of whoredom is within them, and they do not know the LORD. The spirit of whoredom is not merely an external pressure but an internal disposition that has become so thoroughly embedded in the character of the people that the capacity for the return has been disabled. They cannot frame their doings to return — the very faculty by which the deliberate choice of the return would be made has been captured by the spirit of whoredom.

The withdrawal of verse 6 is the most theologically significant development in the first section. When Israel goes with its flocks and herds to seek the LORD — when they undertake the religious activity of seeking — they will not find Him. He has withdrawn from them. The withdrawal is the consequence of the treachery of verse 7 — they have dealt treacherously with the LORD — and the preparation for the discipline that will produce the genuine seeking of verse 15. The seeking that goes with flocks and herds is the seeking of the religious performance: the bringing of the right offerings to the right places. It is the seeking that is external without being internal, that performs the gestures of the return without the substance of the returning. This seeking will not find the LORD, because the LORD has withdrawn until the seeking becomes something more than the performance of the religious form.

Plain American English

Listen to this, you priests! Pay attention, people of Israel! Listen, you members of the royal family! This judgment is directed at you. You have set a trap at Mizpah and spread a net on Mount Tabor. You rebels go deep in your slaughter, even though I have been a discipline for all of you. I know all about Ephraim, and Israel doesn't hide anything from me. Ephraim, you have played the prostitute; Israel is completely defiled. Their deeds won't let them return to their God, because the spirit of prostitution controls their lives and they refuse to acknowledge the LORD. Israel's arrogance testifies against them to their face. Israel and Ephraim will stumble in their sin, and Judah will stumble along with them. When they go with their flocks and cattle to search for the LORD, they won't find Him — He has withdrawn from them. They have been unfaithful to the LORD, because they have given birth to children who are not His. Now a month will devour their land along with everything they own.

Key Observations

“Ye have been a snare on Mizpah, and a net spread upon Tabor”: This signifies **The Leadership That Was Ordained to Lead the People Toward the Covenant God Has Become the Instrument of Their Entrapment in the Idolatry — the Most Devastating Form of Institutional Failure.**

The snare and the net are the instruments of the hunter — the mechanisms designed to catch and hold the prey that cannot escape them. The charge that the priests and rulers have become snares and nets at the sanctuary sites is the charge of the most complete institutional reversal: the places

and the people ordained to liberate the covenant community into the covenant relationship have become the places and the people that entrap them in the condition from which they need to be liberated. The sanctuary site that should be the place of encounter with the covenant God has become the place of entrapment in the idolatrous system. The priest who should be the guide toward the covenant relationship has become the mechanism of the community's capture in the system of the wrong worship. When the institution designed to free becomes the instrument of captivity, the community has no obvious resource for the liberation it needs.

“I know Ephraim, and Israel is not hid from me”: This signifies **The Divine Omniscience Is Not a Theological Abstraction but the Pastoral Declaration That the Whoredom Which Israel May Believe Is Unobserved or Which Israel Has Ceased to Recognize as Needing Concealment Is Fully Known to the Covenant God.**

The I know Ephraim of verse 3 is not a statement of the general divine attribute of omniscience. It is the specific pastoral declaration that the whoredom — the particular condition of the particular people being addressed — is known to the God who sees through the religious performance to the reality beneath it. The declaration strips away two possible explanations for the continuation of the whoredom: the explanation that the people did not know they were being observed (I know Ephraim) and the explanation that the condition has been successfully concealed (Israel is not hid from me). Neither explanation is available. The whoredom is fully known. The continuation of it in the face of that knowledge makes the treachery of verse 7 the more deliberate and the less excusable.

“They will not frame their doings to turn unto their God: for the spirit of whoredoms is in the midst of them”: This signifies **The Spirit of Whoredom Is Not Merely an External Pressure but an Internal Bondage That Has Disabled the Capacity for the Return — the Most Comprehensive Diagnosis of the Spiritual Condition of Persistent Unfaithfulness.**

The they will not frame their doings to return to their God is the statement of the internal bondage that the spirit of whoredom has produced. The framing of the doings — the deliberate ordering of the life toward the covenant God — is the faculty by which the return would be made. The spirit of whoredom has captured this faculty: the people cannot frame their doings to return because the very capacity for the deliberate ordering of the life toward God has been disabled by the spirit that has taken up residence within them. This is the most comprehensive diagnosis of persistent spiritual unfaithfulness in the book: not merely the external choices that the surrounding culture has shaped, not merely the misattribution of the provision that chapter 4 diagnosed, but the internal bondage of a spirit that has disabled the very faculty of return. The condition requires not merely better choices but the liberation of the will that the spirit of whoredom has captured.

“They shall go with their flocks and with their herds to seek the LORD; but they shall not find him; he hath withdrawn himself from them”: This signifies **The Seeking That Goes with Flocks and Herds Is the Seeking of the Religious Performance Without the Substance of the Return — and the Withdrawal of the LORD from This Seeking Is the Most Sobering Statement of the Consequence of the Treachery.**

The seeking of verse 6 is the seeking of the religious form without the reality: the bringing of the right offerings (flocks and herds) to the right places without the internal transformation that the offering is meant to express. This is the hesed without the sacrifice that chapter 6:6 will identify

as what God does not desire — except reversed: it is the sacrifice without the hesed, the external performance without the internal reality. And the LORD has withdrawn from this seeking. The withdrawal is not the final abandonment — the chapter will close with the promise that genuine seeking will find Him. But the seeking that goes with flocks and herds, that performs the religious gesture without the acknowledgment of guilt that verse 15 will identify as the necessary accompaniment of the genuine return, will not find the LORD who has withdrawn from it. He cannot be found by the performance of the form that His own prophets have identified as insufficient.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Examine the Leadership Structures of the Community to Determine Whether They Are Liberating the People Toward the Covenant God or Entrapping Them in the System That Has Replaced the Relationship:

The snare of Mizpah and the net of Tabor are the specific charges against the leadership that has reversed its ordained function. The contemporary equivalent is the religious institution or the leadership structure whose mechanisms have become the instruments of the people's captivity in a religious system that has replaced the living relationship with the covenant God with the performance of the system's requirements. The church that requires of its members the performance of institutional loyalty in place of the genuine pursuit of the knowledge of God, the religious community whose structures have been designed to maintain the community's dependence on the institution rather than to cultivate the community's direct relationship with the living God — these are the contemporary snares of Mizpah. Examine the structures. The test is whether the community is being liberated into the knowledge of God or entrapped in the performance of the system.

2. Receive the Diagnosis of the Spirit of Whoredom as the Most Honest Available Account of the Inner Bondage That Explains Why the Genuine Return Is So Difficult Even When the Desire for It Is Present:

The spirit of whoredom that disables the capacity for return is the diagnosis of the condition that the believer who wants to return but cannot frame their doings to do so already knows from the inside. The desire to return can be genuine — the call of verses 1–3 of the next chapter is genuinely spoken — while the inner bondage of the spirit of whoredom has captured the faculty of the deliberate ordering of the life toward God that the return requires. This is the condition that Paul describes in Romans 7: I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. The spirit of whoredom is the Old Testament diagnosis of the bondage that the new covenant addresses through the gift of the Spirit who liberates the faculty that the spirit of whoredom has captured. The diagnosis is honest. The remedy is the Spirit of the living God.

3. Do Not Turn to the Assyria of Your Own Age for the Healing of the Wound That Only the Covenant God Can Address:

The sending to Assyria and the appeal to the great king that verse 13 will describe is the most vivid illustration of the strategy that the spirit of whoredom produces in its most desperate expression: the turning to every solution except the theological one that can actually reach the wound. The contemporary equivalents are the political, therapeutic, institutional, and technological solutions that the culture offers for the conditions that the covenant violation has produced. None of these are without value in their proper place. But when the wound is theological — when the distress is the consequence of the departure from the covenant God — the Assyrian king cannot heal it. Turn to the acknowledgment of guilt and the seeking of the LORD's face. This is the seeking that verse 15 promises will find Him.

How This Relates to Today

The spirit of whoredom of verse 4 is the most important diagnostic category in the chapter for understanding the phenomenon that every pastor and every believer encounters: the genuine desire to return, combined with the incapacity to sustain the return beyond the moment of its expression. The morning mist repentance of chapter 6 is not the repentance of hypocrisy. It is the repentance of the person whose spirit of whoredom has captured the faculty of the sustained return. The people who speak the beautiful words of chapter 6:1–3 are not necessarily performing. They mean what they say in the moment they say it. The spirit of whoredom is the inner disposition that has made the sustained meaning of the expressed intention impossible. This is the diagnosis that pastoral care most needs and most often misses: the failure to sustain the return is not merely a failure of will but a bondage of spirit that requires the liberation that only the Spirit of God can provide.

The withdrawal of the LORD in verse 6 is also one of the most important pastoral observations in the chapter for the believer in a season of seeking that does not find. The LORD who has withdrawn from the seeking that goes with flocks and herds — the seeking of the religious performance without the acknowledgment of guilt — has not withdrawn forever. He has withdrawn to His place, and the condition of His return is the acknowledgment and the seeking of verse 15. The season of the withdrawal is the season of the discipline that is designed to produce the acknowledgment: the experience of the absence of the God who has been sought in the wrong way, which creates the crisis of the genuine seeking that the performance seeking has been avoiding. The withdrawal serves the restoration. The absence is purposeful.

Key Lesson: **The snare of Mizpah is the charge that the leadership ordained to liberate the covenant people into the covenant relationship has become the instrument of their entrapment in the religious system that has replaced it; the spirit of whoredom of verse 4 is the inner bondage that disables the faculty of the genuine return even when the desire for it is present; and the withdrawal of the LORD from the seeking that goes with flocks and herds without the acknowledgment of guilt is the most sobering consequence of the treachery — the purposeful absence that is designed to produce the genuine seeking that the performance seeking has been substituting for.**

Hosea 5:8–14

The Political Crisis: The Removed Landmark, the Alliance with Assyria, and the Wound That Cannot Be Healed

*(8) Blow ye the cornet in Gibeah,
and the trumpet in Ramah:
cry aloud at Beth-aven,
after thee, O Benjamin.
(9) Ephraim shall be desolate in the day of rebuke:*

*among the tribes of Israel have I made known
that which shall surely be.*

*(10) The princes of Judah were like them that remove the bound:
therefore I will pour out my wrath upon them like water.*

*(11) Ephraim is oppressed and broken in judgment,
because he willingly walked after the commandment.*

*(12) Therefore will I be unto Ephraim as a moth,
and to the house of Judah as rottenness.*

*(13) When Ephraim saw his sickness,
and Judah saw his wound,
then went Ephraim to the Assyrian,
and sent to king Jareb:
yet could he not heal you,
nor cure you of your wound.*

*(14) For I will be unto Ephraim as a lion,
and as a young lion to the house of Judah:
I, even I, will tear and go away;
I will take away, and none shall rescue him.*

The Context

The blast of the trumpet in verse 8 is the alarm call of the military invasion — the signal that the enemy is coming and the towns along the invasion route are in danger. Gibeah, Ramah, and Beth-aven (Bethel) are towns along the road from the north to Jerusalem, which maps the anticipated route of the Assyrian advance through the northern kingdom and into Benjaminite territory. The alarm of verse 8 is the announcement of the historical consequence that the theological indictment of verses 1–7 has been building toward: the Assyrian invasion that will be the instrument of the discipline that the LORD has been announcing through Hosea’s ministry.

The princes of Judah who remove the landmark in verse 10 are the southern counterpart to the northern sin: the landmark — the boundary stone that defined property lines and prevented the unjust seizure of the neighbor’s land — was one of the most sacred protections of the covenant community (Deuteronomy 19:14, 27:17). The removal of the landmark is the act of the ruler who uses political power to unjustly appropriate what belongs to others. The charge against Judah’s princes is the charge of the covenant violation through political injustice — the same category of sin as the murder and stealing in chapter 4:2, expressed in the specific form available to the political class.

The two images of verse 12 — the moth to Ephraim, the rottenness (dry rot) to Judah — are among the most distinctive similes in Hosea’s prophecy for the character of the divine judgment. The moth and the dry rot are not the spectacular judgments of fire and flood. They are the slow, invisible, progressive destruction that works from the inside: the moth that eats through the

fabric without being noticed until the fabric disintegrates, the dry rot that hollows out the timber without being visible until the structure collapses. The judgment that the LORD is administering to Ephraim and Judah is this kind of judgment: not the sudden catastrophic destruction but the slow internal corruption that leaves the outward appearance intact while the inner substance is being consumed.

The political crisis of verse 13 is the specific historical referent that anchors the theological indictment in the events of the period: when Ephraim saw his sickness and Judah saw his wound, they sent to Assyria — to King Jareb, a name or title meaning the great king or the king who contends. The historical background is the political maneuvering of the 730s BC, when both Israel and Judah at different points appealed to the Assyrian empire for military assistance against their enemies. The theological indictment is devastating: the wound that they have recognized is a wound that the Assyrian king cannot heal. The political alliance with the greatest earthly power available cannot address the theological condition that is the actual source of the distress. They have correctly identified that they are sick. They have incorrectly identified the physician.

Plain American English

Sound the alarm in Gibeah! Blow the trumpet in Ramah! Sound the battle cry at Beth-aven! Benjamin, watch out — the enemy is coming! Ephraim will be laid waste on the day of punishment. I am announcing to Israel's tribes what is certainly coming. Judah's leaders are like those who move property boundary markers — I will pour out my anger on them like a flood of water. Ephraim is oppressed, crushed by judgment, because he was determined to follow human commands. I will be like a moth eating Ephraim's clothing, like dry rot consuming Judah's timbers. When Ephraim saw how sick he was, and Judah saw the extent of his wounds, Ephraim went to Assyria and appealed to the great king for help. But that king can't heal you or cure what ails you. For I am going to be like a lion to Ephraim, like a young lion to Judah. I myself will tear them to pieces and go away. I will drag them off with no one to rescue them.

Key Observations

“The princes of Judah were like them that remove the bound: therefore I will pour out my wrath upon them like water”: This signifies **The Removal of the Landmark Is the Covenant Violation of Political Justice — the Use of Political Power to Unjustly Appropriate What Belongs to Others Is the Southern Kingdom's Specific Form of the General Covenant Failure.**

The landmark — the boundary stone that defined property and protected the neighbor's inheritance from unjust seizure — was one of the most specific and most practically important protections of the covenant community's social order. The covenant theology of Deuteronomy places the curse on the one who removes the neighbor's boundary marker (Deuteronomy 27:17) precisely because the protection of property boundaries is the protection of the neighbor's dignity and inheritance. The princes of Judah who remove the bound are using the power of the political office to do what the covenant explicitly curses. This is the political dimension of the

absent hesed — the covenant loyalty that should have protected the neighbor’s property and dignity has been replaced by the political calculation that uses the power of the office to appropriate what belongs to others. The I will pour out my wrath like water is the image of overwhelming, uncontrollable consequence — the judgment that is as inevitable and as comprehensive as a flood.

“I will be unto Ephraim as a moth, and to the house of Judah as rottenness”: This signifies **The Moth and the Dry Rot Are the Images of the Slow, Invisible, Progressive Divine Judgment That Works from the Inside Before the Outward Collapse Becomes Visible.**

The choice of the moth and the dry rot as the images of the divine judgment is theologically significant for what it implies about the character of the discipline. The spectacular judgments of the Exodus — the plagues, the sea, the fire and cloud — are visible and immediate. The moth and the rottenness are invisible and progressive. The fabric that is being consumed by the moth looks intact from the outside until the day it disintegrates. The timber that is being hollowed by the dry rot looks solid until the day it collapses. The judgment that the LORD administers to Ephraim and Judah is this kind of judgment: the slow internal corruption of the social order, the institutional fabric, and the spiritual vitality that leaves the outward appearance of the society intact while the inner substance is being consumed. The covenant community that continues to perform the forms of its religious and social life while the inner reality is being eaten away by the moth of the divine judgment is the community that will be surprised by the collapse when it comes.

“When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah saw his wound, then went Ephraim to the Assyrian, and sent to king Jareb: yet could he not heal you, nor cure you of your wound”: This signifies **The Appeal to the Assyrian Great King Is the Most Vivid Illustration of the Strategy That Correctly Identifies the Symptom and Entirely Misidentifies the Physician.**

The recognition of verse 13 — when Ephraim saw his sickness and Judah saw his wound — is an acknowledgment of the condition. The people know that something is wrong. The diagnosis has been partially correct: they are sick, they are wounded. The catastrophic error is the identification of the physician: the Assyrian king, the greatest earthly power available, is the resource to which they turn. But the wound is theological. The sickness is the covenant violation of the preceding verses — the removal of the landmark, the oppression, the willingness to walk after human commandments rather than the covenant. The Assyrian king cannot heal a wound that is the consequence of the departure from the covenant God. No political alliance, no military power, no earthly great king can address the condition that only the covenant God can heal. They have correctly diagnosed the symptom and entirely misidentified the cause, and the misidentification of the cause produces the misidentification of the physician.

“I will be unto Ephraim as a lion, and as a young lion to the house of Judah: I, even I, will tear and go away”: This signifies **The Lion Who Tears and Goes Away Is the Image of the God Whose Judgment Is Both Most Powerful and Most Absent — the Tearing Is the Discipline and the Going Away Is the Withdrawal That Verse 15 Will Explain.**

The lion image of verse 14 is the most powerful image in the chapter for the character of the divine judgment. The lion is the most powerful predator — there is no appeal, no negotiation, no rescue when the lion has taken its prey. The I, even I, will tear and go away is the emphatic declaration that the tearing is entirely the LORD’s action and entirely effective: none shall

rescue. But the going away is the most theologically significant detail. The lion does not remain with the torn prey. It tears and departs. The going away is the withdrawal of verse 6 taken to its most dramatic form: the God who has administered the discipline of the tearing then returns to His place, and the torn community is left in the condition that the tearing has produced, until the acknowledgment and the seeking of verse 15 bring about the return of the One who went away.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Receive the Moth and Rottenness Images as the Pastoral Warning Against the Complacency That Mistakes the Continued Performance of the Forms for the Continued Health of the Substance:

The moth and the dry rot of verse 12 are the images of judgment most relevant to the community that continues to perform the forms of the covenant life while the inner substance is being consumed. The church that fills its pews, maintains its programs, produces its theological content, and sustains its institutional structures while the hesed and the da'at Elohim that these structures are designed to express and sustain have been consumed by the moth of the divine discipline is the church whose collapse will be a surprise only to itself. The pastoral wisdom of verse 12 is the diagnostic question: is the fabric of the community intact, or is it intact only in appearance while the moth has been working? The test is not the performance of the forms but the presence of the substance that the forms were designed to express.

2. Identify the Assyrian King in Your Own Life — the Resource to Which You Turn When You Have Correctly Identified the Symptom but Entirely Misidentified the Cause:

The sending to Assyria of verse 13 is the strategy of the person or community that knows something is wrong but has misdiagnosed the cause and therefore sought the wrong remedy. The wound is theological but the physician is political; the sickness is spiritual but the medicine is therapeutic; the condition is the consequence of the departure from the covenant God but the solution is the institutional fix. The contemporary believer who has correctly identified that something is wrong in their life, their community, or their culture, but who is turning to the political alliance, the therapeutic program, the institutional reform, or the technological solution for the healing of a wound that only the covenant God can address is sending to Assyria. Identify the Assyrian king. Then turn to the One whose face the acknowledgment of guilt makes available to the genuine seeking.

3. Understand the Lion Who Tears and Goes Away as the God Whose Discipline Is Both Most Effective and Most Purposeful — the Tearing Produces the Condition That the Withdrawal Requires:

The lion who tears and departs is not the God who has abandoned. He is the God who has administered the discipline that the condition required and then withdrawn to His place — not permanently, but until the condition of verse 15 is met: the acknowledgment of guilt and the earnest seeking of His face. The tearing produces the condition: the awareness of the wound, the recognition of the need, the crisis of the seeking that the performance seeking has been avoiding. The going away is the space in which the crisis can produce the acknowledgment. The lion who departs has created the conditions under which the genuine seeking is most likely to be prompted. Receive the tearing and the going away as the double action of the God who disciplines toward restoration.

How This Relates to Today

The appeal to King Jareb in verse 13 is the most historically specific and the most contemporary illustration in the chapter. The two kingdoms that have been addressed throughout the chapter — Ephraim and Judah — both recognize their sickness. Both turn to the Assyrian empire. Neither is healed. The political alliance with the greatest earthly power available cannot address the theological wound that is the source of the distress. The contemporary church and the contemporary culture are in the same position: the recognition of the distress is widespread, the desire for the healing is genuine, and the physicians being consulted are the great kings of the contemporary political and cultural landscape — the legislative solution, the therapeutic program, the economic reform, the technological fix. None of these can heal the wound. The wound is the consequence of the departure from the covenant God, and only the covenant God can address it.

The moth and rottenness of verse 12 also address the specific phenomenon of institutional decline that many Western Christian communities are experiencing. The institutions of the church — the denominational structures, the seminary programs, the publishing enterprises, the parachurch organizations — have in many cases continued to perform their institutional functions while the *hesed* and the *da'at Elohim* that these functions were designed to express and sustain have been consumed by the slow invisible judgment of verse 12. The collapse of the institutional fabric — when it comes, as it has come for many communities — surprises only those who were mistaking the continued performance of the institutional form for the continued presence of the spiritual substance. The moth has been working for decades. The fabric is more threadbare than the continued performance of the forms has made visible.

Key Lesson: **The political crisis of verses 8–14 is the specific historical illustration of the theological diagnosis of the preceding section: the alarm of the Assyrian invasion, the slow invisible judgment of the moth and the dry rot, the catastrophic misidentification of the physician in the appeal to King Jareb, and the lion who tears and goes away — all of these are the specific forms that the discipline of the covenant-violating community takes in the political sphere, and all of them point toward the withdrawal of verse 6 and the condition of verse 15 as the only pathway through the discipline to the restoration that the withdrawing lion's return will accomplish.**

Hosea 5:15

The Return to His Place: The Withdrawal That Waits for the Acknowledgment and the Seeking

*(15) I will go and return to my place,
till they acknowledge their offence,
and seek my face:
in their affliction they will seek me early.*

The Context

The final verse of the chapter is the most theologically concentrated verse in the chapter and the hinge on which the entire movement from chapter 5 to chapter 6 turns. The lion who has torn and gone away in verse 14 now declares the terms of the withdrawal and the condition of the return: I will return to my place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face; in their distress they will earnestly seek me. The verse is a single sentence that contains the entire theological movement of the book in compressed form: the withdrawal (I will return to my place), the condition (until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face), and the promise (in their distress they will earnestly seek me).

The return to my place is the most significant phrase in the verse for understanding the character of the divine withdrawal. The LORD is not withdrawing from existence or from the universe. He is withdrawing to His place — the position of the God who is fully present but not accessible to the seeking that does not meet the condition of the acknowledgment. The withdrawal is not the abandonment. It is the withdrawal to the position from which the genuine seeking can find Him: the position of the God who is present but not available to the seeking that is not accompanied by the acknowledgment of guilt that makes the seeking genuine.

The until is the most important word in the verse for understanding the purposefulness of the discipline. The withdrawal is not permanent. It is temporal — lasting until the condition is met. And the condition is twofold: the acknowledgment of the offense and the seeking of the face. The acknowledgment is the honest reckoning with the specific covenant violation that the preceding chapters have been naming: not the general acknowledgment of sinfulness but the specific acknowledgment of the specific departure from the covenant God that the chapter has described. And the seeking of the face is the seeking that is oriented toward the personal presence of the God who has withdrawn — not the seeking that goes with flocks and herds for the performance of the religious form, but the seeking that desires the face of the One who has turned away.

The in their affliction they will earnestly seek me is the promise that the withdrawal is working toward: the distress that the lion's tearing and going away has produced will be the instrument that drives the seeking to the earnestness and the genuineness that the flocks-and-herds seeking lacked. The affliction is not the evidence of abandonment. It is the catalyst of the genuine seeking. And the earnestly — the Hebrew is *shachar*, to seek early, to seek diligently, to seek with the urgency of the one who goes out at dawn to find what they need before the day has fully begun — is the quality of the seeking that the affliction produces and that the flocks-and-herds seeking never achieved. The withdrawal serves the genuine seeking. The affliction produces the earnestness. And the earnest seeking of the face finds the One who has withdrawn to His place but not withdrawn from the possibility of being found.

Plain American English

Then I will go back to my place and stay there until they admit they are guilty and turn to me. When they are in trouble, they will search for me and find me.

Key Observations

“I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face”: This signifies **The Divine Withdrawal Is Not Abandonment but the Return to a Position of Presence Without Accessibility — the Purposeful Withdrawal That Waits for the Condition That Makes the Genuine Seeking Possible.**

The return to my place is the most important theological specification of the divine withdrawal in the verse. The LORD does not withdraw into non-existence or into indifference. He withdraws to His place — the position of the holy God who is fully present in His sovereignty and His holiness but not accessible to the seeking that is not accompanied by the acknowledgment that the holiness requires. The withdrawal is therefore not the withdrawal of the love but the withdrawal of the availability — the positioning of the God of the covenant in the place from which He can be found by the genuine seeking but not by the performance seeking that goes with flocks and herds without the acknowledgment of guilt. The discipline of the withdrawal is the discipline of the love that refuses to be found on terms that would confirm the shallowness of the seeking.

“Till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face”: This signifies **The Two-Part Condition of the Acknowledgment and the Seeking Is the Most Precise Available Specification of What Genuine Repentance Requires — the Specific Acknowledgment of the Specific Offense and the Personal Seeking of the Face That Has Turned Away.**

The condition of the until is twofold and precise. First, the acknowledgment of the offense: not the general confession of sinfulness but the specific acknowledgment of the specific covenant violation that the preceding chapters have been naming. The acknowledgment is the direct confrontation with the specific ways in which the covenant relationship has been violated — the whoredom, the misattribution, the forgotten law, the rejected knowledge, the political injustice, the appeal to Assyria. The honest naming of the specific offense is the beginning of the genuine return. Second, the seeking of the face: the seeking that is oriented toward the personal presence of the God who has withdrawn, not the seeking that is oriented toward the benefits the presence of the God provides. The face is the personal dimension of the divine presence — the intimacy of the knowing relationship that the da’at Elohim of chapter 4 and chapter 6 has been naming as the absent virtue. The seeking of the face is the seeking of the relationship, not the seeking of the religious benefit that the relationship provides.

“In their affliction they will seek me early”: This signifies **The Affliction Is the Catalyst That Produces the Earnestness of the Genuine Seeking — the Distress That the Discipline Has Produced Is the Condition in Which the Seeking Becomes What the Withdrawal Has Been Waiting For.**

The in their affliction they will earnestly seek me is the promise embedded in the discipline. The affliction — the distress that the lion’s tearing and going away has produced, the wound that the Assyrian king cannot heal, the sickness that the appeal to the earthly great king has failed to address — is the condition in which the earnest seeking becomes possible. The earnestly (shachar — to seek early, to seek with the diligence of the one who cannot wait) is the quality of the seeking that the flocks-and-herds seeking never achieved. The distress has done what the comfortable seeking could not: it has produced the urgency, the genuineness, the desperation that makes the seeking something more than the performance of the religious form. The affliction is

not the evidence of abandonment. It is the evidence of the discipline's effectiveness: the withdrawal has produced the condition in which the genuine seeking is the only resource left, and the genuine seeking finds the One who withdrew to His place specifically to wait for it.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Understand the Seasons of the Divine Withdrawal as the Purposeful Positioning of the God Who Is Present but Waiting for the Acknowledgment That Makes the Genuine Seeking Possible: The return to my place of verse 15 is the theological framework for understanding the season of seeking that does not find. The God who has withdrawn has not withdrawn into absence. He has withdrawn to His place — the position of the holy God who is fully present but not accessible to the seeking that is not accompanied by the acknowledgment of the specific offense. The believer in the season of seeking that does not find is not in a season of divine abandonment. They are in the season of the divine positioning that is waiting for the condition of the genuine seeking: the acknowledgment of the specific offense and the seeking of the face rather than the benefits. The withdrawal is purposeful. The condition is specific. The promise is that the seeking which meets the condition will find the One who has withdrawn to His place to wait for it.

2. Meet the Condition of the Withdrawal with the Specific Acknowledgment and the Personal Seeking That the Verse Requires: The until of verse 15 is the most important word for the believer who wants to end the season of the withdrawal. The condition is twofold: the acknowledgment of the offense and the seeking of the face. The acknowledgment must be specific — the naming of the specific departure from the covenant God, the specific misattribution of the provision, the specific turning to the wrong lovers, the specific appeal to the Assyrian king for the healing of the theological wound. And the seeking must be personal — the seeking of the face, the orientation of the whole life toward the personal presence of the God who has withdrawn, not merely the seeking of the religious benefit that the performance seeking was designed to secure. Meet the condition with the specific acknowledgment and the earnest seeking. This is the seeking that finds.

3. Receive the Affliction as the Catalyst of the Genuine Seeking Rather Than the Evidence of the Divine Abandonment: The in their affliction they will earnestly seek me is the promise that gives the affliction its meaning and its purpose. The distress that the discipline has produced is not the evidence that the pursuing love of chapters 1 through 3 has been exhausted. It is the evidence that the discipline is working: the withdrawal has created the conditions in which the earnest seeking is the only resource left. The believer in the deepest affliction is the believer closest to the condition that verse 15 promises will produce the earnest seeking that finds the One who withdrew to His place. Receive the affliction as the catalyst, not the verdict. The verdict is the promise of the verse: in their affliction they will earnestly seek me. The affliction and the finding belong to the same sentence.

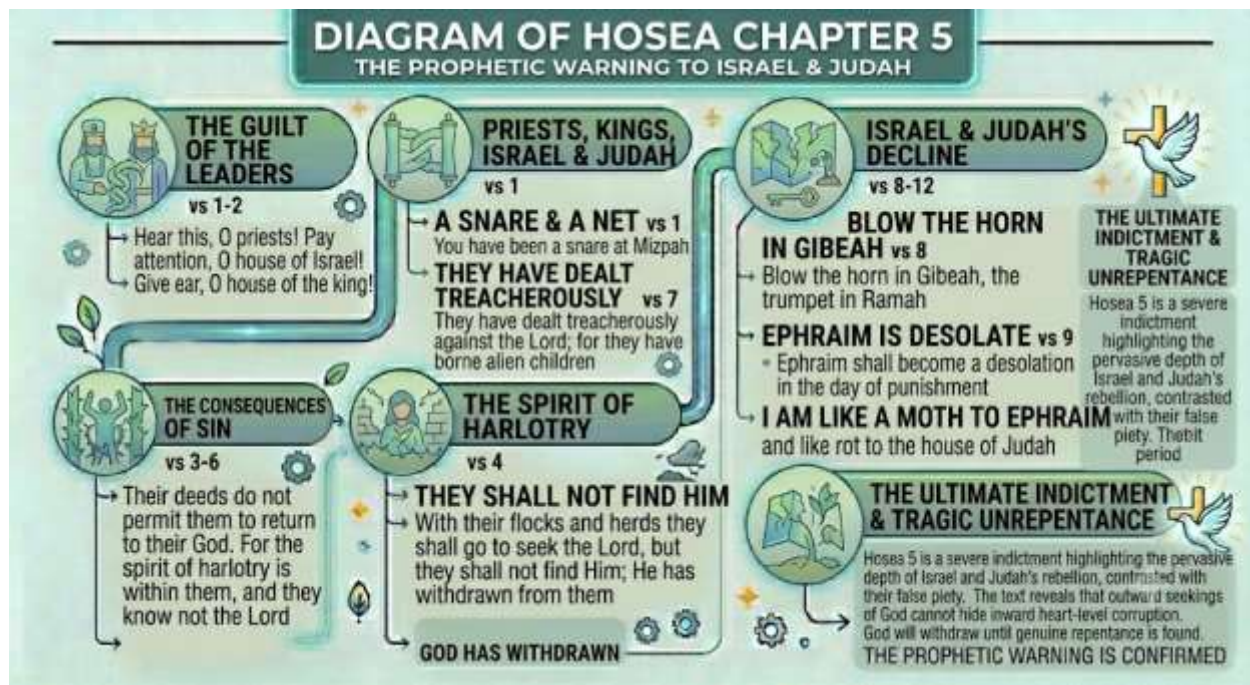
How This Relates to Today

The single verse of Hosea 5:15 is the hinge of the entire movement from the judgment of chapters 4 and 5 to the repentance of chapter 6 and the divine response that follows it. The

withdrawal of the lion who tears and departs is the preparation for the seeking of chapter 6:1 — Come, let us return to the LORD. But the verse also exposes why the seeking of chapter 6:1–3 will be found insufficient by the divine response of chapter 6:4–6. The condition of verse 15 is the acknowledgment of the offense and the seeking of the face. The seeking of chapter 6:1–3 is beautiful and theologically informed, but it does not include the specific acknowledgment of the specific offenses that chapters 4 through 5 have named. The come, let us return of chapter 6 is the seeking that goes with flocks and herds of chapter 5:6 — the seeking that performs the religious form without the acknowledgment of the specific guilt that the verse requires.

The in their affliction they will earnestly seek me is also one of the most pastorally important promises in the book for the minister who accompanies people through the most severe disciplines of their lives. The affliction is not the end of the story. It is the condition that produces the quality of seeking that the comfortable seasons could not. The person in the deepest distress — the wound that the Assyrian kings of their own age have been unable to heal, the sickness that the earthly great kings cannot address — is the person who is closest to the earnest seeking that finds the face of the God who withdrew to His place to wait for it. The pastoral presence with the afflicted person is the presence alongside the one who is being brought by the affliction to the condition of the genuine seeking. Do not rush the affliction. It is the catalyst. The earnest seeking is coming.

Key Lesson: **The single verse of Hosea 5:15 is the theological center of the chapter and the hinge of the book's movement from judgment to restoration: the withdrawal to His place is the purposeful positioning of the holy God who waits for the condition that makes the genuine seeking possible; the until of the acknowledgment and the seeking of the face is the precise specification of the genuine repentance that the performance seeking has been substituting for; and the in their affliction they will earnestly seek me is the promise that the discipline of the withdrawal is working toward the earnest seeking that the affliction will produce and that the One who withdrew to His place has been waiting all along to receive.**



Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We close Hosea chapter 5 having been warned, indicted, and promised. We have been warned by the snare of Mizpah and the net of Tabor — the leadership that was meant to liberate and has become the instrument of entrapment. We have been indicted by the spirit of whoredom that disables the faculty of genuine return even when the desire for it is present, by the withdrawal from the seeking that goes with flocks and herds without the acknowledgment of guilt, and by the moth and dry rot of the slow invisible judgment that works from the inside before the outward collapse becomes visible. We have been sobered by the appeal to King Jareb — the most vivid illustration of the strategy that correctly identifies the symptom and entirely misidentifies the physician. And we have been promised by the final verse: in their affliction they will earnestly seek me.

Lord, let the withdrawal of verse 6 — He has withdrawn from them — and the return to my place of verse 15 be understood for what they are: not the abandonment of the pursuing love but the positioning of the holy God who waits for the acknowledgment and the seeking of the face that make the genuine return possible. Let us not mistake the season of the withdrawal for the season of the abandonment. Let us instead meet the condition of the until: the specific acknowledgment of the specific offense and the earnest seeking of the face rather than the benefits.

Let the affliction do its work in us. Let the wound that the Assyrian kings of our age cannot heal drive us to the One who can heal it. Let the distress that the discipline has produced be the

catalyst of the earnest seeking that the comfortable seasons could not produce. And let the earnest seeking find the One who withdrew to His place specifically to wait for it, who tears before He heals, who goes away before He returns, who is the most powerful and the most holy and the most pursuing of all the loves we have encountered in our lives.

We acknowledge our offense: the specific whoredom, the specific misattribution of the provision, the specific appeal to the wrong physicians, the specific removal of the landmarks of the covenant justice, the specific spirit of whoredom that has disabled the faculty of genuine return. We seek Your face: not the benefits that the relationship provides, not the revival that the flocks-and-herds seeking was designed to secure, but Your face — the personal presence of the covenant God who has withdrawn to His place and who is found by the earnest seeking of the one who has acknowledged the guilt and desires the face above all else.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
Glory to God Alone