

The Book of Hosea

Chapter 10

The United States of America is a Christian nation. What do I mean by that statement? I do not mean that the United States is a Christian theocracy. Surely our nation is not ruled by the Bible or the Christian faith; in fact, the Bible is banned from most spheres of public influence. Neither by this statement do I mean that the majority of Americans believe the Word of God is absolute truth. In fact, when we compare surveys of American Christians' beliefs with the teachings of Scripture, we realize that there are very few *true* Christians in America. It is clear that immorality and idolatry are rampant in modern America and its churches.

Yet, if there is any nation in the world that could be called Christian, it is the U.S.A. Two recent studies show that the majority of Americans still profess to be Christians. The *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*¹ shows that **78.4 percent of all Americans still profess to be Christians**. The breakdown is 51% Protestant, 24% Roman Catholic, 1.7% Mormon, 0.7% Jehovah's Witnesses, 0.6% Eastern Orthodox, and 0.3% other Christian.

Other world religions claim the adherence of just 4.7% of Americans (1.7% Jewish, 0.7% Unitarians, 0.7% Buddhist, 0.6% Muslim, 0.4% Hindu, 0.4% New Age, etc.). Meanwhile, the fastest growing group is the non-religious, secular "unaffiliated" who now comprise 16% of all Americans.

Equally striking is a recent Harris Poll cited by Reuters news service on April 9, 2008, which showed that the Bible is the most popular book in America. In fact, the Bible is America's favorite book, among whites, Hispanics, African-Americans, southerners, midwesterners, easterners, westerners, Republicans, Democrats, Independents—*every* demographic group!²

What is most striking for our study in Hosea is that the majority of Americans still profess to be followers of the one, true God, the Lord Jesus Christ. They even claim that the Bible is their "favorite book." And, yet, America is seemingly just as rebellious, idolatrous, and immoral as the ancient nation of Israel, featured in the book of Hosea.

That is why it is appropriate to apply the teachings of Hosea not only to the church but also to our nation as a whole. America is a Christian nation, insofar as nearly 80% of Americans claim to be Christians. So Hosea's teachings and warnings hold great import for our nation, our churches, and our families.

In Hosea, chapter 10, the LORD continues to explain why He was forced to put away His unfaithful wife, Israel. He was forced to judge her because she was unrepentant.

¹ Available online at religions.pewforum.org/reports. See article "Change-seekers" by Gene Edward Veith (*WORLD*, April 5/12, 2008), p. 31.

² "Bible is America's favorite book: poll. *Yahoo! News*. Electronically retrieved 9 April 2008 at news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20080408/lf_nm_life/reading_survey.

Hosea 10:1 Israel empties *his* vine; He brings forth fruit for himself. According to the multitude of his fruit He has increased the altars; According to the bounty of his land They have embellished *his* sacred pillars. (NKJ)

Israel had prospered bringing forth fruit. God blessed the people despite their unworthiness. Yet, God reproves the people here for having not only been obstinate in their sin but also for having increased in their sin. As soon as the people gained new strength, they multiplied altars to themselves, even though the Lord had clearly shown that their false forms of worship did not please Him. In fact, they were the greatest abomination to him.

The more God prospered the people, the more they turned against Him and His true worship. They would not repent. They would not turn back to God and to His true worship, as He sets forth in His Word. In His Word God says, "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you" (**Deuteronomy 4:2**).

Likewise, we read in **Deuteronomy 12:28-32**: "Observe and obey all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you and your children after you forever, when you do *what is* good and right in the sight of the LORD your God. " When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You shall not **worship** the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it" (emphasis added).

So God's Word clearly states that in worship we must *only* do that which He has commanded. We cannot add to nor take away from what He has commanded in His Word. To do things in worship that God has not commanded us to do in His Word is idolatry. It is a superstition to add human inventions to God's pure worship. Even if such things are done with the best of intentions, even if they have an appearance of wisdom to us (Col. 2:23), God is *not* pleased by them. We must not do anything in worship that God has not commanded in His Word, either explicitly or implicitly, "by good and necessary consequence."

Rather than turn back to God's pure worship, Israel had multiplied altars for himself without God's authorization. He had become worse than ever. Entrenched in false worship as they were, the Israelites thought that they were most holy worshipers of God. They displayed great zeal for worship. Yet, it was an insane devotion, for God detests false worship done according to human whim. They would have been better off if they had never even heard of God.

2 Their heart is divided; Now they are held guilty. He will break down their altars; He will ruin their sacred pillars.

Christ wants a faithful bride. A faithful bride must give her heart to her husband, as a chaste and holy wife. If her heart becomes divided, if she drifts away from her husband, she may be led to forsake her husband for other lovers. Such is also the case with

Christians today. If our hearts are divided; if we are double-minded; if we follow other gods, then we will drift away from Christ. The Israelites had failed to devote themselves to God as true disciples of the Lord.

In the New Testament book of James, we find this same warning to Christians today to flee from spiritual adultery. James writes in James 4:4-8: "Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, 'The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously'? But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: 'God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.'" Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse *your* hands, *you* sinners; and purify *your* hearts, *you* double-minded."

The heart of a double-minded man is divided. He says he loves Christ, but he also is in love with the world and the things of this world. Yet, God warns that "whoever . . . wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." Such friendship amounts to spiritual adultery. God is jealous for His bride. He wants our complete devotion to Him. He wants us to humble ourselves before Him, to seek His face, to pray, and to turn from our wicked ways. He wants us to talk with Him day and night, as we pray at all times. He wants us to learn from Him, as we study His Word alone and with our families, in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening. He calls us to submit to Christ, just as He calls wives to submit to their own husbands. He promises that if we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us. So let us cleanse our hands and purify our hearts. Let us reject all false teachings and all human inventions in worship (Col. 2:23). Let us cling to God's Word alone, as we believe all that it teaches us.

The Israelites were "held guilty." God will inflict dreadful punishment on them so that they shall no longer deceive and flatter themselves. The Lord will "break down their altars; He will ruin their sacred pillars." The Israelites trusted in their own inventions and the worship they had created according to their own desires. So God had to destroy their altars and sacred pillars, so that they would be brought to fear Him and to realize that they had been deceived by the craftiness of Satan. They had given themselves up to superstition and idolatry.

Anything that man invents for us in worship that God has not commanded in His Word is a superstition. It is idolatrous. The Israelites will be forced to lay aside the confidence they had mistakenly placed in their own inventions. Why? Because by their false worship, they had grown in pride against God.

In Colossians 2:20-23, the apostle Paul states: "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as *though* living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations -- "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," which all concern things which perish with the using -- according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh."

This New Testament passage is a key passage for understanding what constitutes *true* worship in God's eyes, as opposed to *false* worship. As Christians, we have "died with Christ from the basic principles of the world." How then can we subject ourselves to

worldly regulations? The NIV translation says, “why, as though you still belonged to it [the world], do you submit to its rules” (v. 20)? This passage from Colossians teaches us that *true* Christian doctrine, *true* Christian teachings, *true* Christian worship, are based on the word of God *alone*. On the other hand, *false* doctrine, *false* teachings, and *false* worship are “according to the commandments and doctrines of men” (v. 22), or the New International Version says that “they are based on human commands and teachings.”

God says in Colossians 2:23 that “these things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion” and “false humility.” The term “self-imposed religion” is elsewhere translated “self-made religion” (NAS), or “self-imposed worship” (NIV). What does this term mean?

The editors of the *New Geneva [or Reformation] Study Bible* explain the significance of this “self-imposed worship,” which God condemns:

God accepts worship offered according to His will revealed in Scripture, not religious exercises done at the dictate of presumptuous human whim (Matt. 15:9). The idea that God must be worshiped only in the way He has instituted has had a profound influence in Reformed churches.³

John Calvin further explains the significance of “self-imposed worship” or “will worship”:

We are not in this matter to stand either by our own or by other men's judgments. We must listen to the voice of God, and hear in what estimation He holds that profanation of worship which is displayed when men, overleaping the boundaries of His Word, run riot in their own inventions. The reasons which He assigns for punishing the Israelites with blindness, after they had lost the pious and holy discipline of the Church, are two, viz., the prevalence of hypocrisy, *and will-worship* (Gk. ἐθειλοθηρκία) meaning thereby *a form of worship contrived by man*.⁴

So what we are talking about are teachings or commandments or forms of worship that are “self-imposed” or “self-made.” They are invented by people, but not ordained, not prescribed by God; they are not ordained by God in His Word. Such worship, such religion, may display a “false humility.” In the eyes of religious hypocrites, those who submit to their manmade commandments and doctrines are “humble,” as they yield obedience to the church and its laws. If the rituals are self-abasing, involve self-denial or austerity, then this furthers the appearance of humility. Yet, God views such submission as a great expression of pride—to think that we know how to worship God better than He does. Manmade worship is an attack on God and the authority of His Word.

Any church that engages in false worship is asking for trouble.

³ *New Geneva Study Bible*, 1888, emphasis added.

⁴ John Calvin, *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1:189, emphasis added.

3 For now they say, "We have no king, Because we did not fear the LORD. And as for a king, what would he do for us?"

The Israelites would be forced to admit that they "have no king" because they are being punished, as they deserved. Why? "Because [they] did not fear the Covenant LORD."

The people of Israel had acted very pridefully. Lacking the fear of the Lord, they resisted the words of God's true prophets with all their might. As soon as a severe word came out of their mouths, great contentions arose. They said, "What! Is this how you should treat the people of God, the elect race of Abraham?" They were too prideful to receive any rebuke. They obstinately spurned every instruction.

Had the Lord not dealt severely with the people, it is doubtful that they ever would have been led to confess their sin, as they do here. However, it is doubtful that the people were truly repentant. It is one thing to be forced to admit that God's hand is against you; it is another thing to be truly repentant and obey God in full submission to His will.

While Israel had a king, they thought they were safe from every harm. Therefore, they sneered against all the threats God made against them through His ordained prophets. Yet, when the Lord took away their earthly protector, they began to see how foolishly they had flattered themselves and how much they had been deceived by Satan.

4 They have spoken words, Swearing falsely in making a covenant. Thus judgment springs up like hemlock in the furrows of the field.

The Israelites likely promised that they would be the best and the most faithful worshipers of God. Yet, all they spoke were *words*; what they spoke was not from their hearts. The people swore falsely "in making a covenant" to the Lord. They brazenly broke their membership vows to God. They were not sincere in their promises to be faithful to God and His Church. Now their judgment will arise against them, like poisonous weeds in a plowed field.

5 The inhabitants of Samaria fear Because of the calf of Beth Aven. For its people mourn for it, And its priests shriek for it -- Because its glory has departed from it.

The inhabitants of Samaria in the northern kingdom were glorying in their golden calves, which they had created with their "good intentions" to worship the Lord. They thought that God would be pleased with such worship, even though He never commanded it in His Word. Thus, they set up their golden calves in Dan and Bethel, the rival worship sites that King Jeroboam I had established without the approval of God's Word. (God had commanded them to worship Him at the temple in Jerusalem.)

How foolish it is to worship a golden calf. Remember that Bethel, the house of God, became Beth Aven, the house of idols. The people were delirious in their religious superstitions. They mourn for their golden calf and the priests shriek and cry out over it "because its glory has departed from it." The priests and the people had spent much time molding their golden idols and using them as aids to worship God. How upset they were when their golden idols were taken away from them. Yet, their gods cannot save themselves. They have shown themselves to be worthless. Remember how the prophet Elijah mocked the idolatrous worshipers of Baal in 1 Kings 18:27: "Elijah mocked them and said, "Cry aloud, for he *is* a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is

on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened.”” The whole people of Israel were implicated in the superstition. All the Israelites had come to believe that golden calves should be part of the worship of God. How dangerous it is to add things in worship that God has not commanded us to include!

6 The idol also shall be carried to Assyria As a present for King Jareb. Ephraim shall receive shame, And Israel shall be ashamed of his own counsel.

The people of Samaria will mourn over their manmade idols, their golden calves. For their idol “shall be carried to Assyria as a present for King Jareb.” When the Assyrian troops converged on the northern kingdom of Israel, the Israelites found themselves in dire straits. They became so desperate that they gave their golden calves to the king of Assyria, in an attempt to pacify the king.

Yet, in doing so the Israelites realized that they were stripped of their protection, for they were now without any hope of safety, as there was no God among them. Their exile is now at hand. Not only the Israelites, but also the calves they worshipped will be carried away captive.

Let us recall that King Jeroboam I, the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel, had built temples in the north to prevent the people under his command from reuniting with the children of David in the southern kingdom of Judah. He desired totally to separate the ten tribes from Judah, by inventing a new system of worship with new temples, new ceremonies, and a new priesthood in the north. Had the ten tribes worshiped the true God in Jerusalem, they might have been led to reunite with their brothers and sisters into one body under one head. Yet, largely for selfish political reasons, Jeroboam desired to cut off all communication between the two peoples. All Israel agreed to their leader’s counsel. After all, under Jeroboam and subsequent leaders, the northern kingdom experienced great material prosperity and numerical growth. By all worldly standards, the southern kingdom of Judah seemed inferior.

King Jeroboam had proven himself an expert at what today we might call “church growth.” However, he did not grow his churches God’s way, but man’s. He used worldly methods to grow his churches. He attempted great things for God, but not in accordance with God’s Word. The priests and the people trusted in human wisdom, rather than God’s commands. Thus, God declares through the prophet Hosea, “Ephraim shall receive shame, and Israel shall be ashamed of his own counsel.” Their own counsel had given them numerical growth and financial prosperity. Yet, ultimately it led to their destruction. The Lord will show them who really is in charge.

7 As for Samaria, her king is cut off Like a twig on the water.

Because they were so hard-hearted and disobedient, the Lord sought to stun the ears of the people with continual threatening. In doing so, he took away any excuse they might have before God. The Israelites had thought that their king, after their idols, was an invincible fortress. They were invincible; no one could bring them down.

Therefore, God announces that He will humble Samaria. He will give her a just punishment. Her king will be cut off “like a twig on the water.” He will be proven helpless and at the utter mercy of the King of kings—the King in whom the Israelites ought to have placed their trust.

8 Also the high places of Aven, the sin of Israel, Shall be destroyed. The thorn and thistle shall grow on their altars; They shall say to the mountains, "Cover us!" And to the hills, "Fall on us!"

The people's hearts were as hard as iron or steel. Therefore, the prophet Hosea continues to threaten the people over and over, expressing the vengeance of God that is about to be poured out on their nation. Hosea declares that God will destroy the churches of His holy nation. "The high places of Aven, the sin of Israel, shall be destroyed."

God no longer dwelt in Bethel, the place where He had appeared to the patriarch Jacob. The superstitious thought God was there, but He had forsaken the place. Why? Because His worship had been corrupted. Men may give holy names to things, but that does not make them holy. **Only God can declare something to be holy, and God declares things to be holy in His Word alone. "Why?", you might ask. Because He is the very definition of holiness.**

God loudly proclaims that Bethel is Beth Aven, for here Jeroboam had built temples and appointed new sacrifices without God's command. Whenever men depart from the word of the Lord, it will do them no good to disguise their inventions with religious terminology. Why? Because **the Lord only approves of that which He Himself commands.**

You see, the Israelites thought that they performed a great service to God and that their worship was acceptable to Him. They took great interest in their holy rites and ceremonies. But shockingly, God declared that all their ceremonies were sinful. The high places were "the sin of Israel." Why? Because **whenever we depart from following God's command, we fall into idolatry and profane God's holy name. Or do we think that we know how to worship God better than He does?**

John Calvin, a founder of the Presbyterian and Reformed churches, explains: "We must then understand, that it is not in the power of men to form any modes of worship they please; nor is it in their power to decide on this or that worship, whether it be lawful or spurious; but nothing remains for us but to attend to what the Lord says. When, therefore, the Lord pronounces that to be profane which pleases us, we ought to acquiesce in His judgment; for it does not become us to dispute with Him, and it would be vain to do so."

So when we speak of what we can or cannot do in worship, there is very little to discuss. God leaves very little if any room for debate. The only question we have to ask is whether or not God has commanded us to do this or that in His Word. If He has commanded it, then we must do it. If He has not commanded it, then we are forbidden from doing it. Period.

Hosea says that "the thorn and the thistle shall grow on their altars." Despite the gross sin in their lives, the Israelites thought that they were safe from God's judgment because they had outward forms of religion and observed things that they called "holy." How foolish to trust in their own altars, for the altars they invented and built were in fact provoking God's wrath against them.

The destruction that was coming at the hands of the Assyrians was so dreadful that it would have been better to perish a hundred times than to remain in that state alive. For the people cry to the mountains, "Cover us!" and to the hills, "Fall on us!" Life itself would become a horror to them, for they would perceive the hand of God to be against them. The people will seek to flee from the presence of God and His judgment.

Just before the crucifixion, Jesus cited this passage to describe what the last judgment will be like—or he may also be referring to the judgment that befell Jerusalem in AD 70. Jesus said in Luke 23:28-30, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, 'Blessed *are* the barren, wombs that never bore, and breasts which never nursed!' "Then they will begin 'to say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!"'"

9 " O Israel, you have sinned from the days of Gibeah; There they stood. The battle in Gibeah against the children of iniquity Did not overtake them.

As we learned in chapter 9, the Gibeonites had fallen away from all fear of God and had become lawless. They became like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, and they even committed horrible acts of rape and murder. Israel's sin was not new; they had a long history of depravity.

God had used the Israelites to take vengeance on the people of Gibeah and on the whole tribe of Benjamin. Yet, the Israelites themselves were no better. Their sin, like a deluge, had overwhelmed the whole land of Israel since that time.

The lessons from Gibeah did not cause the Israelites to fear God and obey His law. On the contrary, they foolishly abused His grace and became just as lawless as the Gibeonites.

The Israelites had been warned at the expense of others to repent and to live afterwards a holier and purer life in subjection to God and obedience to His commands.

In a similar fashion, the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 5:5-7, "For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them."

10 When *it is* My desire, I will chasten them. Peoples shall be gathered against them When I bind them for their two transgressions.

God is longsuffering with His wayward people. Yet, when it is His desire, He will chasten them. God's decree to destroy the northern kingdom of Israel cannot now be revoked, for this punishment will be to Him His highest delight.

All the nations on earth are in God's hand. He holds all peoples under His command. He is the King of kings. Whenever it pleases Him, He can stir nations up to war. Israel had laughed at God's judgment. Yet, God will have the last laugh. He will cause the wicked nation of Assyria to rise up against them and destroy them.

What are their “two transgressions”? This may refer to the past sin at Gibeah and the present sin of Israel or to Israel’s religious sin and political faithlessness, or simply to Israel’s repeated and unyielding transgressions.

11 Ephraim is a trained heifer That loves to thresh *grain*; But I harnessed her fair neck, I will make Ephraim pull a *plow*. Judah shall plow; Jacob shall break his clods.”

There is more labor and toil in plowing than in threshing, for the oxen are joined together and then they are compelled to obey. In contrast, when oxen thresh, they are loose, and the labor is less toilsome and heavy. An animal that threshes is teachable and unmuzzled, threshing the harvested grain and free to eat as it works. With similar imagery, Jesus declares in Matthew 11:28-30: “Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light.”

The prophet Hosea means that Ephraim had pretended some obedience and yet would not take the yoke so as to be really and completely submissive to God.

Ephraim is like a trained heifer that will not submit her neck to the yoke but will only pass through the threshing-floor and tread the corn. Israel did not completely repudiate the truth. Yet, when the Lord gave her spiritual meat, she fiercely resisted and showed that she wished to do according to her *own* will and desire.

John Calvin comments, “Almost the whole world exhibit . . . some appearance of obedience . . . ; but they wish to make a compact with God, that He should not require more than what their pleasure may allow. When one is a slave to many vices, he desires a liberty for these to be allowed him; in other things, he will yield some obedience. We now understand the meaning of the Prophet, and see what he had in view.”

Hosea condemns that hypocritical service that the Israelites rendered to God. They were unwilling to bear the yoke of God’s law. They did not want to submit to God. They were untamable. They were not willing to come to God’s threshing.

God says, “I harnessed her fair neck.” Why did God treat Ephraim with severity? It was because she was so obstinate. God tried by afflictions to subdue stubborn Israel. God sought to bring Israel into conformity to His law. Israel had no excuse for her rebelliousness. She had a “fair neck,” which means a strong neck capable of arduous work. She was strong enough to bear the yoke, but she loved her own pleasures and refused the yoke. Therefore, God tamed her by afflictions. Now, the easy yoke of covenant blessings will be replaced by the hard yoke of covenant curses in order to teach the Israelites to obey their Master, the one true Lord.

God says, “I will make Ephraim pull a *plow*. Judah shall plow; Jacob shall break his clods.” The people will be carried away into exile since they cannot rest quietly in the land of Canaan. Judah, the remaining portion of God’s people, shall also be afflicted.

12 Sow for yourselves righteousness; Reap in mercy; Break up your fallow ground, For *it is* time to seek the LORD, Till He comes and rains righteousness on you.

Once again God calls the Israelites to repentance. They lacked true righteousness and mercy. What God desires of us, too, is true righteousness, true holiness, and true mercy. Micah 6:8 says, “He has shown you, O man, what *is* good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?”

Hosea declares that the way of salvation is not yet closed. The Lord invites you to Himself, and He is of Himself inclined to mercy.

So the prophet Isaiah declares, “Seek the LORD while He may be found, Call upon Him while He is near” (Isa. 55:6). “Behold, now *is* the accepted time; behold, now *is* the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). Whenever sinners truly repent, God shows Himself merciful and kind to them.

“For it is time to seek the LORD, till He comes and rains righteousness on you.” What a glorious picture we have here in the midst of the repeated proclamations of God’s judgment in Hosea, chapter 10. Let us seek the Covenant LORD, for He is faithful. He will cover us with Christ’s righteousness, if we place our faith in Him alone. If we truly seek the Lord and turn to Him in repentance and faith, He will rain righteousness down on us. Ephesians 4:24 reminds us as Christians that we “put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.” How beautiful and refreshing and full of hope these words are.

13 You have plowed wickedness; You have reaped iniquity. You have eaten the fruit of lies, Because you trusted in your own way, In the multitude of your mighty men.

Sadly, the Israelites had failed to repent. They plowed wickedness, and they reaped iniquity. They “have eaten the fruit of lies.” They had false confidence in themselves. Why? “Because [they] trusted in [their] own way, in the multitude of [their] mighty men.”

This was the source of all the Israelites’ sins. They trusted in their own counsels, and they were unwilling to listen to the word of God. Having abandoned God’s law and the fear of the Lord, they no longer dreaded God’s judgments. Neither did they flee to God for His promise of protection to defend them. Rightly does Proverbs warn us that “Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18).

When men are puffed up in pride, they will not listen to counsel nor instruction. The foundation and root of the sin of Israel was in this falsehood—that they set up their own strength in opposition to God. They thought that they were so wise that they had no need of teachers. The people were so blinded by their own pride, that they could not hear God’s Word that called them again and again to repent and to obey His Word alone.

14 Therefore tumult shall arise among your people, And all your fortresses shall be plundered As Shalman plundered Beth Arbel in the day of battle -- A mother dashed in pieces upon *her* children.

The prophet Hosea clearly pronounces punishment on Israel. God will be a just Avenger. The people had become drunk with falsehood, vainly trusting in their own counsels, walking in their own ways, as the blind led the blind. "Therefore tumult shall arise among your people and all your fortresses shall be plundered." Whatever strength they had would prove weak and utterly useless.

Shalman was probably Shalmaneser V, king of Assyria (727-722 B.C.) who played a role in Israel's demise (cf. 2 Kings 17:3-6). Although the location of Beth Arbel is uncertain, the memory of the heinous crimes committed there were vividly etched into their minds. Mothers were violently thrown on their children. The cruel enemy spared neither women nor children.

15 Thus it shall be done to you, O Bethel, Because of your great wickedness. At dawn the king of Israel Shall be cut off utterly.

God's judgment on Israel shall be equally horrid. Why does He mention Bethel in particular, instead of Ephraim or Israel. Because Israel had turned Bethel, which was the house of God, into Beth Aven, the house of idols and iniquity. The Church had become a house of idolatry, a house of false worship. They had corrupted the worship of God by worshiping the calf. The slaughter of the Israelites should not be attributed so much to the Assyrians as to the "great wickedness" of the Israelites, who committed spiritual adultery against their God and ran after other lovers, other gods.

Israel cannot blame anyone else for their destruction; they were totally at fault. It was on account of their "great wickedness" that this final, horrid judgment befell them. The people had a blind confidence in their own strength. Now, suddenly, "at dawn," the Lord would overturn that kingdom which once had been so mighty and prosperous. The king of Israel will perish in a moment. Her soldiers and defenses will prove useless to her.

PRAYERS (by John Calvin)

Grant, Almighty God, that as You have once appeared in the person of Your only-begotten Son, and have rendered in Him Your glory visible to us, and as You daily set forth to us the same Christ in the glass of Your gospel, — O grant, that we, fixing our eyes on Him, may not go astray, nor be led here and there after wicked inventions, the fallacies of Satan, and the allurements of this world: but may we continue firm in the obedience of faith and persevere in it through the whole course of our life, until we are finally transformed into the image of Your eternal glory, which now already begins to shine in us, through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Grant, Almighty God, that as we remain yet in our own wickedness, even though we are often warned and sweetly invited by You, and as You prevail not with us by Your daily instruction, — O grant, that we may, in a spirit of meekness, at length turn to Your service, and fight against the hardness and obstinacy of our flesh, till we render ourselves submissive to You, and not wait until You put forth Your hand against us. Or may we at least so profit from Your chastisements, as not to constrain You to execute extreme vengeance against us. May we repent without delay. May we truly and without hypocrisy plow under Your yoke, and so enjoy Your special blessings, that You may show Yourself to us not only as our Lord, but also as our Father, full of mercy and kindness, through Christ our Lord. Amen.