

LOVE WITHOUT LIMIT

Unmasking the Delusion

I wonder what you think of, or what image comes into your mind, when I say the word God? I wonder what you are thinking right now, even as I ask you that question. People have all sorts of different responses to thinking about God. When I was the Chair of Governors at Waterfield Primary School a few years back, I would go in and take assemblies. One time I was chatting to a member of staff who said to me: "Ian when you say God in assembly in this school, these children are not thinking what you are thinking." It was a school of multi cultures and multi faiths. When I said God, it meant something different to most of the children than it did to me. I had some learning to do as I turned up for assemblies.

If I went out into Crawley town centre and asked people what they thought of when I said 'God', I am sure I would get a variety of answers. I'm sure if I asked some Christians what they think of when I say the word God I'd get different answers too! So... I am wondering what you think of, or what image comes to your mind, when I say the word 'God'.

I wonder if there are some common images of God that people think of when asked to think about God. Perhaps one is like this picture: an old man. God is like an old man with a beard. He's probably a fairly kind old man, but he's also probably a little deaf. When you get close, he's nice enough, but mostly he's not close. And because he's old and a little deaf, he doesn't really hear you if you try to speak to him, and he's pretty ineffectual if you want him to do anything. Basically, he's nice but powerless.

Or, perhaps, he's like this: a stern headmaster. God is really like the stern headmaster who's always watching ready to catch you out. He's always watching wanting to catch you in any and every mistake. God's job is really, like that of a headmaster, to keep you in line to make sure you can be the best you can be. Trouble is, mostly, he does it by putting fear into you so you don't dare step out of line. And, it's a lot about making sure you avoid any punishment that might be ready if you get anything wrong.

Or perhaps God is like this: a genie in a bottle. God's job is to turn up, like a genie in a bottle, when we want him to make things right. A genie in a bottle is

there, when we need it, to do things for us. And God really is there to do things for us, to change a situation, to give us what we ask for.

Now I realise these are caricatures, but I suspect there's more truth in them than we might be prepared to admit. Perhaps, at times, we think of God in all those ways. So, what do you think of, what image comes to mind, when I say the word God?

I'm going to read lots of text this week! I'm going to read chapters 8 and 9 of Hosea and while I do that, I invite you to think about this question: what does Israel think about God? Remember that in Hosea we have God's perspective on how things are, but it gives some clues as to what Israel thinks about God.

Israel to Reap the Whirlwind

8 "Put the trumpet to your lips!

An eagle is over the house of the LORD
because the people have broken my covenant
and rebelled against my law.

² Israel cries out to me,
'Our God, we acknowledge you!'

³ But Israel has rejected what is good;
an enemy will pursue him.

⁴ They set up kings without my consent;
they choose princes without my approval.

With their silver and gold
they make idols for themselves
to their own destruction.

⁵ Samaria, throw out your calf-idol!
My anger burns against them.

How long will they be incapable of purity?

⁶ They are from Israel!
This calf—a metalworker has made it;
it is not God.

It will be broken in pieces,
that calf of Samaria.

⁷ "They sow the wind
and reap the whirlwind.

The stalk has no head;
it will produce no flour.

Were it to yield grain,

foreigners would swallow it up.
⁸ Israel is swallowed up;
now she is among the nations
like something no one wants.
⁹ For they have gone up to Assyria
like a wild donkey wandering alone.
Ephraim has sold herself to lovers.
¹⁰ Although they have sold themselves among the nations,
I will now gather them together.
They will begin to waste away
under the oppression of the mighty king.
¹¹ “Though Ephraim built many altars for sin offerings,
these have become altars for sinning.
¹² I wrote for them the many things of my law,
but they regarded them as something foreign.
¹³ Though they offer sacrifices as gifts to me,
and though they eat the meat,
the LORD is not pleased with them.
Now he will remember their wickedness
and punish their sins:
They will return to Egypt.
¹⁴ Israel has forgotten their Maker
and built palaces;
Judah has fortified many towns.
But I will send fire on their cities
that will consume their fortresses.

Punishment for Israel

9 Do not rejoice, Israel;
do not be jubilant like the other nations.
For you have been unfaithful to your God;
you love the wages of a prostitute
at every threshing floor.
² Threshing floors and winepresses will not feed the people;
the new wine will fail them.
³ They will not remain in the LORD’s land;
Ephraim will return to Egypt
and eat unclean food in Assyria.

⁴They will not pour out wine offerings to the LORD,
nor will their sacrifices please him.
Such sacrifices will be to them like the bread of mourners;
all who eat them will be unclean.
This food will be for themselves;
it will not come into the temple of the LORD.

⁵What will you do on the day of your appointed festivals,
on the feast days of the LORD?

⁶Even if they escape from destruction,
Egypt will gather them,
and Memphis will bury them.
Their treasures of silver will be taken over by briers,
and thorns will overrun their tents.

⁷The days of punishment are coming,
the days of reckoning are at hand.
Let Israel know this.
Because your sins are so many
and your hostility so great,
the prophet is considered a fool,
the inspired person a maniac.

⁸The prophet, along with my God,
is the watchman over Ephraim,
yet snares await him on all his paths,
and hostility in the house of his God.

⁹They have sunk deep into corruption,
as in the days of Gibeah.
God will remember their wickedness
and punish them for their sins.

¹⁰“When I found Israel,
it was like finding grapes in the desert;
when I saw your ancestors,
it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree.
But when they came to Baal Peor,
they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol
and became as vile as the thing they loved.

¹¹Ephraim’s glory will fly away like a bird—
no birth, no pregnancy, no conception.

¹²Even if they rear children,
I will bereave them of every one.
Woe to them

when I turn away from them!
¹³ I have seen Ephraim, like Tyre,
planted in a pleasant place.
But Ephraim will bring out
their children to the slayer.”
¹⁴ Give them, LORD—
what will you give them?
Give them wombs that miscarry
and breasts that are dry.
¹⁵ “Because of all their wickedness in Gilgal,
I hated them there.
Because of their sinful deeds,
I will drive them out of my house.
I will no longer love them;
all their leaders are rebellious.
¹⁶ Ephraim is blighted,
their root is withered,
they yield no fruit.
Even if they bear children,
I will slay their cherished offspring.”
¹⁷ My God will reject them
because they have not obeyed him;
they will be wanderers among the nations.

(Hosea chapter 8 v 1 - 9 v 17)

So, what does Israel think about God?

I’m going to focus on verse 2, but I think the meaning of verse 2 plays out in the rest of chapters 8 & 9.

Verse 2 ‘Israel cries out to me, Our God, we acknowledge you!’ (NIV). Many other translations, translate it as: “Our (My) God, we know You.” (Message, CEV, NASB, NKJ) The Hebrew word translated as acknowledge or know, is the word Yada and it means, ‘To know’. The Hebrew word carries a broader meaning than our English word – to know. It can be translated three different ways, and in the Old Testament it can mean all three meanings at the same time.

The name Yoda, from Star Wars, makes this point beautifully. Yoda (the name) is the noun form of the Hebrew “Yada”. And, as Star Wars fans will know, Yoda

- 1) knows all about the force
- 2) submits to the force
- 3) constantly uses the force.

So, Hosea 8 v 2 can be translated in three ways:

- 1) Our God, we know about you
- 2) Our God, we acknowledge you
- 3) Our God, we experience you.

We know about you, means we know what you are like, or we understand what you are like. We acknowledge you, means we are submitting to what we know about you. We experience you, means we see the fruit of surrendering to who God really is.

In chapters 8 & 9 God says Israel does none of these three things. They don't know what God is like, they don't submit to him and there is no fruit because there is no surrender to God. Maybe, maybe another way of saying that, is that, in truth, Israel had simply forgotten about God.

What would God say about you?

Israel claims to know God but they have forgotten who he is, they don't submit themselves to what they think they know of him, and they don't have any experience of the fruit that comes from living God's way.

Is it possible that any of that might be true about you and me today? Is it possible we have forgotten who God really is – even though we claim to know what he's like? Is it possible that we don't submit ourselves to anything we say we know about God? Is it possible that we are not experiencing the fruit that walking with God brings?

Israel has one view of God. God has a different view of what Israel thinks about God. The people of Israel claim they know all about God, but God says they are ignorant of who he really is.

Chapter 8 verse 1 tells us they have rejected God's law and broken the covenant. God's law was a gift. God's law, was a way of God showing his people the best way to live. Often the Ten Commandments are understood simply as a list of 'don'ts'. And usually in an angry sort of a way – a stern headmaster sort of a way – don't do this, don't do that – or there will be

trouble. But they are given in a loving way: “Honestly folks, don’t do this because it really isn’t good for you or the community – living that way simply doesn’t work! If you want to live well, then avoid doing these things – it’ll be better that way.”

But Israel has chosen a different way to live without reference to God’s help. In chapter 8 verse 3 the people of Israel have lost all sense of what is good and what is bad. God says they haven’t turned to the scriptures for so long, they no longer have any understanding of what they mean (v12). Israel has forgotten God (v14). And they have forgotten God to the point that how they live tells lies about God – it’s not true to what God has said or who he is. And, tragically, because the people have rejected God’s invitation to learn about him, he is going to reject them (9v17).

So, friends, what do you know about God? How are you doing?

The people of God claim too, to acknowledge God – they claim to submit to him. God says that’s not really true. In fact, they resist what little they know about him. The people know God wants worship to take place in the Temple in Jerusalem. But (8v1) says they have not done what God said, and they have set up alternative shrines all over the place.

They know that God set up David’s dynasty to rule the nation, yet the nation under David is now split into Israel and Judah and chapter 8 v 4 tells us they set up their own kings – who are nothing to do with God.

They know God said not to make any images of him, but (8 v 4-6) tells of how they’ve done just that, and, because of that, the sin offerings they bring to these altars are actually therefore sinful in themselves (8v11.) Because the people constantly rage against him (9v7), rebel against him (9v15) and resist him (7v17), he will ruin them.

That’s tough to hear, isn’t it?

What would God say about you? How are you doing?

The people claim to experience God but actually they are living separate lives. Ch. 8v1 says they have broken the covenant in just the same way Gomer broke her wedding vows. Just as Gomer was promiscuous in her relationship with Hosea, so has Israel been spiritually promiscuous in their relationship with God. They worship fertility gods on the threshing floor (9v1), worship images at Gilgal (9v15) and even travel to Assyria to worship idols there. (8v9).

Israel has become like her ancestors who bowed down to idols at Baal Peor in Numbers 25, and became as vile as the idols they worshipped. (9v10-16). The consequence is that God will make them as barren as their lifeless images. And, since they love foreign gods, and desire to experience God so little, he will send them far away from the Temple into exile.

What would God say of your desire to experience him? How are you doing?

One commentator says that this part of Hosea is so utterly tragic because the people of Israel have no idea about any of this. They genuinely think they know God, that they have acknowledged him and are experiencing his presence. Perhaps the question becomes, for us, something like this: Have we become content with something less than genuinely knowing God ourselves?

What do you know about God? What do you think of when I say the word God?

Friends, perhaps what Hosea teaches us in these chapters, is that what we believe about God is absolutely critical. Hosea unmasks the delusion the people of Israel hold: that they know God.

How about you friends?

In 8v7 God says Israel sow the wind and reap the whirlwind.

How about you friends?

Maybe, not knowing God, is a bit like this:

It was pristine winter day with the sun glistening off of the newly fallen snow. I had been flying for about an hour and was turning my Cessna 172 for final approach to runway 24 at Palwaukee Municipal Airport, north of Chicago. I could tell that my instructor was pleased.

Though relatively new at it, I was getting the feel for flying. Moments later, I made what I thought to be a nearly perfect landing. Without comment on my landing, my instructor spoke up. "it's time to go under the hood. Yes, you definitely are ready for time under the hood." I wasn't sure to what he was referring. My first thought was he was going to show me the plane's engine. I asked him what he meant. He reached around behind him and pulled out a strange-looking device.

"We are going to take off as usual and head north away from the O'Hare traffic. Once we get to five thousand feet and forty miles from trouble, you're

going to put this thing on and fly the plane.” He explained. The device was designed to fit like a baseball cap but had a large shield that allowed the pilot to see only his instruments. I followed his instructions and flew out over the Illinois-Wisconsin state line. Once we were in the desired locations and at the right altitude he turned to me and said, “Okay, put this on. When you do, you will not be able to see outside the plane. You will only see the controls and your instruments. Here is what I want you to remember: No matter what, trust your instruments, not your feelings.”

He then took control of the plane and began to make all sorts of manoeuvres. Without the ability to look out the window and see the horizon or ground, I became disorientated. I really wasn’t sure if we were turning, climbing, or descending. He began to instruct me what to do next. “Imagine you have just flown into a cloud or are trying to land in fog. Without an outside reference point, you will feel like you feel right now, disorientated. What you need to remember is to trust your instruments, not your feelings.”

After several minutes of flying ‘under the hood,’ it became apparent how important his admonition truly was. Everything in my body said I was in level flight, but the artificial horizon, an instrument that tells the pilot the orientation of his wings to the horizon, indicated that I was in a turn and descending. “If you don’t trust your instruments you will enter what is known as the dead man’s spiral and crash. What’s worse, you will never know what hit you. That is why you must trust your instruments and not your feelings.” warned my instructor.

Tragically, that is probably what happened to John F. Kennedy Jr. on July 16, 1999. John, his wife, and his sister-in-law were flying from New Jersey to Martha’s Vineyard when the plane he was flying crashed into the sea. Two hours before his flight, Kennedy had gotten a weather forecast from the Internet, but it offered no caution that the haze that hung over his route could obscure a pilot’s vision of the horizon. The forecast called for good visual flying conditions with visibility of six to eight miles. It is likely that Kennedy became disoriented as he flew over the ocean on a nearly moonless night in the thick haze. Kennedy’s Piper Saratoga made a series of meandering turns as it tried to approach the airport at Martha’s Vineyard. At 9.41 p.m. it crashed into the Atlantic Ocean. The NTSB report later revealed that the wreckage of Kennedy’s single-engine showed no evidence of fire, no in-flight breakup, and no engine or other mechanical problems. Their conclusion? Pilot error.

Chapters 8 and 9 in Hosea are hard and challenging, but the truth is, it didn't have to be that way for them. God's invitation was simply: 'Come back, it's better that way.' And that is still his invitation today: 'Come back, it's better that way.'

We know what Israel did. We get to choose what we will do.

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