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**People Go Astray When Leaders Go Astray**

by Zac Poonen

Hosea chapter 4 verse 1 begins as "This is the case that the Lord has against His people". And then like all the prophets, he started with the leaders. Many years ago I was invited as a special speaker to a large denominational convention. There were about 12,000 people there. When I got up to speak I said, "The burden the Lord has given me is not to speak to all of you thousands of people sitting in front of me, but to all the pastors who are sitting behind me on the platform and in the audience." And I spoke on being righteous in money matters. I had been invited to speak for three days, but after two days, they told me, "We don't want you to speak any more." So I sat down quietly on the third day. God always starts with the leaders. I just want to tell you that it has gone very badly with that denomination since then.

The prophets always spoke to the leaders first. It is because the leaders go astray that the people go astray. If the children go astray, it is because the parents have not brought up those children properly. If your children misbehave in school, don't blame them. You didn't teach them to behave properly at home. Once a mother brought a young boy to me and said, "Brother Zac, please pray for my son. He doesn't study properly etc.," I wanted to pray for the mother because I felt the problem was with her. So I did not pray for the son. I don't do what people tell me to do. But I told the mother privately, "You are not going to help your son if you humiliate him publicly by saying such things."

God's people suffer even today because their leaders are ungodly and don't know God. So Hosea spoke to the priests first (Hosea 4:4). If you're a leader, don't point your finger at the congregation and say, "What to do? The people in my church are so bad." The Lord says to you, "My complaint is with you leaders. You will stumble in broad daylight, and so will all the false prophets (Hosea 4:5).

"My people are being destroyed because they don't know Me" (Hosea 4:6). Why are God's people destroyed? It is not because they don't know the Bible. They don't know God. The Lord says, "The fault is yours, you priests, because you don't know Me. So I refuse to recognise all of you as priests any more. I am removing the anointing from your life. You have forgotten the laws of your God and so I will forget to bless your children" (Hosea 6:6).

"The more preachers there are, the more they sin against Me" (Hosea 4:7). What a condition! "They have exchanged the glory of God for the disgrace of idols." Do you see how relevant this word is for today! Many preachers have lost the anointing of God today because they worshipped the idol of money. Once upon a time they were poorer but had the anointing of God. Today they are richer but have lost that anointing. They have exchanged the glory of God for idols.

The priests were interested only in feeding themselves at the expense of people. God's law had permitted the priests to eat a part of the sin and guilt offerings that the people brought (Lev.6:25,26; 7:5-7). So the priests were happy when the people sinned, because the more the people sinned, the more meat the priests got in their curry!! "The priests get fed when the people sin and bring their sin offerings to them. So the priests are glad when the people sin!" (Hosea 4:8-NLT).

Hosea went on to say that the people also were like the priests and so both would be punished (Hosea 4:9). It is because the parents love money (and parents are the priests in a family) that their sons and daughters also turn to spiritual adultery – even today (Hosea 4:13). So God says, "Why should I punish them? For you men are doing the same thing. O foolish people! You will be destroyed, for you refuse to understand." (Hosea 4:14). "Their worship is mere pretense" (Hosea 4:15).

"Hear this, you priests and all of Israel's leaders! Listen, all you men of the royal family! These words of judgment are for you: You are doomed! For you have led the people into a snare by worshiping idols...But never forget – I will settle with all of you for what you have done. One thing is certain, when your day of punishment comes, you will become a heap of rubble. The leaders of Judah have become as bad as thieves. So I will pour my anger down on them like a waterfall." (Hosea 5:1,2,9,10). Again it is to the leaders that God speaks of judgment first, because they were primarily responsible for Israel's failures. Even today, Christians fail because their leaders have failed first.

Then the Lord says that He will wait until Israel faces some trouble. Then they will turn to Him (Hosea 5:15). When Israel heard Hosea's message, they said they wanted to turn back to the Lord – just like many do today when they hear a powerful word of judgment. They said, "Come, let us return to the LORD! He has torn us in pieces; now he will heal us. He has injured us; now he will bandage our wounds. In just a short time, he will restore us so we can live in his presence. Oh, that we might know the LORD! Let us press on to know him! Then he will respond to us as surely as the arrival of dawn or the coming of rains in early spring." (Hosea 6:1-3). Many preachers would have been excited to hear such words and imagined that this was a genuine repentance that would lead to revival. They would have probably quickly sent a report to their sponsors saying, "We have had a revival here. Many thousands raised their hands saying they want to turn back to the Lord and signed decision cards", etc. But the Lord's response was different. He was not fooled. He knew that this was only a shallow, emotional turning that would vanish like the morning dew in no time at all (Hosea 6:4). You see the dew on the grass in the morning. An hour later it is gone.

In 6:5, God describes true prophetic ministry: "I sent my prophets to cut you to pieces. I have slaughtered you with my words, threatening you with death." It's not an easy ministry to cut people to pieces. But remember that Hosea himself had been cut to pieces by God's dealings with Him in his married life. And it was from such a school of suffering that Hosea spoke.

If Hosea had not had all that suffering in his private life, he would have spoken these words in a harsh way. Don't try to imitate Hosea's words if God hasn't taken you through the deep valley of suffering. It is very exciting to act like a prophet in the pulpit. You can get honour for that. But if you try to imitate a prophet without God leading you into the sufferings that the true prophets underwent, you will be a false prophet. First of all, ask God to take you through deep experiences whereby you get to know Him – experiences of trials, sufferings and pain. Then God will make you His mouthpiece to many people. Walk with God in secret. Humble yourself under whatever God sends in your life.