

Hosea: The Unfailing Love of God

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If God gave you the assignment of marrying someone you knew would be unfaithful, what would you think? What would you do? This actually happened to the Old Testament prophet Hosea. Of course there's some background we need to understand to appreciate his story, and I'm only going to give you the abbreviated version. Ready?

Way back in Genesis, we read that God chose a people, they are referred to as "the seed of Abraham," and they are the descendants that came from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Of course you remember that Jacob's name was changed to "Israel," so his descendants are called "the children of Israel." I can't tell you why God chose to have a special relationship with this people, he never gave a reason. In fact, the Apostle Paul said that God chose this people even before they were born, and totally without respect to any foreseen merit on their part (Romans 9:6-29). So, God's choice to have a special relationship with Israel was based solely on his grace.

God chose to give Abraham's descendants something they didn't deserve and could never have earned. He promised to make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky, to make them a great nation, to bless them in a unique way, to give them a land forever, to enter into a special and unique relationship with them that would endure forever, and even to bless the whole world through them. Of course this doesn't leave the Gentiles out in the cold; we read in the gospels and the New Testament letters, especially Paul's writings, that the salvation of the Gentiles and the very existence of the Church is part of the outworking of God's promise to bless the whole world through Abraham's descendants. God first shared these promises in Genesis chapters 12 to 22, and in a sense these eleven chapters are the very heart of the Bible. What comes before Genesis 12 serves as background to God's promises, and everything what comes after Genesis 22 in some way relates to their fulfillment. In other words, the whole story of the Bible is about how God is working in the lives of his people, Israel, to bring about the fulfillment of the promises he made to Abraham and his seed. The Bible is an epic drama of how God wants to show his love for his chosen people, and he wants to do that by fulfilling the special promises he made to them; but there is a snag: the fulfillment can only happen when God's people choose to love him in return.

One doesn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that unregenerated sinners are never going to love God—right? So, in order for God to fulfill his promises to Israel, as a nation, somehow God is going to have to bring the nation of Israel to repentance and faith. Now I think we could agree that the salvation of an entire nation is an epic challenge. I don't know of any nation in world history that has been a "saved nation."

Now I need to clarify something before we move on, and I hope it's not too confusing: The promises God made to Israel were to "a seed," or "a people"; in other words, that "seed" extends all the way from Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob, to the

Jewish people of our day who have a physical connection to Abraham. However, the promises will not be fulfilled to unbelievers in that line. In fact, many of Abraham's seed have already lived and died in unbelief. The promises will be fulfilled to a generation of Israel in the future that turns to the Lord with their whole heart. So, in order for the promises to be fulfilled, it will be necessary for Israel as a nation to be regenerated, because the fulfillment of the promises involves an intimate personal relationship with God. So, not surprisingly, the theme of the Bible is how God is working in the lives of his people, Israel, to bring them to faith in him, his word (the Bible), and his Messiah, without which they cannot be "born again" (cf. John 3:1-21).

Now concerning Hosea's message, the events recorded in the book happened in the years just before the northern kingdom of Israel was carried off into captivity in 722 B.C. (over 2700 years ago). The story of the book is about how God, who found Israel to be stubbornly faithless and spiritually rebellious, had to allow them to experience the consequences of their waywardness. God didn't let this to happen because he stopped loving Israel, or because he ran out of patience, he did it as part of a plan for the redemption of his people. God is very patient, and this plan is still being worked out today, and it won't come to completion until Israel comes to faith in Christ, which the Bible says will happen in the last days, that is, the last days prior to the second coming of Christ.

Let's begin in Hosea chapter one.

^{1:2}When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry; for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the LORD."

I don't know how many of us would be thrilled to be given an assignment like this, but Hosea was commanded to marry a woman whom God told him would not be faithful. Obviously this is not a passage we should use for advice on how to find a mate. We can find that kind of advice in the book of Proverbs, as well as in the New Testament. God's purpose for Hosea's marriage to Gomer was to confront Israel with their sin of unfaithfulness. So, with regard to marriage, this is a special case, with a special purpose. It's very difficult to describe how bad Israel's spiritual condition had become by the time this book was recorded, I'll just go through the list of things that are mentioned in the book itself, mostly from chapter four. God said there was no faithfulness, or kindness, or knowledge of him (4:1); there was swearing, deception, murder, stealing, and sexual vice (4:2); the prophets and priest were corrupt (4:4); the priests no longer taught the knowledge of God (4:6); the religious leaders had become merely opportunists, in their greed profiting from the sins of the people (4:7); there was harlotry and drunkenness (4:11); the people had become idol worshipers (4:12), and we know from 2 Kings 17 that there were human sacrifices. Virtually every hill and shade tree in Israel had become a place for the immoral revelries involved in the worship of Baal and Ashtarte (the male and female fertility idols, cf. 4:13); and we are told that the people of Israel had sunken so low that the more shameful their deeds, the more they loved and flaunted them (4:18). They were, in effect, boastful of how "bad" they were. Too bad there were no ox-cart

bumper stickers back then that said, “Bad to the bone,” or “No Fear (of God)”—they would have loved them!

The early part of Hosea’s marriage is related to us in the following passage.

^{1:3}So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. ⁴And the LORD said to him, “Name him Jezreel; for yet a little while, and I will punish the house of Jehu for the bloodshed of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. ⁵On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel.” ⁶Then she conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. And the LORD said to him, “Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have compassion on the house of Israel, that I would ever forgive them. ⁷“But I will have compassion on the house of Judah and deliver them by the LORD their God, and will not deliver them by bow, sword, battle, horses or horsemen.” ⁸When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and gave birth to a son. ⁹And the LORD said, “Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not My people and I am not your God.”

Hosea did exactly as God commanded. He married Gomer, and in the course of time three children were born. As each of the children was born, they were given names by God, and each of their names symbolizes some aspect of Israel’s relationship with God. The first child was named, *Jezreel*. Jezreel was both a city and a territory located in the heart of Israel, and it was from the heartland of Jezreel that much of the wickedness associated with Israel’s history originated. We can’t be certain, but the naming of this child may have been God’s way of saying to Israel, “You know what? you’re rotten all the way to the core!”

The second child was named *Lo-ruhamah*. This name comes from two Hebrew words: *lo* in Hebrew is a negative, and means “no,” or “not,” and *ruhamah* means, “to have pity.” So the name “Lo-ruhamah” means, “to have no pity.” The name of this child refers to the impending judgment on the nation of Israel. It would not be long after this prophecy that Israel would be invaded by Assyria; that invasion happened in 722 B.C. The Assyrians were undoubtedly one of the cruelest people in history. In fact, you may recall that the prophet Jonah was sent to proclaim judgment upon the city of Nineveh, the ancient capital of the Assyrian Empire. The reason Jonah didn’t want to go was because the Assyrians were so violent and pitiless that Jonah actually wanted them to be destroyed; he didn’t want to see them have the opportunity to repent and be spared. When the Assyrians invaded a land, they had no mercy on the people they conquered. When they conquered a city, they were known to throw the children off the city walls, or if there were no wall, they would take them to a nearby cliff and throw them onto the rocks below. Conquered people they thought would not make good slaves, or anyone they particularly disliked, they would impale on large pikes set upright in the ground. They were experts at making their victims suffer as much, and as long, as possible. Those that survived had metal hooks driven through their jaws and were connected to chains and led

away into captivity. So the name “Lo-ruhamah” is prophetic of where Israel’s decision to leave the shelter of God’s protection is about to lead them. By the way, I don’t think God caused this awful thing to happen—it was just part of the reality of walking away from God’s protective care. If God had continued to shield Israel from the consequences of their sins, they would have never understood the true nature of their choices. So, God was saying by the naming of this child, “I’m not going to shield you any longer from the consequences of the sinful choices you have made. If you’re going to worship other gods, then you’re going to have to depend on those gods to provide for you, and we’ll see if they are able to take care of you—of course they couldn’t, because these “gods” were only wood, metal, and stone. Now this might seem cruel, but it’s a dose of reality, and sometimes reality is what people need. If we were to put this into modern terms, we might imagine God saying something like this: “I’m no longer going to be an enabler for your spiritual degeneration; you’ve got to learn that there are consequences for the choices you make. Go ahead, compare the love, provision, and protection I’ve given you to what your idols can do for you.”

The third child was named *Lo-ammi*, meaning “not mine.” This name seems to have significance both to Hosea’s marriage and to Israel’s relationship to God. We don’t know the circumstances of how the truth about this child was discovered, but it appears that somehow Hosea came to the realization that this child was not his, and we can well imagine the personal devastation Hosea felt. Of course the prophetic symbolism is that just as Gomer had brought forth a child born of her harlotry, so Israel had brought forth its children in spiritual harlotry by going after idols. Now *Lo-ammi*’s name isn’t simply an acknowledgment of the fact that Israel had played the harlot; it’s a declaration of disownership. Israel, having been unfaithful, is about to experience the full effect of being cut off from God.

When a person persistently sins and never has to pay a penalty, what happens? Well, often they develop a distorted view of reality. They begin to think they can sin without consequences. So even though it can be very painful, having to deal with the consequences of sin can be a positive thing if it leads to repentance.

Hosea’s story continues in chapter two...

^{2:5} “For their mother has played the harlot; she who conceived them has acted shamefully for she said, ‘I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.’

⁶ Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths. ⁷ She will pursue her lovers, but she will not overtake them; and she will seek them, but will not find them. Then she will say, ‘I will go back to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now!’ ⁸ For she does not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the new wine and the oil, and lavished on her silver and gold, which they used for Baal. ⁹ Therefore, I will take back My grain at harvest time and My new wine in its season. I will also take away My wool

and My flax given to cover her nakedness.¹⁰ and then I will uncover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers, and no one will rescue her out of My hand.¹¹ I will also put an end to all her gaiety, her feasts, her new moons, her Sabbaths and all her festal assemblies.¹² I will destroy her vines and fig trees, of which she said, 'These are my wages which my lovers have given me' and I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field will devour them.¹³ I will punish her for the days of the Baals when she used to offer sacrifices to them and adorn herself with her earrings and jewelry, and follow her lovers, so that she forgot Me," declares the LORD."

What comes next in this story isn't clear and we have to read between the lines, but it seems that sometime after the birth of the third child, Hosea and Gomer's marriage fell apart, and Gomer left. Perhaps Gomer left Hosea for the father of her last child—we don't know. Gomer appears to have gone from one man to the next, until somewhere along the way she became the woman of a man who didn't have the means, or the will, to support her. Some other man might have been happy to see his wayward wife fall on such hard times, but not Hosea. We learn that Hosea, in some way or another, found a way to secretly provide for Gomer's support. So while Gomer was living in her adulterous relationship, Hosea was behind the scenes making sure she had clothes, food, and money. At some point Hosea came to the realization that providing for Gomer's needs wasn't going to help unless her heart changed; in fact, it would only enable her to continue her wayward lifestyle, so he made the very difficult decision to cut off her support. In time the consequences she had been protected from began to roll in. Eventually Gomer's lover sold her into slavery, and she discovered the sad truth that so many others have discovered: that often what presents itself as an opportunity for self-fulfillment, ends in bondage and despair.

Now even though Gomer deserved what she got, this is a sad story. It's sad for Hosea because his family was broken apart and he was robbed of the love for which he longed. It's sad for Gomer because her sin caused her to lose her family and eventually led her to slavery. But of course the real story of this book isn't the story of Hosea and Gomer, it's the story of God and Israel. Hosea's love for Gomer is only a picture of God's love for Israel, because all the while that Israel was unfaithful to God, he was providing for them, and they took his blessings and used them for their idol worship. But it's important for us to recognize that just as Hosea never stopped loving Gomer, no matter how low she sank, so God never stopped loving Israel, even though he had to stand by and watch them be given over to the terrible consequences of their sin.

While the Book of Hosea goes on for several more chapters, the story of Hosea and Gomer's relationship comes to a close in chapter 3. Chapter 3, verses 1-5 says,

^{3:1} Then the LORD said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is loved by her husband, yet an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the sons of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes."² So I bought her for myself for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a half of barley.³ Then

I said to her, "You shall stay with me for many days. You shall not play the harlot, nor shall you have a man; so I will also be toward you." ⁴ For the sons of Israel will remain for many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar and without ephod or household idols. ⁵ Afterward the sons of Israel will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king; and they will come trembling to the LORD and to His goodness in the last days.

Gomer may have been sold into slavery, but Hosea never forgot her and never stopped loving her, and when God revealed to him that the time was right, Hosea went and redeemed Gomer out of slavery. Now you might be thinking, "Wow, what a wonderful ending for a love story," but it's not the end of the story, because a marriage can't go through what Hosea and Gomer went through without a lot of brokenness. Their relationship needed a lot of mending before they could again live together as man and wife. We notice that Gomer, though purchased, was not immediately restored to her former status as a wife, and things would remain that way until her heart changed. The same is true with God and Israel. God allowed Israel to experience the consequences of unfaithfulness. He allowed them to experience the destruction of their nation, and captivity, and although he purchased them, they have remained unrestored for all these years. So what is God waiting for? He's waiting for a change of heart, and it hasn't happened yet, but it's going to happen. Did you notice when? Verse 5 says, "in the last days." If we look back in chapter two this is explained to us.

^{2:14} Therefore, behold, I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness and speak kindly to her. ¹⁵ Then I will give her her vineyards from there, and the valley of Achor as a door of hope and she will sing there as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt. ¹⁶ It will come about in that day," declares the LORD, "That you will call Me Ishi and will no longer call Me Baali. ¹⁷ "For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, so that they will be mentioned by their names no more. ¹⁸ In that day I will also make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds of the sky and the creeping things of the ground and I will abolish the bow, the sword and war from the land, and will make them lie down in safety. ¹⁹ I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, ²⁰ And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD. ²¹ It will come about in that day that I will respond," declares the LORD. "I will respond to the heavens, and they will respond to the earth, ²² And the earth will respond to the grain, to the new wine and to the oil, and they will respond to Jezreel. ²³ I will sow her for Myself in the land I will also have compassion on her who had not obtained compassion, and I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' and they will say, 'You are my God!'"

At the present time Israel is without a king, without sacrifices, without a temple, without a priesthood, It has been that way for almost 2,000 years, but there's coming a day when their hearts are going to be changed and they will seek their Messiah—Jesus Christ.

Now aside from the obviously important truth that God has a future for Israel, you may be wondering how any of this applies to us today. Did you notice the cycle that Israel went through? They belonged to God. Somewhere along the way they got their eyes onto other loves. God patiently pleaded with them, but they wouldn't listen. Finally they reached a point where there was no alternative but to expose them to the consequences of their choices. Later, after God would redeem them out of their enslavement it would be a long process before they could be fully restored. Israel's rejection of God was deep and persistent; and the deeper and longer the rejection, the more difficult the restoration. Did God stop loving them? No. Does he still want a relationship with them? Yes. Can they be restored? Yes—and there's more than hope, there's a promise that Israel will be restored, but it won't be easy, and it won't be quick, and it won't be painless, but it will happen at the appointed time in the "last days."

Is there a personal lesson here for us? Of course. Some of you reading this might have walked close to the Lord at one time, but something happened; you allowed other things to come between you and him. It seemed that you took your eyes off of him for only a moment, but that moment turned into an hour, and the hour into days, weeks, months, perhaps even years. You used to hear his voice calling you back, but now all you hear is deafening silence. You pray, but there is no answer. You confess your sins, but you feel no release from the burden, and you worry that somehow you've wandered so far away, or done something so terribly wrong that you can never get home again. Can I share a great truth from the story of Hosea's life? No matter what you might have done, no matter how long it's been since you walked with the Lord, no matter how far you may have wandered from his presence, no matter what you may have said to him in your anger, frustration, pain, or disappointment, the truth is that God has never stopped loving you, and he will never give up on you.

Now if you happen to be one of those people I just described, I'm not going to tell you that a simple prayer, or walking down to the front of a church is going to repair your wounded spirit. We've seen from the example of Hosea and Gomer that sometimes deeply broken relationships take time to heal. But I want you to know that no matter how horrible your failure may seem to you, God has never stopped loving you, and he will never give up on you. Why? Because he has always known the end from the beginning. Just like Hosea knew before he married Gomer that she would be an unfaithful wife, and just like God knew before he chose Israel that they would be an unfaithful people, so he has always known everything about you, and me; and he chose to love us in spite of what he has always known.

I know, you look into that spiritual "mirror," and you see tangled matted hair, worn and ragged clothes, a weathered face, and dirty feet and hands. The thought of God's presence no longer brings peace and joy, but apprehension, maybe even dread.

Somehow you can't believe God would even want to look at you, much less put his arms around you. You say, "Where do I go from here?" Well you know something, you can't repair the damage yourself, and if you wait until you think you can, you'll likely die a very miserable person. But here's the message of Hosea: There is hope! God can fix your life if you will step out of the shadow, and allow him to put his arms around you, unworthy though you feel. Restoration might not happen instantly, but be assured that God has not stopped loving you; and if you have ever known him, he will never abandon you, no matter where your choices may have led you.

Perhaps you're reading this and you've never known peace with God; you've never become one of his children. You can begin that relationship today. You say, "But I don't think I have enough faith." Well, there's good news! It doesn't take much faith, and you can receive Christ right where you are. Jesus said even a tiny bit of faith can accomplish great things, and God will even give you the faith you need (Eph. 2:8-9); so with God's help you can begin that relationship right now! All you have to do is say "Yes" to Christ—"Yes, I accept what you did on the cross for me"; "Yes, I accept your offer to be my Savior and my God"; "Yes, I accept your offer of forgiveness and reconciliation" (John 1:12; Romans 10:9-10).

Remember, it's never too late to begin, or begin again; God's redemptive love is unfailing.

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