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THE CHALLENGE OF LOVE

Hosea 1–2; 11

One Main Thing

The marriage between Hosea and Gomer presents to us a picture of our gracious, loving God, and calls on us to imitate God by loving others even when it hurts.

Introduction

Hosea lived in the eighth century BC, according to the first verse of the book. The kings named there all reigned between about 750–700 BC. That dating makes Hosea more-or-less a contemporary of a few other prophets: Amos, Micah, and Isaiah name some of the same kings in the first verses of their books, and Jonah also lived at this same time (cf. 2 Kings 14:25). But Hosea is unique among this group of prophets; in fact, he's unique among all prophets, because he's the only northern prophet for whom we have a book of oracles. Remember that after the death of Solomon,

the kingdom of Israel split in two (cf. 1 Kings 12), into a northern kingdom called Israel and a southern kingdom called Judah. Almost all the prophets who have books named after them are from the south, the nation of Judah. That's true of Isaiah, Amos, Micah, and most of the others. Jonah is from the north (again, see 2 Kings 14:25), but we don't have a book of Jonah's oracles, we just have a story about Jonah (with one, very brief oracle; Jonah 3:4). Amos, like Hosea, did prophesy to the northern nation of Israel, but Amos was actually from the south (see Amos 1:1; 7:12–15). So the book of Hosea—alone among all the books of the Bible—preserves for us a collection of oracles form a northern prophet.

As soon as Jeroboam the son of Nebat founded the northern nation of Israel, he established a state-sponsored religion centered around veneration of golden cows, one in Dan in the far north, another in Bethel close to the border with Judah (1 Kings 12:26–33). As in the case of the golden cow that Aaron made for the people at Sinai (Exod 32:1–6), these cows in Dan and Bethel were probably supposed to be idols of Yahweh, Israel's God. Jeroboam identifies the cow as representing the one "who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 12:28; cf. Exod 32:4). This sin of worshiping Yahweh through an idol defiled the northern nation of Israel throughout their history. At their best, the northerners were idolaters.

When Ahab came to the throne of Israel, things got

worse. "Then, as if following the sin of Jeroboam son of Nebat were not enough, he married Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and then proceeded to serve Baal and bow in worship to him" (1 Kings 16:31). No longer were they idolaters; now they were pagans, worshiping foreign gods. You remember Elijah's contest on Mt. Carmel with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18), and the Lord's words that there were 7000 (only!) who had not bowed the knee to Baal (19:18).

A century later, in the days of a second Jeroboam—this one, the son of Jehoash (cf. 2 Kings 14:23–29)—the situation was largely the same, as we see in Hosea.

Going Deeper

God called Hosea to do something pretty strange, something that we would never advise our own children to do. God told Hosea to go find himself an unfaithful woman and marry her (1:2). Of course, when God gives these strange commands—such as telling Isaiah to walk around naked (Isa 20) or telling Ezekiel to lie on his side for more than a year (Ezek 4)—he does so in order to prove a point. Hosea's marriage with Gomer, the unfaithful woman, will provide a living demonstration of what God's relationship with Israel is like.

Israel is the unfaithful woman.

> Yes, their mother is promiscuous; she conceived them and acted shamefully. For she thought, "I

> will follow my lovers, the men who give me my food and water, my wool and flax, my oil and drink." (2:5)
>
> She does not recognize that it is I who gave her the grain, the new wine, and the fresh oil. I lavished silver and good on her, which they used for Baal. (2:8)

The entire book of Hosea is a meditation on the unfaithfulness of Israel. Chapter 4 details sin after sin. The problem is, of course, that they worship Baal, but also that they worship that cow in Bethel (which Hosea derisively calls Beth-aven, "house of sin," rather than Bethel, "house of God"; 4:15). The problem is the priests, who do not teach (4:4), the prophets, who prophesy lies (4:5). "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (4:6).

> My people consult their wooden idols, and their divining rods inform them. For a spirit of promiscuity leads them astray; they act promiscuously in disobedience to their God. (4:12)

But the book of Hosea, even more so, is a meditation on the love of God. Hosea the prophet is an image of God. What God wants to communicate through this

marriage of the prophet and the harlot is not only how unfaithful Israel has been, but how much pain Israel's unfaithfulness has caused God—pain out of God's deep love for his people.

Hear God, the wounded lover, speak about his dear one.

> She does not recognize
> that it is I who gave her the grain,
> the new wine, and the fresh oil.
> I lavished silver and gold on her,
> which they used for Baal. (2:8)

> Therefore, I am going to persuade her,
> lead her to the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. (2:14)

God wants to take Israel back to the beginning of their relationship, where they went on their first date, in a manner of speaking. God is angry and hurt, but even more so he longs for the relationship to be restored. He just wants his people back. So he will court his wife again. Once he gets Israel back to the wilderness, God has it all planned out.

> There I will give her vineyards back to her and make the Valley of Achor into a gateway of hope. There she will respond as she did in the days of her youth, as in the day she came out of the land of Egypt. In that day, says the Lord, you will call

> me "My husband" and no longer "My baal." For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth; they will no longer be remembered by their names. (2:15–17)

Even though *baal* is sometimes just a Hebrew word meaning "husband," God said he didn't want Israel using that word anymore, because it sounds too much like Israel's ex-boyfriend. What God wants more than anything is not to punish Israel but to love Israel and be loved in return.

The image of a marriage is not the only image Hosea uses to depict God's relationship with Israel. Another way of looking at it is that God is Israel's father, and Israel is the disobedient son.

> When Israel was a child I loved him,
> and out of Egypt I called my son. (11:1)

God is the tender-hearted father who lavishes gifts on his child.

> It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
> taking them by the hand,
> but they never knew that I healed them.
> I led them with human cords,
> with ropes of love.
> To them I was like one who eases the yoke from their jaws;
> I bent down to give them food. (11:3–4)

But Israel is so disobedient, God decides to punish his son (11:2, 6–7). Then the unexpected happens—God has a change of heart. He cannot give up on his beloved son, which leads to "an utterance whose daring is unparalleled in the whole of prophecy."[1]

> How can I give you up, Ephraim?
> How can I surrender you, Israel?
> How can I make you like Admah?
> How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
> I have had a change of heart;
> my compassion is stirred!
> I will not vent the full fury of my anger;
> I will not turn back to destroy Ephraim.
> For I am God and not man,
> the Holy One among you;
> I will not come in rage. (11:8–9)

God is like the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. (In fact, God is the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.) The younger son abandons his family and burns through his inheritance doing all the things his father had warned him about. And when this prodigal son decides to return home, there is his father, standing at the edge of their property, peering into the horizon on the lookout for his boy (Luke 15:20). Sure, there had no doubt been moments when this father had been angry

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[1] Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 2.145.

with his son, had thought to himself, "If I ever see that boy again, why I'll...." But when it came right down to it, the father just wanted a relationship with his son. When the boy came back, the father felt no bitterness, just delight.

Application

God calls on Hosea to be an image of God. God calls on his servants to be an image of God. And in the case of the book of Hosea, God is the wounded lover, the hurting father, longing for relationship with his people. He calls on us to do the same. God calls on his people to love at the risk of a broken heart.

In the movie *Room* (2015), a mom has to convince her small son to help her escape from their abductor, so she tells him a story, explaining things he doesn't understand. At one point, this boy looks up at his mom and yells, "I want a different story!" and the mom yells back, "No! This is the story that you get!"[2]

There are many times that we'd like a different story. Right after Peter had confessed Jesus as the Messiah, and then Jesus started to explain about his impending death—teaching for which Peter was not at all ready—Peter essentially looked at Jesus and said, "I want a

[2] You can see the scene on YouTube; search "Room I want a different story."

different story" (cf. Mark 8:27–33). But Jesus had to tell Peter, "No, this is the story that you get." I bet Paul sometimes wished he didn't have to endure all these hardships in order to bring salvation to the world (2 Cor 11:24–29). But that is the story that God had prepared for Paul (Acts 9:16).

I can imagine Hosea looking up to heaven and saying, "I want a different story. I don't want to marry this unfaithful woman. I don't want to go find her again. It hurts too much." And God responds, "No, Hosea, this is the story that you get. You have been called to image me. And that means you must love even when it hurts, because that's who I am."

Followers of Christ love others even when it hurts. There are times in our families that it gets hard to love people, but we will love them even when it hurts. It gets hard in church sometimes to love fellow Christians, but if we are going to imitate God, we will love people even when it hurts.

When my wife and I first decided to get involved in foster care, one older member of our church who had fostered children decades earlier told me, "Prepare to have your heart broken." He meant that foster parents take in kids who have been in some pretty rough situations, and the foster kids become a part of this new family. Foster parents provide for these kids, and support them, attend their school functions and their sporting events; foster parents love their foster kids.

And then, usually, after a while, a state agent comes and removes the children from the foster home and puts them back in a situation that is—shall we say?—less than ideal. And it breaks your heart. So, what? Should you not love these kids at all? That is no kind of solution for people who imitate God, because our God loves even when it hurts.

Conclusion

What is the message of Hosea? Paul sums it up well.

> So be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma. (Ephesians 5:1–2)

Hosea is a vision of grace, because he is an image of our God.

Discussion

1. Why do you think God told Hosea to marry an unfaithful woman? (Hosea 1:2)
2. What do you think you would have done if you received the command from God that Hosea received?
3. Which image of God do you find more compelling: God as the broken-hearted husband (Hos 1–2), or God as the grieving father (Hos 11)?

4. What was a time in your life when you had to make a conscious decision to love someone who was not very loveable?
5. What struggles do you think Hosea had in imitating God's love? What struggles do Christians today have?