

Hosea: The Prophet of Love

Writer: Hosea

Theme: God's love spurned, but constant
Date: 753-725 BC, just before Israel was taken
captive by the Assyrians.

Key Verse: 3:1

Hosea's name means "salvation." He has been called the tenderest prophet, the prophet of grace, the St. John of the Old Testament. Hosea, both by his life and preaching, taught vital truths about the love of God. He ministered to a wicked society, overripe for judgment. The people were lawless, unjust, rebellious, evil sinners who completely missed the mark of God's standards. To these unworthy sinners on the brink of judgment, Hosea issued the summons to repent (6:1).

He declared the Lord's continuing love for His wayward, backsliding people. Hosea's message was of sovereign grace and love, a love that remained constant even though scorned by Israel. Three lines of thought reveal a message for both saint and sinner.

The Symbolic Message: Hosea's Marriage to Gomer

Most prophecies begin with some command for the prophet to prophesy. Hosea begins with the Lord's instruction for him to get married. God intended Hosea's family life to be a symbol, a visible picture or object lesson, of the message he was to preach to Israel. Hosea 3:1, the key verse of the prophecy, explicitly links Hosea's marriage to Gomer with God's marriage to Israel: "Love a woman . . . according to the love of the LORD toward the children of Israel." It was not unusual for the Lord to instruct His prophets to use some symbolic act to accompany some part of the message, but Hosea was unique in that his whole life was symbolic, an object lesson of his message.

Any who saw or knew about Hosea's ordeal could only feel sorry for him. The Lord was using his whole miserable, tragic experience of personal sorrow and emotional distress to portray a vivid lesson to Israel. Hosea's constant love and loyalty to Gomer provided a beautiful picture of the Lord's unfailing love and loyalty to Israel.

Gomer's unfaithfulness to Hosea was a tragically clear picture of Israel's treacherous unfaithfulness to the Lord: "The Lord said to Hosea, Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms: for the land hath committed great whoredom, departing from the Lord" (1:2).

Though many in the nation were deaf to Hosea's preaching, even the dullest of them could see his grief, sympathize with his sorrow, and wonder at his persistent love. Hosea's marriage became a living sermon: What Hosea did for Gomer, God did for Israel; what Gomer did to Hosea, Israel did to God. Humanly speaking, Hosea's love for Gomer did not make any sense. But, that is the very point of the message. God's love for sinners is inexplicable apart from His free and sovereign grace.

HOSEA.

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^a ch. 2. 18.
Zech. 4. 6.
^b Is. 1. 1.
Amos 1. 1.
^c 2 Kin. 14.
23.
² i.e.
Not my
people.
Dan. 9. 26.
^d Gen. 32. 10.
Jer. 33. 22.
³ Or, instead
of that.
^e Deut. 14. 1.
^f Josh. 3. 10.
Ps. 42. 2.
^g Is. 11. 12, 13.
Jer. 3. 18.
^h 2 Kin. 10.
11.
⁴ Heb. visit.
Jer. 9. 25.
ⁱ 2 Kin. 15.
10, 12.
^k ver. 4.
^l 2 Kin. 15.
29.
⁵ i.e.
My people.
Cp. ch. 1. 9.
⁶ i.e.
Not having
obtained
mercy.
Rom. 9. 25.
⁷ Heb. I will
not add any
more to.
⁸ i.e.
Having
obtained
mercy.
ch. 1. 6.
Cp. ver. 29.
⁹ Or, that I
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The Direct Message: God's Marriage to Israel

Hosea's direct preaching to the nation focused on three basic themes. First, God's relationship to Israel was initiated by divine love. Second, that relationship was spurned by Israel's sin. Third, that relationship was maintained by divine loyalty. Each theme finds some parallel in Hosea's homelife.

Initiated by love. Hosea 2:19-20 explicitly states that God proposed marriage between Himself and Israel. Hosea 3:1; 14:4; and 11:1 (father/son image) all draw attention to God's love. The picture of marriage suggests strong affection between the parties, but the primary focus of God's love for Israel is more on the inclination of His will, His choice. The motive for the choice is not found in the attractiveness or worthiness of the chosen. Moses said that God loved Israel because He loved her (Deuteronomy 7:7, 8). God's love is totally of grace. That is what makes grace amazing. God chose Israel *in spite of* what she was, not *because of* what she was. He knew her sin, her weakness, her bent to evil. God's love for Israel was not "blind" and neither was Hosea's love for Gomer.

Spurned by sin. Israel's response to God's love should have been humble gratitude, devotion, and loving obedience. However, it did not take long for Israel to reveal her latent idolatrous heart. Hosea 2, using the imagery suggested by Gomer's fornication, details how the nation had played the harlot in departing from the Lord. Hosea 6:6, 7 declares that Israel failed to give the Lord the covenant loyalty He deserved and demanded and that she had overstepped the bounds of the covenant agreement and behaved treacherously against the Lord. The word "treacherous" is significant because it refers to deceitful behavior and frequently designates the violation of marriage. Israel was doing to God just what Gomer did to Hosea. A big part of Hosea's message to the nation exposed and condemned the sin of forsaking the Lord (4:10-19; 5:2-7; 6:10; 7:4; 11:7).

Maintained by loyalty. Whereas Israel was bent on backsliding (11:7), God purposed to remain faithful (11:8; 14:4). Whereas Israel's covenant loyalty was like the passing cloud and dew (6:6), the Lord's covenant loyalty was central to the relationship He initiated and established (2:19-20). He would not quit His love. By example and precept, the prophecy of Hosea establishes three important principles about loyalty.

First, discipline is an evidence of loyalty. Love does not overlook sin. Hosea makes clear that sin brings a day of recompense (9:7, 9) and that the consequences of sin are inescapable (8:7; 10:13—the sowing/reaping principle). This chastening is not to destroy, but to restore: "I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face; in their affliction they will seek me early"

(i.e., diligent, earnest seeking). This theme of discipline is most clearly expressed by the symbolic names of the three children (1:4, 6, 9). They each speak of the necessary judgment: Jezreel ("God scatters"), Lo-ruhamah ("not pitied"), and Lo-ammi ("not my people").

Second, restoration is the goal of loyalty. Just as Hosea was to take Gomer back, so the Lord would take back His people. Chapter 2 reveals the Lord's threefold plan to bring the nation back to Himself. He would isolate her so that she might learn to recognize His superiority (2:6, 7). He would bring her to poverty so that she might learn to depend utterly on Him (2:9-12). He would allure her, persuading her irresistibly to

return (2:14-23). Likewise, Hosea isolated Gomer from her former lovers and enticed her with bridal gifts; once again she would be his. Hosea 2:22, 23 also suggests the restoration theme in terms of the children. There was to be a reversal: "Scattering" (Jezreel) becomes a sowing; "No-pity" will receive mercy; "Not-my-people" will become my people.

Third, repentance is the response to loyalty. Without repentance there could be no enjoyment or experience of reunion. God made the terms of the covenant clear. To repent means

simply to return, to reverse directions. Israel had been backsliding, turning away from God (11:7); God called her to turn around and come back to Him (6:1-3; 14:1-3). He left the door open for the estranged wife to come home.

The Evangelical Message: God's Love to Saints and Sinners

Hosea's closing words transcend his time and circumstance to ours: "Who is wise, and he shall understand these things? prudent, and he shall know them? for the ways of the Lord are right, and the just shall walk in them: but the transgressors shall fall therein" (14:9). Saints can be sure that their sowing in righteousness will bring a harvest of mercy. Sinners can be sure that their ploughing wickedness will produce further iniquity and certain punishment (10:12, 13). Both saints and sinners must learn that "it is time to seek the Lord" (10:12), for those who seek Him with all their heart will always find Him. He draws near to those who draw near to Him. ■

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