

The Story of Two Loves

Hosea 1-3

In the summer of 1981, I was walking down the sidewalk not realizing that my life was about to be changed forever. I saw a young lady walking toward me carrying a small trash can. It was obviously cleaning day, and she was even pretty on cleaning day. I mustered the courage to talk with her. There were so many things about her that I found compelling: she was easy to talk to, she asked a lot of questions, she was very pretty. What I saw in her was moving me to love her. That is the way human love most often works.

Divine love is different. God only loves the undeserving. There is nothing compelling in the object of his love, no quality that moves him to love, merits his love, or deserves his love.

This is what Israel had trouble understanding. They mistakenly thought that there was something in them that moved God to love them. God did not love them because they were special, but they were special because God loved them.

The theme of Hosea is the love of God. Hosea 1-3 confronts us with the love of God in the most stirring and profound way that can be found in all of Scripture.

Hosea was an 8th century BC prophet whose ministry is dated by the king list of 1:1.¹ What makes the timing of Hosea ministry enlightening is that during the reign of Jeroboam, the NK prospered in every way but was spiritually bankrupt. They were approaching YHWH on their own terms, rather than on his terms. Their quest to merit God's love led them to think of God in pagan ways (2:5b,8,16). They thought they could merit God love, when all they needed to do was rest it.

Humanly speaking, God had had enough, so he called Hosea to prosecute his case in the NK in a most dramatic way. Hosea is called to take an unfaithful wife and then to re-marry her after she had spent herself in the prostitution associated with fertility worship.

The story of Hosea's troubled marriage (chs 1 and 3) frames the story of God's own troubled marriage, by analogy, to his wife Israel (ch 2). The one is the living,

dramatic illustration of the other. Hosea's first marriage to Gomer shows Israel's unfaithfulness (1:2), and his second marriage to Gomer shows God's love for unfaithful Israel (3:1).

Hosea is not giving us marriage and family advice. Rather his life shows us the profound love of God, the persistent unfaithfulness of Israel, and God's plan to save his people.

I want to walk through this text, making some applications along the way.

1. God confronts us with our sin and its consequences (1:1-9)

The Bible is the story that progressively reveals God's plan to gather a people for himself from the fallen race of Adam. Israel had had a unique role to play in God's unfolding plan of redemption, but their idolatry was incompatible with God's redemptive purpose, so God sent Hosea to confront their sin in a most unusual way.

A. Unfaithfulness confronted (1:2)

God spoke through Hosea saying Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD (1:2). You read that rightly. Hosea was to take a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom for the purpose of providing a living illustration of Israel's unfaithfulness to God.

A picture is worth a thousand words. This opening of the book has tremendous shock value. To address their sin, to make them sensible to the error of their ways, God graciously confronted them with the marriage and family of Hosea.

One of the dangers of illustrations and stories in sermons is the story can overshadow the sermon. People remember the story but not the point of it. The beginning of Hosea is so shocking to our sensibilities that we get preoccupied with the marriage and family of Hosea and miss the message of the book.

The point of the shocking nature of Hosea's marriage is to make the reader sensible to the shocking nature of unfaithfulness to God.

B. The consequences of unfaithfulness (1:3-9)

Hosea was not only to take a wife of whoredom, but he was also to have children of whoredom. If his marriage illustrated the unfaithfulness of Israel, the names of his children illustrated the consequences of unfaithfulness.

1) Jezreel

The LORD commanded Hosea to name his first born, Jezreel. His name means both *God scatters and God sows*.ⁱⁱ Here it means *God scatters*, symbolizing both the end of the Jehu dynasty (2Kgs 10:30; cf 2Kgs 15:12) and the demise of the NK itself (1:4-5).

2) No Mercy

His daughter *No Mercy* (1:6)ⁱⁱⁱ shows that the God who had revealed himself to be *merciful* (Ex 34:6) and who *forgives sin* (Ex 34:7), now says, *no more mercy and no more forgiveness*.

His mercy would continue for Judah for a little while, and he would save them from the same power that would destroy the NK, but He would work alone in his saving purpose (1:7).

3) Not My People

Not My People, marks the reversal of the covenant formula, equivalent to a divorce decree (1:9). The God who identified himself to Moses at the burning bush as *I Am Whom I Am* is saying here, *I Am is not your God*. These are devastating and hopeless words of finality for the NK (1:8-9).

Israel's unfaithfulness is dramatically confronted to bring them to the sensibility of their sin. Dear friend, if God does not confront us with our sin, we will remain insensible to it and its consequences. We are masters of self-deceit and self-justification.

One of the most loving things God can do is to confront our sin. Many people today are offended at the idea being called a sinner. Somehow, it's viewed as harmful to self-esteem. The human problem is not a lack of self-esteem, it is a sinful heart and the uncanny ability to justify our sin. The only way we will ever feel better about ourselves is to have our sin forgiven and find our identity in

Christ.

The consequences of sin are dire. The refusal of the 8th century Israelites to hear the word of God led to them being cut off.

God graciously confronts us with our sin and its consequences.

2. God graciously pleads with us to forsake our sin (2:2-13)

Playing off the background of Hosea's family, God addresses his own family in chapter 2.

A. God's case against Israel (2:2-5a)

In poetic language, God brings his case against Israel. In a heart wrenching analogy that is almost too much to hear, God indirectly makes his appeal to Israel through her children because she is no longer willing to listen to him: *Plead with your mother, plead—for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband (2:2a).*

The divorce was final, but perhaps she would listen to the pleas of her children. Casting Israel's persistent infidelity as her children beg her not to pursue her lovers is another powerful way to awaken us to the heinous nature of our sin.

If she refuses to listen to her children, the LORD will remove from her all the covenant blessings she has known, thus exposing her lewdness to the world (2:3).

As it turned out, the children had taken on the characteristics of their mother and followed in the footsteps of her harlotry. They, too, will not know mercy, and there is no one to plead with her.

B. The consequences of their sin (2:5b-23)

With the case laid out (1:2-5a), the text now outlines 3 consequences, each introduced with the word, *therefore* (2:6,9,14). We will look at the first two and save the last one for the grand finale.

A. Futility (2:5b-7)

The last half of verse 5 introduces the first, *therefore*. Because Israel said, *I will go after my lovers who give me ...*(5b), the LORD said, *I will hedge up her way ...* (6).

This *therefore* introduces us to the inevitable futility of a life of sin. It's like the Rolling Stone's *I Can't Get No Satisfaction*. Israel saw a direct correlation between their activity at the Baal shrines and their prosperity as a people. God will remove that. She will pursue her lovers but not find them (7a).

Realizing her Baal mojo was not working, Israel would reason, *I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now* (7b). This return was simply selfish manipulation.

Manipulation is the gold standard of idolatry. If I do X, God will do Y. By engaging in cultic prostitution, they were attempting to manipulate Baal/YHWH into causing the crops to germinate, cattle to reproduce, and children to be born. The whole plan was simply asking, *How can I get god to do what I want him to do?*

B. Exposure (8-13)

The second *therefore* builds on the first. Verse 8 introduces the second consequence. God would not only block her way to her lovers, but he would also expose her shame for trusting in gods who are nothing.

Because Israel would not *acknowledge* that YHWH was her sole provider (8), *therefore*, he would take back all his gifts. Her spiritual poverty was hidden behind her prosperity, so that she, and everyone else, was blind to her own lewdness.

One of the most gracious things God can do is expose our sin. We are masters of disguise, manipulation, and deceit, so much so, we deceive ourselves. God would not only expose her shame but also show that her lovers were powerless to come to her aid (10).

The party was over for Israel (11-13). Israel had said, the vines and the fig trees were "*the wages her lovers had given her*" (12). When the *wages* are no longer given, there will be nothing to celebrate. All Israel had lived for and hoped in, her entire worldview, would come crashing down.

The root of all her sin is simply that she *forgot God* (13b).

Sin always leaves us empty and frustrated. It promises so much but delivers so

little. Hosea's words seemed empty. The people were prosperous, having a great time, and life was interesting, that is, until it wasn't.

Pursuing your own way and turning from Christ will leave you searching for peace and satisfaction in life never to find it. Perhaps, you are already empty and frustrated and have no explanation for it. On paper, your life should be good, but you are empty, lost, and lonely. Could it be that God has cut off your ability to find joy, in order to teach you your need of him?

God graciously pleads with us to forsake our sin.

3. God in love pursues us despite our sin (1:10-2:1; 2:14-23; 3:1-5).

Perhaps, no better description of the searching, saving, and sanctifying love of God can be found than in Hosea 1-3. All three chapters surprisingly move from judgment to salvation.

A. Undefeatable purpose of God (1:10-2:1)

If the NK is finished, divorced, and judged, why would God go to such radical extremes to confront them with their sin?

God is showing that his redemptive purpose cannot and will not fail. Divine mercy is not defeated by human sin, because God purposes to win a people for himself by sovereign grace.^{iv}

To show this truth, Hosea foresaw a day of restoration. He grounded it in the Abrahamic covenant (1:10a). The disobedience of the NK did not nullify the promise to Abraham that the number of his children would be like the sand of the sea.

The covenant formula, *You shall be my people, and I will be your God*, finds fulfillment in the New Covenant (1:10b). The New Covenant established by Jesus, expands the scope of the covenant to include the Gentile nations as well as the restoration of Judah and Israel under one head (1:11).

Peter picked up this forecasted change in the names of Hosea's children and offered its fulfillment in the church (1:11b-2:1). He addressed his letter to those

who had been called out of the dispersion both Jew and Gentile: *Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy* (1Pet. 2:10; cf 1:10b; 2:1). The day of Jezreel no longer marks the demise of Israel but the coming of the KOG in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

God in love confronts us in our sin that we might become the *children of the living God* (1:10b).

B. The latter-day people of God (2:14-23)

I skipped over the third *therefore* in 2:14. The first 2 spoke of judgment. Surprisingly, the third *therefore* points to a coming day of salvation. This reversal shows that the ultimate aim of the judgment in verses 2-13 is that God would win a people for his very own (14-23).

How would he do that? He intends to capture their hearts (14-15). The prophet here speaks of the wooing, drawing love of God.

We see the **how**, what about the **when**? **When** would God fulfill his saving mission? In 2:16-23, we are introduced to a *coming day* in which God will realize his saving goal. Three times the prophet speaks of a coming day with the technical phrase, *in/on that day* (16,18,21). This phrase refers to the last days.

In the *coming day*, God's people will call him *My Husband* rather than *My Baal* (16-17). God must be approached on his terms not our terms. He will not be mischaracterized. The point is God is personal and loving, and we actually have a relationship with him.

The *coming day* is inaugurated by a New Covenant (18-20). The details of how the New Covenant is established are not spelled out here, but some of the characteristics of it are. We see the comprehensive nature of the work of Christ in this text: he will transform creation order, abolish rebellion and strife, and save his people by a righteousness that is not their own but is based on God's love and mercy toward them (19-20).

Pure grace is the foundation of the New Covenant. The LORD has betrothed his

New Covenant people to himself on the basis of who he is not who we are. The consequence of such a union is that we know the LORD.

The *coming day* is a day in which the curse will be lifted, and creation will respond (21-23). Jezreel will no longer mean *God scatters* but *God sows*. In that day, we will know God's mercy and be his people (2:23).

C. The saving love of God (3:1-5)

In contrast to his first marriage which shows the unfaithfulness of Israel, Hosea's remarriage to Gomer shows God's love for Israel despite her unfaithfulness.

1) Redeeming love (3:1-2)

Gomer's idolatry had finally enslaved her. I think *the other man who* loved her was a way of saying she had bound herself to one the shrines as a ritual prostitute. Hosea had to purchase her release. The cost was very high for Hosea to make Gomer his own.

Like Gomer, we are bankrupt and without merit. There is nothing in us to call forth the love of God. God's love is not only underserved, but we have also demerited his love. We have given him every reason not to love us. It is staggering that God should love sinners. It is costly. He will save those whom he loves.

Romans 5:8 says, *But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.*

No reason can be given for his love, save his own sovereign good pleasure. God's love is his eternal disposition toward us. It's not a fluctuating thing. It's not impotent longings for what can never be. It is his eternal determination to love us and save us from our sin and his wrath.

2) Sanctifying love (3:3-5)

Verse 3 gives us the exchange of vows in Hosea's remarriage to Gomer. It is equivalent to, *You will be mine, and I will be yours*, only modified to reflect their unique situation: *You shall not play the whore, or belong to another man; so will I also be to you.*

In Christ, God betroths us to himself in faithfulness (cf 2:20a). And his love brings about its desired effects. He does not love us because we are holy, but his love makes us holy.

8th century Israel did not defeat the saving purpose of God. Rather he sent them into exile to be gathered in the *latter days* under David, their king (5).

One day the latter-day David, the True Israel, the last Israelite, stood in Galilee, the heart of the NK and proclaimed, *The time is fulfilled, and the KOG is at hand repent and believe the Gospel*. Since that time Jew and Gentile are gathered in one body as the latter-day people of God.

God graciously confronts us in our sin; He graciously pleads with us to forsake our sin; and he lovingly saves sinners.

ⁱ Four kings of the Southern Kingdom (SK) and 1 king of the Northern Kingdom (NK) of Israel are listed. His ministry then took place at some point starting in the reigns of Jeroboam in the North and Uzziah in the South and ending at some point in the reign of Hezekiah in South.

ⁱⁱ In the course of Hosea 1-3, it will mean both. It is the perfect name to illustrate both exile and restoration.

ⁱⁱⁱ *No mercy* and *Not MY People* were probably not Hosea's (compare 1:3b, 6a, 8).

^{iv} Ray Ortland, *God's Unfaithful Wife*, NSBT, 54.