

52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

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23. Hosea

Let's pray. Father, some of the language in the Bible is pleasing and soothing to our ears and to our souls and we are comfortable with it and we can relax with it. "As a deer thirsts for water, so my soul thirsts for you." We like those kinds of words and thoughts and passages. And yet, Father, you have written your word with some very strong language when it comes to sin. Father, may this morning not be one of over-reaction; may we not look at the language and run screaming from this place unthankful for all the good work that you have done in our lives and the victories that your Spirit has wrought. And yet, Father, I pray also that for those who need to hear the message of Hosea, that it will come through clearly. In Jesus name, Amen.

I. Introduction

I should say this is one of those sermons that again I fought with. I thought it was done on Thursday and I was still messing with it last night. That's why there are no overheads; I didn't know what was going to happen this morning. This is one of those passages where I kept having the feeling like I was preaching to the choir. You're the ones that will understand this. It is the ones who aren't here that need to hear the message. But it is Hosea. It is a pivotal passage in the process of revelation in the Old Testament.

While Isaiah and Micah were prophesying to the Southern Kingdom, Hosea was prophesying to the Northern Kingdom; to Israel, which is also called Ephraim. We are somewhere around 760 to 720 B.C., and like Isaiah and Micah, Hosea was prophesying in a time of material prosperity and spiritual bankruptcy just like Spokane and America. His book contains graphic descriptions of persistent sin. He uses the language of whores, harlots, and prostitutes to make his point. But Hosea also graphically portrays God's persistent love for his faithless wife, Israel. As a husband longs for his faithless wife to return home, so God longs to receive his people back to him, if only they would be faithful. That is the message of Hosea.

II. Gomer

The first three chapters of the book start with God telling Hosea to go marry a prostitute and some of the commentaries have trouble thinking God would ever do that, but it is the plain, straight forward meaning of the text and God does what God jolly well wants to do. And God told Hosea to go marry a prostitute. So he married a woman named Gomer and the idea was that Hosea's marriage was to be an object lesson to the Jews. That just as Hosea was to love Gomer; just as Hosea was to desire her to be faithful; just as Hosea was willing to forgive her and take her back, if she would only promise to be faithful, so also God loves his children. In the same way God desires his children to be faithful he also is willing to forgive his children and take them back, if only they would be faithful to him. There is no mention of any idea in the book of Hosea that God wants them back if they won't be faithful. That is not a Biblical notion. The cry for forgiveness and open arms is only if they promise to be faithful.

In Hosea, Chapter 1, it states this in verse 2. "When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea 'Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of

whoredom for the land (in other words the Children of Israel) commit great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.' (There is the book of Hosea.) So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. And the Lord said to him (to Hosea) 'Call his name Jezreel; for in just a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. (The Northern Kingdom). And on that day I will break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel."

God had told Jehu to kill the house of Ahab and put an end to the sin of Ahab but evidently Jehu didn't do it the way God wanted and God is now about to punish the Northern Kingdom for what Jehu did in the valley Jezreel. So Hosea names his first child Jezreel.

"And she conceived again and bore a daughter. And the Lord said to him (to Hosea) Call her name No Mercy, for I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them AT ALL."

Verse 8: When she had weaned No Mercy, she conceived and bore a son And the Lord said, 'Call his name Not My People, for you are not my People and I am not your God.'" I often imagine the prophets' wives, because all the prophets did the same thing, the prophets' wives standing out their back door (if they had back doors. I don't think they did; maybe front doors) and yelling "No Mercy! Not My People! Time to eat!" But in the very crying out of their names, the message of their father, the prophet, was made clear. This is Hosea's message; that God will no longer, after centuries of persistent sin, God will no longer have mercy on his people. They are NOT his people and he is NOT their God.

What makes this a little more powerful, perhaps, is most of the commentaries believe that Hosea was not even the father, of especially the last son, and perhaps the last 2 children. But he is still naming them and he is still using them in the proclamation of God's message.

But what is also amazing about the book of Hosea is that while it is primarily a judgment on persistent sin, at every stage Hosea is still calling out to his wife, that no matter where she is in her sin, whether it is having these last 2 children or whether, as Chapter 3 talks about that she evidently got sold into slavery, and he went and bought her back and he gave her another chance, that at every stage Hosea is still calling out to his wife..."If you will be faithful, I am willing to forgive and to receive you back." So also, at every stage of OUR sin, God is standing there and saying to you and to me, "If you are willing to be faithful, then I am willing to forgive and I am willing to take you back." Even in the midst of our unfaithfulness, God holds out forgiveness. Or as Paul says, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

I think Hosea 2:16 is one of the most gut-wrenching verses in all of Hosea. Starting at verse 14 he has been talking about some time in the future when Israel will promise to be faithful, will return to their God, and in verse 16, God through Hosea says: "And in that day (in that day of repentance) declares the LORD, you will call me "My Husband" and no longer will you call me "My Baal"

God longs for his people to look at him and say “You are my husband”. Try to imagine a perfect husband...(I’ll give a little time for the snickers to drop)...Try to imagine a perfect husband, faithful and loving in all his ways, never losing hope, always willing to forgive even though his wife is down on 2nd Street and going with anyone who will pay her. And this perfect husband longs, in the deepest recesses of his heart, to hear his bride say “You are my husband. I love you!”

It is an amazing picture of an amazing God. A God of mercy who treats us in ways we do not deserve. An amazing picture of a forgiving God who wants to forgive us and wants us back IF we promise to be faithful.

III. Portrait of the Downward Spiral of Sin

Chapters 4 through 13 then, in Hosea, paint a powerful portrait of the downward spiral of sin. They are dark chapters. They are chapters of judgment. They are not “feel good” chapters. And this spiral starts with idolatry. Hosea makes it very clear that the beginning of sin is idolatry. Hosea 4, first part of verse 12...and you want to leave your Bibles open because we are going to be flipping back and forth quite a bit...In Hosea 4:12 God says:

My people inquire of a piece of wood and their walking staff gives them oracles. This is prophetic sarcasm in the extreme! That the people want to know God’s will so they talk to a piece of wood, or the staff they lean on when they walk starts talking to them and gives them an oracle. The downward spiral of sin starts with idolatry.

Idolatry is more than wooden statues.

Idolatry is anything that takes the place of God. And an idol is anything that we desire more than we desire God.

And we become idolaters if we love something more than we love God. We are idolaters if we desire something more than we desire God. And we are idolaters if we seek something more than we seek God.

Sin starts with idolatry; of removing God from the throne where he belongs and allowing things of creation to creep back up and to take over his throne. And even in the midst of our idolatry...This is the bright point in Hosea...Even in the midst of our idolatry our husband still calls to us, asking us to return. Hosea 2, starting at verse 14: Therefore, behold, I will allure her (I will call her) and bring her into the wilderness (which is a good thing here) and speak tenderly to her and there I will give her her vineyards and make the valley of Achor a door of hope; and there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. Remember back to those early days when everything was new and exciting and you were so passionately in love with your fiancée; passionately in love with your spouse. God says “Someday it is going to be like that again with my people.”

But starting with idolatry, the speed of this downward spiral, despite God’s open invitation for us to return, the speed of the downward spiral tends to increase and one of the means by which it increases is luxury. This is one of the stronger sub-scenes in Hosea. For example: Hosea 10:1

Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased the more altars he built (These are pagan altars.) as his country improved, he improved his pillars. Over in Chapter 13, verse 6, (again speaking of God's faithless children) But when they had grazed they had become full. They were filled and their heart was lifted up, therefore they forgot me.

You and I do a good job, don't we, of crying out to God in desperation when things hurt; when there are problems; when things aren't going well. We do a really good job of crying out to God in hurt and pain. But the message of Hosea and some of the other prophets is that when the money is flowing and when life is free from pain, we forget God; and the more and more we worship the gods of wealth and the gods of comfort. This downward spiral, Hosea says, this downward spiral of sin is only increased by wealth and by luxury, and in this downward spiral of sin, who gets caught in it? Our children. Again, this is one of the strongest themes in Isaiah, that as we descend the downward spiral of sin, our children are caught up in it. Again, the language here is very, very strong. In chapter 1 verse 2 he talks about having children of whoredom; children who are going to become like Gomer.

In chapter 4, verse 6:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge because you have rejected knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge. I reject you from being a priest to me, and since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children. Because of the sins of the parents, and because they have forgotten God's laws and obviously can't teach the children the laws, so also God is going to forget their children.

Look at verse 13; I am not making this stuff up.

They (meaning the parents, the faithless Israelites) they sacrifice on the tops of mountains and burn offerings on the hills (these are all offerings to Baal) under oak, poplar, and elms because their shade is good, therefore, your daughters play the whore and your brides commit adultery.

Generational sin is an ugly thing, isn't it? It is an ugly thing when we start moving down this spiral and instead of doing everything we can to push our kids out of the spiral, we grab them and pull them down with us. What a contrast to the way it is supposed to be.

Deuteronomy 6 (we quote the Shema a lot) "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And then in verse 7, "You shall teach them (the law) diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise."

What a totally different kind of family unit that God sees in Deuteronomy than what Hosea sees. It is one thing to mess up my own life. It is one thing for ME to become faithless, like the faithless children of Israel; it is one thing for ME to become an idolater, but am I willing and are you willing...are WE willing...to destroy the lives of our children in the process. Because the message of the Book of Hosea is that is exactly what is going to happen. It is exactly what is going to happen.

Some of you may be thinking, "Oh Bill, don't be so melodramatic!" I'm NOT! Hosea isn't either, and neither is Moses. In the giving of the Ten Commandments; Exodus 20

starting at verse 4, second commandment: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. (Idols take many form, don’t they? They are not all walking staffs.) For I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the 3rd and the 4th generation of those who hate me.”

You see, if we do not teach our children the precepts of the Lord; if we do not speak to them when we are sitting down and when we are standing up. If we do not write them on the door posts of our door, then how can they know them? And how can they learn to love the Lord?

And yet, as children tend to be caught in this downward spiral, even in the midst of that, our husband calls us to return. That is the bright light. That is the bright story in the Book of Hosea; that no matter how bad the sin becomes; no matter how far down the spiral someone has gone, God is still there. His arms are still open and he says “I want to forgive you! I am willing to take you back, if you would but repent and commit to being faithful to me.

Chapter 10, verse 12: (Hosea is looking forward to a future time of restoration.)
“Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap steadfast love, break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord that he may come and rain righteousness on you.”
That’s what God wants to do. He wants us to be faithful to him...and thankfully we have the Holy Spirit now. We have the empowerment to do precisely that, because our husband wants us. He wants to rain righteousness down on you and me. No matter where we are in the spiral of sin, our merciful, forgiving, faithful husband wants us home.

But eventually, as people continue down this spiral, they get to a point where Hosea is very explicit that they have become so thoroughly sinful that they are useless and many other words. Look at Hosea 8, verse 8, please.

Israel is swallowed up; already they are among the nations as a useless vessel. (What a condemnation.) They are meant to be the light to the Gentiles...the light to the world...we are to be the salt of the earth. Right? And yet, they have become so sinful that instead of being God’s Kingdom of priests, Exodus 19, going out and mediating God to their neighbors and co-workers and families and friends, what has happened is that they have become a useless vessel for they cannot do the very thing that God intended them to do.

Hosea continues; he says they have become incapable of understanding, verse 12 in Chapter 8, God says “Were I to write for him (for Israel) my laws by the ten thousands, they would be regarded as a strange thing.”

The Israelites had simply become incapable of understanding. And they have also become incapable of innocence. Look back at verse 5: I have spurned your calf, Oh Samaria, my anger burns against them. How long will they be incapable of innocence? Hosea 9:5: “They have become detestable like the thing they loved.”

We all become like what we love, don’t we? And the Israelites had loved whoredom and they had become as detestable as whores.

Hosea 5:11: “They are determined to go after filth.”

11:7... "My people are bent on turning away from me."

4:10... "They cherish whoredom."

4:12... "They have a spirit of whoredom that leads them astray."

The spiral keeps going down. Right when you think it can't go any further, it keeps going further and further down until people become useless; incapable of understanding; incapable of innocence. Detestable.

Somebody told me, and I'm not going to get the name straight, but it is one of the pictures in *Pilgrim's Progress*, of one of the characters that Christian meets who is in a cage and the bars of the cage are sin and he can't get out of the cage and he is living in the cage. He is trapped in the cage but the lock isn't locked! And he could open the door whenever he wants and move out. But he is so far down the spiral of sin the he doesn't know he can get out and he is bound by the irons of sin. That is what Hosea is talking about.

There is a bottom to the spiral, though. I don't know if that is the good news but there certainly is a bottom to the spiral. And the bottom of the spiral of sin is when forgiveness becomes impossible. There is a point at which sin becomes unforgivable. Is there not? And it is not because God won't forgive his bride. The problem is never with God. The problem is that the bride won't ask for forgiveness. We won't ask for forgiveness.

Hosea 5, verse 4: Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God, for the spirit of whoredom is within them and they know not the Lord.

So what happens is that God withdraws. Chapter 5, verse 6:

With their flocks and herds they shall go to seek the Lord, but they will not find him; he has withdrawn from them. And in fact, what God does is that he drives his bride into judgment. Chapter 9 verse 15...second half of verse 15: Because of the wickedness of their deeds, I will drive them out of my house. I will love them no more.

This is the doctrine of the hard heart that we first met in Pharaoh. It gets discussed most fully in Romans chapter 9. People being so consumed by sin, refusing to do anything about the downward spiral of sin, that they get to the point where their hearts are so hard they are not going to ask for forgiveness. It is what Jesus calls the unforgivable sin. I know some people are concerned about having committed the unforgivable sin. If you are concerned about it, you haven't done it, because if you have done it you don't know it, you don't care, and you don't want repentance. But there is a point in which, as we go down this spiral of sin, that we get to the bottom; a place of hard-heartedness. A place of unforgivable sin and it is this place that Hosea called "whoredom".

Whoredom does not refer to an occasional sin. It does not refer to when we commit a faithless act. Whoredom means that we have become faithless people and when we become faithless to God, when we fail to love him as we ought, when we love the things of this world more than we love him, then we have become idolaters and eventually we become whores.

And yet, the spark of light in Hosea, that even at the bottom of the spiral, when we still have to go through judgment...and Israel had gotten to a point where God says through Hosea "There is no other option. You WILL go through judgment. You HAVE to go

through judgment. It is the only thing that is left.' Still, on the other side of judgment stands our loving husband. Still willing to forgive and still willing to have us back if we would but be faithful! Standing there, in the words of Hosea chapter 6 starting at verse 1, this is what our husband longs to hear us say, even on the other side of judgment, at the bottom of the spiral, he longs to hear us say

"Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us that he may heal us. He has struck us down and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us. On the third day he will raise us up that we may live before him. Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD, his going out is sure as the dawn and he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.

Even in the midst of judgment, our faithful husband longs for us to repent and to come home to him, if we would be but faithful.

IV. New Testament Imagery of Hosea

When this imagery moves into the New Testament, it is picked up as the image of you and I collectively, being the bride of Christ. It is a little difficult concept, I think, for guys to get their hands around, but nonetheless it is a tremendously important concept that all of us together, men and women as the church, are the Bride of Christ. Paul tells the Corinthians, 2nd Corinthians 11:2

"I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ."

You see, that is the intent of Paul. The intent of Paul is not that we have some emotional, religious experience and think that we can go and live any way we want...and unfortunately Paul is often misread saying that; he never does. His intention was to help us to come to faith, live as disciples, and grow into maturity so that when we stand before Christ we are pure; we are virgins...we are not whores. We are presented, as Paul tells the Ephesian church, pure and blameless before him.

In Revelation, chapter 19, the end of time, John's vision about what is going to happen when time is over; he picks up the same imagery. Revelation 19 starting at verse 6: And then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out Hallelujah! For the Lord God, the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exalt and give him the glory. For the marriage of the Lamb is come and his bride has made herself ready. It was granted her to clothe herself (this is you and me, you all!) It was granted her...it was granted Bill, it was granted you...to clothe herself with pure linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.!

That is how you and I are to be clothed as the chaste virgin before our husband as we get ready for the marriage and the marriage feast that awaits those of us who are disciples of Jesus Christ. Clothed in faithfulness.

The question of Hosea is as obvious as it is blunt. Am I caught in the downward spiral of sin? Have I toyed with, or have I become an idolater? Loving something more than I love God; desiring something more than I desire God; seeking something more than I see God. Has my idolatry been sped up by my luxury? Again, using prophetic imagery, have I become fat and forgotten God? Will my children pay the price for my sin? Have I

become useless...incapable of being innocent? Am I at the bottom of the spiral? Am I a whore?

Your faithful God, our husband, stands before us, his arms outstretched, with a heart that is ready to forgive and receive you back and to receive me back, if only we will be faithful to him, empowered by the Spirit, clothed in the righteous deeds of the saints. Let's pray. Father, there is something inside of us that wants to feel good and feel comfortable and feel fully accepted no matter what and that something is called sin. Father, if we are sinners we don't want to feel comfortable. We don't want to feel good about ourselves. We want to feel horrible and wretched because we ARE horrible and wretched people apart from the grace of Jesus Christ. Father, we long to be free. We long to move through brokenness into wholeness. We long to be your faithful bride. Father, at whatever stage of the spiral we might happen to be, Father may you through the power of your Spirit take Hosea and speak to us; firmly, lovingly, and may we see that you stand there with your arms outstretched, offering us forgiveness. Asking us to come home to you, if only we could be a faithful bride. In Jesus name, Amen.