

INTRODUCTION TO HOSEA

The book of Hosea is a love story. It is the story of God's love for his people, Israel, but it is written from God's perspective. It shows us the yearning heart of a God who longs for reciprocal love from those he loves. To illustrate this love, we are given a graphic picture in the first three chapters. God tells Hosea to take a wife. Her name is Gomer and she is a prostitute. This might come as a shock to us and we might wonder why God would do that.

Gomer bears three children, but only the first seems to be fathered by Hosea. The names of the children are unusual to say the least. Children's names are usually chosen because the parents like them. Parents may choose a name because of its origin or its meaning. Or, the name may be a family name, continuing through generations. These children's names are highly significant. The first, a son, is called Jezreel. He was to be a reminder that God holds people accountable for what they do. It was at Jezreel, a place in Israel, that a man called Jehu had annihilated the descendants of the house of King Ahab. This was divine justice on the king's evil deeds. Jehu, however, did not have pure motives and God held him responsible. Jehu was granted a dynasty of only four generations. Gomer and Hosea's first child, Jezreel, was an indicator of a prophecy soon to be fulfilled.

The second child born to Gomer was a daughter and she was named Lo-Ruhamah. Verse 6 of chapter 1 tells us that the name meant I will no longer show love to the house of Israel that I should at all forgive them. Such a name reveals the depth of heartache that God had for his people and the consequences for those who did not respond to his love with obedience to his covenant. Is God really saying that his love and compassion for his people will cease?

The third child, a son, was named Lo-Ammi. In verse 9 we read: then the Lord said, Call him Lo-Ammi, for you are not my people, and I am not your God. But this statement is immediately followed in verse 10 by a promise given many times before:

Yet the Israelites will be like sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called sons of the living God.

Within the first three chapters of Hosea, God's longing for the love of his people, and his strong judgment upon them see-saw. The language of chapter 2 is graphic. God calls upon the children of the marriage to rebuke their mother. She is an adulteress. She is unfaithful. She will be punished for her flagrant

disregard of her husband and children. Remembering that Gomer is a picture of Israel, God declares he will 'make her like a desert ... and slay her with thirst'. But Gomer's attitude does not change. She declares she will go after her lovers and they will give her food and drink, saying, in effect, she does not care about her husband's words.

The word therefore is used three times in chapter 2 to tell us God's response. Firstly, he will block Gomer's path. She may chase after her lovers but she won't catch them or find them. This will cause Gomer to re-think her situation. Maybe it is better to go back to her husband. He at least will look after her. We need to relate the picture of Gomer and Hosea to that of Yahweh and Israel, because that is how God is using this illustration.

The second therefore brings more judgment. God will take away the fruitfulness of the land. No food, no drink. No crops to produce linen for clothing. No celebrations. The result will be a stark nakedness, depicted in Gomer, the picture of Israel.

If you draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper, making two columns, and you label the first column 'Judgment', and the second one 'Compassion', you could read through the fourteen chapters of Hosea picking up verses that are appropriate to each column. It is quite startling. Words of strong judgment are repeated time after time. A good example of this relates to agriculture in the land. "I will take away my grain', I will take back my wool and my linen' 'I will ruin her vines and her fig trees'. And a few verses later, 'I will punish her'. The verses in our judgment column would be running far down the page.

But the third therefore, only a verse or two later, begins a wonderful reversal. God is going to woo Israel. He will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. He will give her back her vineyards and the fullness of harvest. He will delight in Israel's response when he says: you will no longer call me master; you will call me husband. Suddenly, the verses that relate to compassion, love and mercy are flowing down our second column, to draw level with those of judgment.

The beginning of chapter 3 records the words of Yahweh to Hosea:

The LORD said to me, "Go, show your love for your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes."

What is Hosea's reply? So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley. Hosea bought her. He was under no illusion that his wife had changed her lifestyle. He had to stoop to the humiliating task of paying a price for Gomer. This may have been because she was now a slave, or

beholden to some one. But Hosea did what Yahweh asked. He told Gomer that she was to live with him in a relationship devoid of sexual contact for a certain time.

As Hosea cut Gomer off from the men who led her into sin, so would the LORD separate Israel from those people and practices that were leading the nation away from him.

Hosea was a prophet. What are some of the things a prophet did?

- o He revealed the nature and character of God to men.
- o He made known to men the laws of God.
- o He called the people back to obedience to God's law.
- o He exhorted the people to sincerity in worship.
- o He warned them of divine judgment of sin, both personal and national.

One of the ways that Hosea incorporates those things is a method called reversal. Remember our columns called Judgment and Compassion? Hosea is a master at using this method to show the utter sinfulness of the nation of Israel, and Yahweh's unending love for his people. Israel was out of kilter, far, far away from Yahweh. How did this happen?

In Exodus 19, the Lord made a covenant – an agreement – with the people of Israel. God had brought them out of Egypt. They had wandered for forty years in the wilderness. They had finally come to the desert of Sinai and Moses went up the mountain in response to God's call. His words to Moses:

19:4 – You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

7 – so Moses went back ... and set before them all the words that the Lord had commanded him to speak. 8 – the people all responded together, "we will do everything the Lord has said."

There we have a covenant, an agreement. But it was conditional. Obedience would mean blessing; disobedience would mean cursing.

By the time that Hosea prophesied the people of Israel were far away from keeping the covenant. The land of Israel had divided in two: the northern part was called Israel or Ephraim, and the southern part was known as Judah. The kings of Judah were in general God-fearing. The kings of Israel were not. Hosea lived in the northern kingdom; therefore his words as a prophet were directed to the people of the north, known as Israel or Ephraim.

The people were so far removed from the terms of the covenant that they no longer recognised their sinfulness. They did not worship God. They would have said: Of course we do! But ... they combined worship of God with worship of Baal. They could not see the problem. They did not heed the instructions of the covenant: you will not have ANY other gods before me. They were into idol worship, big time. What did the first commandment say: NO OTHER GODS! Right from the beginning Israel sinned in this way. The people seemed unable to focus on their Creator God who had chosen to bless when they were obedient, but also punish them when they were disobedient

While the first three chapters of Hosea describe the marriage of Hosea and Gomer and reflect Yahweh's love for Israel and his anguish for the people, chapters 4 to 14 enlarge on Israel's sinfulness. The people were unfaithful and unkind. This was a result of not worshipping Yahweh or acknowledging him as the God of Israel. How had this happened? The priests had failed to teach the people and they were going to be judged 'big time'. The priests had been appointed to guide the people in their relationship with the Lord by teaching them the Law of Moses and offering sacrifices for their sin. But the priests had rejected knowledge and ignored the law. Those God had chosen to be a bridge between him and his people had not taken the task seriously. Their actions were grossly wrong. They had actually merged the worship of Yahweh with the worship of Baal. The priests were encouraging the people to sin. The people were committing spiritual adultery. Hosea uses very strong words at the beginning of chapter 5: Hear this, you priests! Pay attention, you Israelites! Listen, O royal house! This judgment is against you.

It is helpful to remember what was happening in the world around at the time of Hosea's prophesying in the mid 700s BC. Assyria had been the dominant nation but she had been weakened and Israel had regained some of her prosperity. Warnings of what is to happen never seem to have the same impetus when things are going well. Our world is slowly emerging from a global financial crisis, and it has been a stressful time. There were warnings, well beforehand, that we might be in for tough times. Most people chose to disregard those warnings and we have been experiencing the resultant effects. Israel could not see what lay ahead. Rather, those in leadership chose not to see and heed God's warnings. What God proclaimed through Hosea was indeed certain. Assyria was going to destroy Israel.

There is a map on the inside front cover of your study book to show you Assyria's take over of Israel. It began about 734 BC and slowly closed in to finally capture the Israelites in 722BC and deport them to distant lands where they were resettled. A small number of Israelites remained within their homeland.

Hosea's words concerning God's judgment on the royal family and those associated are damning. He exposes the corruption of the palace, the nation, the diplomats and even the prayers that the people offer. His description of the evil associated with the court is recorded in chapter 7:3, 4:

By their wickedness they make the king glad, and the princes by their treachery. They are all adulterers; they are like a heated oven, whose baker ceases to stir the fire, from the kneading of the dough until it is leavened. And in verse 7: All of them are hot as an oven, and they devour their rulers. All their kings have fallen; and none of them calls upon me.

This is descriptive language referring to the behaviour of those who had no time for God, whose debauchery influenced all levels of society in Israel and who revelled in evil. Six kings had reigned in a period of thirty years. Four had been assassinated; an indication of the state of the nation.

The chapters in Hosea containing the prophecies, or oracles, are not necessarily in date order. Judgment is spelt out, but so is love. Sometimes we read a beautiful description of Israel followed by an outpouring of God's heartbreak. Verses 10 and 11 in chapter 9 are an example of this:

When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in a desert; when I saw your fathers, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree. But when they came to Baal Peor, they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved. Ephraim's glory will fly away like a bird - no birth, no pregnancy, no conception.

The opening verses in chapter 11 present another beautiful picture of the enduring, unending love of Yahweh for his children: When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them.

In contrast, chapter 13 contains the strongest condemnation imaginable upon a people who have replaced the one true God with idols. Verse 7: so I will come upon them like a lion, like a leopard I will lurk by the path. Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open. Like a lion I will devour them; a wild animal will tear them apart.

This study is entitled 'Love that never gives up'. Hosea alone presents the love between Yahweh and Israel as that of the love of a husband for a wife. The heart of God is exposed with all its anguish and tenderness. This husband has a

wife who is unfaithful. She is uncaring. She does not consider him. She rejects him. She runs off with another – and perhaps many others. Yet Yahweh, in his unfathomable love, never ceases to have mercy and compassion upon her. His love does not give up. And we are so encouraged when we read the final chapter that shows, yet again, that repentance brings blessing. Yahweh's words to his people:

I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them. I will be like dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily. Like a cedar of Lebanon he will send down his roots; his young roots will grow. His splendour will be like an olive tree, his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon.

We fail to appreciate the message of Hosea if we do not apply it to ourselves, and for ourselves. Gomer did not value her marriage. She is a picture of a sinful people not placing any value on their relationship with God. Do we treasure what we have in the Lord Jesus Christ: a relationship with him that makes us a child of God?

The people of Israel were so far removed from the truth that they chose to believe their blessings came from idols. Idols are insidious. Many believers would be offended if challenged about idols in their lives. Idols are not just man-made items. They can be a multitude of things, harmless in themselves. When such a thing becomes number one in our lives, we have a problem.

Our Bibles are the Word of God. Sometimes teaching from them is not quite as accurate as it should be. We are encouraged and challenged to check teaching against Scripture to ensure that it measures up. The priests in Israel were teaching the people, but the truth of God's law was not in that teaching.

Our Father in heaven is the God who never gives up. His yearning heart reaches out to his children in every situation. Discipline and rebuke are part of that unending love. Time after time, in Hosea, God calls for his people to return to him. He does the same to us today. There is no cut-off date. As long as we live, the invitation remains. This can be a great encouragement to those who have been on a side path for many years. God will not give up on them.

Just as Hosea presents Yahweh as the husband and Israel as his wife, the New Testament portrays Jesus as the bridegroom, and the church as his bride. All who have confessed their sinfulness, repented and acknowledged Jesus as Saviour are the bride. How beautiful is our bridegroom. How much we long to walk obediently and faithfully with him.

Treasure the teachings of Hosea. They are precious.