



# IMAGES OF LOVE: THE BOOK OF HOSEA

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

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The Book of Hosea  
Third Message  
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Nothing shocks us anymore in today's world. When we watch the news at night, so inundated are we with crime, drugs, sex and violence, our emotions are numbed to the shock value of the stories reported. Our society is in decline. As a nation, we are morally and spiritually bankrupt. Conscience of guilt and accountability are eroding. We have to ask ourselves, Will anything shock us enough to put us on the right road? Is there anything that can draw people's hearts back to God?

In our studies in the Minor Prophets, this morning we come to the book of Hosea. When the prophets wrote these words, the nation of Israel was living in a time like our own, a period of moral and spiritual corruption. How did God speak to his people then? What did he do to shock them so that they would change the way they were living?

The prophets, of course, were God's agents to shake up and change the world—and Hosea was no different. But the book of Hosea has more than searing words of impending judgment. This prophet also presents two powerful images of love, as we will see.

The book opens with these words:

**The word of the Lord which came to Hosea the son of Beeri, during the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel.** (Hos 1:1, NASB)

Hosea shares the same historical context as the book of Amos, which we looked at last week. Following forty years of wandering in the wilderness, at last Joshua took the people of Israel into the land of Canaan. But, as Judges records, Israel failed to destroy all the Canaanite people as the Lord had commanded. Baal was the chief god of the Canaanites. He was the deity who supposedly made the land fertile, the one whom the Canaanites thought was stimulated to blessing them by their engaging in sexual activity with temple prostitutes. Over the years, the religion of the Canaanites wove itself into the fabric of Israel's worship. This practice greatly angered the God of Israel. That is why the prophets spoke to the nation—so that their hearts might be drawn back to the God who had delivered them out of Egypt.

The prophecy of Hosea was given at a time when Israel was divided into two kingdoms, north and south, Israel and Judah. Following the rule of the kings Saul, David and Solomon, the nation divided. A rival place of worship was established in Samaria, and each kingdom had its own king. The prophecy was written in the eighth century BC, and the kings who reigned in both the northern and southern kingdoms are listed in the first verse. Notice that Jeroboam is the only king listed as having reigned in Israel. There were other kings, of course, but they are not deemed worthy to mention.

Hosea's ministry covered the last thirty years of the northern kingdom. At the beginning of the eighth century, Israel's enemies were not as dominant as they were at other times. Assyria and Babylon were engaged elsewhere, while Egypt was comparatively weak. Israel therefore enjoyed a period of

affluence at this time. The economy was booming, although the rich were getting richer at the expense of the poor, as we saw in our study in Amos. The people felt they were prospering as a result of their worshipping the Canaanite gods, so their idolatry increased. (Does this sound like our own society today?)

As Hosea began his prophetic ministry, he declared the impending judgment at the hands of Assyria. Israel imagined this could never happen, but as the years passed, Hosea's prophecy proved true. The armies of Assyria grew stronger and marched nearer and nearer to Israel. When Pekah was king of the land, Israel combined with Syria and attempted a revolt against Assyria, but they were defeated. Damascus fell, in 732 BC, and the Assyrian stranglehold drew tighter. Then Israel made an appeal to Egypt to come to their aid. But this too failed. Finally, Samaria fell in 722, following a three-year siege. The lesson is clear: When you are not following God, friendship with the world cannot save you from God's judgment. Eventually, judgment will come.

So God spoke through the prophet Hosea in an attempt to call his people back to himself, declaring the judgment that would come upon the nation if they did not return to him. And, as he did with all the prophets, God spoke through Hosea to offer the hope of restoration and a time of future blessing. But what really stands out in this book, and what I want to focus on this morning, are two metaphors, two images of love, two very powerful statements that can change people's lives.

The first image centers around Hosea himself and what God asks him to do. Incredibly, God instructs the prophet to become a husband to an adulteress named Gomer:

**When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry, and have children of harlotry; for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the Lord."** (1:2)

What an assignment for a spokesman of God! Yet, this is what God asked 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, "Name him Jezreel; for yet a little while, and I will punish the house of Jehu for the bloodshed of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. And it will come about on that day, that I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel." Then she conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. And the Lord said to him, "Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have compassion on the house of Israel, that I should ever forgive them. But I will have compassion on the house of Judah and deliver them by the Lord their God, and will not deliver them by bow, sword, battle, horses, or horsemen. When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the Lord said, "Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God." (1:3-9)**

By means of these names, God is trying to shock the nation of Israel and awaken them to their perilous state.

God repeats these instructions again, in 3:1,

**Then the Lord said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is loved by her husband, yet an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the sons of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes." (3:1)**

In this metaphor, Gomer represents Israel, and Hosea the image of God as a husband to his people. Israel, therefore, is the bride of God. But, like Gomer, she is playing the harlot, committing adultery with the gods of the Canaanites. She is being unfaithful to this most intimate of relationships.

That is the picture that is drawn in 4:11-12,

**Harlotry, wine, and new wine take away the understanding,  
My people consult their wooden idol, and their diviner's wand  
informs them;  
For a spirit of harlotry has led them astray,  
And they have played the harlot, departing from their God. (4:11-12)**

Our tendency is to do the same thing. We come to church and proclaim: "As the Lord lives, God bless you. Jesus is Lord." We are the bride of Christ, but we are in a love affair with the world. Whether secretly or out in the open, we serve idols: power, popularity, prestige, possessions, people. We court these multiple lovers. Like Israel, we commit spiritual adultery.

In contrast, Hosea presents a marvelous picture of love. God is a faithful, loyal husband who will never forsake his wife, his bride, no matter what she does. No matter how often she strays he is there to restore her. Today, we would call Hosea a fool. We would advise him to get rid of Gomer. But in this account, God is attempting to shock his people by giving them a picture of his faithful, committed love, hoping that they will forsake their lovers and cling to him.

Furthermore, in this picture God assures his people that he is committed to their future restoration.

**"Therefore, behold, I will allure her,  
Bring her into the wilderness,  
And speak kindly to her.  
Then I will give her her vineyards from there,  
And the valley of Achor as a door of hope.  
And she will sing there as in the days of her youth,  
As in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt." (2:14-15)**

We find the same picture again, in verse 19:

**"And I will betroth you to Me forever;  
Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice,  
In lovingkindness and in compassion,  
And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness.  
Then you will know the Lord." (2:19-20)**

God's love for us is like the love of a faithful husband. He will never leave us or forsake us; he will never deny us or divorce us.

Clearly, this feminine image speaks to the heart of women. The greatest hunger of a woman's heart is for one who will be her advocate, her champion, someone who will lift the weight of the world off her shoulders and provide security for her. When she makes a mistake, she longs to feel her husband's arms embrace her and hear that she is loved. When she gets

all dressed up, she longs to hear her husband tell her she is beautiful. When she works hard to be creative, she longs to hear that she has done well. When she is weary, she longs for a strong support to find rest for her soul. God is the kind of husband who does all these things for us—and more. He is committed to us, even when we stray and fall into sin.

Marriage, then, becomes the vehicle through which God demonstrates the kind of love that he has for us. He wants to use faithful husbands to teach the world about his love. The reason we do not understand the depth of God's love for us is that we do not experience this kind of love in our marriages, the kind of commitment, loyalty and faithfulness that will demonstrate an image of God's love that will shock the world. More often than not our marriages reflect our spiritual harlotry. Spouses say things like: "You don't fulfill me." "I'm disappointed in you." "You always mess up." "You should have done it better." "You don't give me what I need." But God's love never accuses us in these ways.

I have begun to learn some things at last after twenty-one years of marriage. Recently, our staff attended a pastors conference, at Regent College, where we heard from Dr. Larry Crabb. He impressed upon us the importance of entering into someone's life so that we might bless them, based on a vision we have for their lives. Dr. Crabb and his wife shared the visions that they had recently written for one another.

I have reflected on this idea in light of the message of Hosea. Remembering when my wife and I were first married, I thought I probably would have written a flowery vision statement if I were asked. But the following words would have more accurately reflected my self-centered love then:

I want to move into your life with a desire to have you bless me. My vision for you is that you can fill all the emptiness and loneliness in my soul. My desire is that you can heal all the wounds and pains I don't even know I have. I want you to be all that God has created you to be so that you can bless me. I don't want you to grow and blossom in areas outside my sphere, because that will leave less of you to give to me. I have a vision that you will satisfy all my emotional and physical desires. I want to enter into your life so that you can bless me.

Now, after all those years of marriage, and whole lot of work by God, I can begin to express different thoughts towards my wife. Today I write this as my statement of vision:

I want to enter into your life so that I can bless you. You have a wonderful passion for people and I want to free you more and more to invest in others. I see you as having a very positive influence on others. You have a wonderful gift to create works of design and art. I want to create a place for you to express these gifts. I love to hear how you have blessed others with your talents. You have a wonderful, crazy, frustrating spontaneity. My vision is to set you free to be wild and passionate. For so long so many people have depended on you. My vision is that you might depend on me. I delight when you share with me your pain. It means that you trust me. It allows me entrance into the deepest part of your soul. I have a vision for you to find protection and comfort in my arms. My greatest desire is for you to know the undemanding and unselfish love of a faithful husband and to know God in the same way. I want to enter into your life so that I can bless you.

Hosea gives us a powerful image of God as a faithful, committed, loyal husband who loves us as his bride, in a love that is quite beyond our human experience. If our marriages begin to reflect this kind of love, we can shock the world and people will be drawn to God.

Hosea's second image is just as powerful. It is the image of a faithful, forgiving, loyal father who will never give up on his son, 11:1-2,

**When Israel was a youth I loved him,  
And out of Egypt I called My son.  
The more they [the prophets] called them,  
The more they went from them;  
They kept sacrificing to the Baals  
And burning incense to idols. (11:1-2)**

Here we see a reference to God's choice of Israel and of the Exodus out of Egypt. In the New Testament, we see that Jesus repeated this same journey.

**Yet it is I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them in My arms;  
But they did not know that I healed them.  
I led them with cords of a man, with bonds of love,  
And I became to them as one who lifts the yoke from  
their jaws;  
And I bent down and fed them. (11:3-4)**

Verse 4 could perhaps be translated: "And I became to them as one who lifts a child to his cheek, and I bent down and I fed them." What a beautiful image of a father's care and protection for his son! God remembers the time when his son was young and helpless. As I get older and my children grow up and contend and fight for their independence, the images of them that fill my mind are their first steps, teaching them to ride a bike, how to swim, how to hit a baseball. I remember the times when I took them in my arms and they would bury their head on my shoulder.

But, there will be judgment, there will be consequences, because Israel did not repent, 11:5-7,

**They will not return to the land of Egypt;  
But Assyria—he will be their king,  
Because they refused to return to Me.  
And the sword will whirl against their cities,  
And will demolish their gate bars  
And consume them because of their counsels.  
So My people are bent on turning from Me.  
Though they call them to the One on high,  
None at all exalts Him. (11:5-7)**

But everything turns in verse 8:

**How can I give you up, O Ephraim?  
How can I surrender you, O Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah?  
How can I treat you like Zebaiim?  
My heart is turned over within Me.  
All my compassions are kindled.  
I will not execute My fierce anger;  
I will not destroy Ephraim again.  
For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst,  
And I will not come in wrath. (11:8-9)**

The words, "give up, surrender," are used with reference to delivering up someone to his enemies. Admah and Zebaiim were cities that were completely destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah. God's judgment must be exercised upon his people. But God cannot do that, because, he cries: "My heart is turned over within me." In a marvelous reversal, God's anger with Israel is overturned and replaced with yearnings and compassion that rise from deep within him. He cannot execute his fierce wrath. God has every reason to destroy Israel, but his father's heart will not allow for that. If he were a man, he would take out his anger and destroy Ephraim. But he is not a man, he is God. The heart of God is not like the heart of man. God's uniqueness is not defined in

terms of power, wisdom, or sovereignty, but in terms of love.

**They will walk after the Lord,  
He will roar like a lion;  
Indeed He will roar,  
And His sons will come trembling from the west.  
They will come trembling like birds from Egypt,  
And like doves from the land of Assyria;  
And I will settle them in their houses, declares the Lord.  
(11:10-11)**

God will roar like a lion, and his sons, Jews and Gentiles alike, will gather from all the nations. They will come home, like the prodigal, and like Jesus, and God will settle them in their houses. The word "settle" is the word from which we get Sabbath. The sons of God will come home and find rest.

God is a faithful, forgiving father who will never give up on his sons, no matter how far or how long they have strayed. If the first image of a husband is more feminine, perhaps this image is more masculine. Of course, any woman can replace the word "son" with "daughter." The significance is just as deep.

Can there be any doubt that a father is a very powerful force in a man's life? Men long for fathers who will embrace them and accept them. When these yearnings are not met, they turn elsewhere. They seek the love of a father in the arms of a woman. They seek the approval of a father by striving for success in their work. Much of the emptiness and loneliness in men's lives can be linked to a lack of intimacy with their fathers. So men become fearful—fearful of rejection, fearful of being inadequate, fearful of intimacy and closeness. Their hearts turn away from God. They can't connect their deep yearnings with the God who loves them.

The joy of being a Christian is being accepted by God, through Christ, as a son or daughter. The New Testament says that because we are in Christ, we are all sons of God. As Paul says, "We have not been adopted into slavery, but into freedom." As believers, we address our Father tenderly, calling him, "Abba, Father," even like God's own son Jesus. The joy of being a son is hearing the Father say to us, as he said to Jesus, "You are my beloved son; in you I am well pleased."

God is a faithful and forgiving Father. His judgment needs a reason, but his compassion never does. He has poured out all his anger and judgment on his own Son so that we might experience his compassion, his fatherhood. It is when we experience these things, over and above our sin and iniquity and rebellion, that we can return home and fall into the arms of our heavenly Father.

But it is not like that in our homes, is it? There, relationships depend more on performance than acceptance, more on control than freedom, more on anger than love. Our family relationships are filled with turmoil and conflict. Now I am not saying that fathers should forego discipline when their children rebel. The problem arises when anger and judgment rule over compassion. Children are crushed when they hear their fathers say: "You're no good." "You should have done better." "Why do you always make a mess of everything." "Why can't you be more like your brother." "If you would work harder, you would make the team." Sometimes we don't even have to say a word. Disapproval is written all over our faces.

But Hosea's image of God as Father shocks us, stopping us dead in our tracks. If we become fathers and mothers who reflect the fatherhood of God, then we too will give the world an image that will shock people and draw them to the heart of God. I have learned as a father that the thing that will have the most lasting effect on my children, even when they rebel, is to reaffirm my love for them and tell them that I will never

give up on them. As a father, I have discovered that I have unlimited compassion for my children, a compassion that far outweighs my anger and frustrations.

Dr. Crabb shared with us a story about a pastor's rebellious son. One night, the police called the pastor to say that they were holding his son. When the father arrived at the police station and inquired about him, the desk sergeant told him there was no one there with that name. The father pressed on and asked the sergeant to check other police stations. But the result was the same: they were holding no one with that name. The worried father drove to the commune where his son had been living. He entered the front door and saw him lying on a couch. Kneeling down, he kissed the boy on the forehead. Seven months later, his son called him and asked to meet with him. When they met, the father was surprised to see his son clean shaven and well dressed. He asked him how long he had been that way, and the son replied that he had been clean for a while. When the father asked him why he hadn't called sooner, the son said he wanted to let enough time elapse so that his father would know that he had indeed changed. Then the father asked what had caused the change. The young man said, "When you came to my house that night seven months ago and knelt down and kissed me, I wasn't asleep."

The love of a father, the love of a husband, are very powerful forces that shape our lives. These are the forces that can change people's hearts and turn them towards God. If we can see our personal relationship with God as one with a faithful husband and loving father, then we will stop committing spiritual adultery with false idols. We will find compassion, grace, and freedom. We will experience what life can be like as a loved bride, a valuable son. Then we in turn can be loving fathers and mothers, husbands and wives. These are images of love that will shock the world around us. We will be modern-day prophets, demonstrating the character of God. We won't change people's hearts through right-wing politics. We will change the world by being loving, caring husbands and fathers. Men, it is time to step up to the plate.

My wife has three sisters, one of whom is presently in a very dark, lonely place as a result of bad choices she has

made. She is lashing out at her family, at my wife in particular, with blame and anger. This has caused an emotional crisis for her. It has revealed the depth of emotional pain in the family, the deep hurt, resentment, and unrealistic expectations which the sisters are placing on one another. At the heart of these issues is the love and approval of a father that was never experienced. Regrettably, most of us never get that from our earthly parents. But my wife's identity and loyalty is not wrapped up with the family. Despite some deep pain, her emotional well-being is not dependent on that; she has a life outside her family. But this only spurs deeper resentment and anger from the others.

As my wife was reflecting on these family issues a few weeks ago, she told me that the one of the reasons she was not suffering the same resentments as her sisters is because she has come to trust God and know him as a Father. But she said that another reason she has her own life and identity is because I have loved her and encouraged her, despite her shortcomings. She told me she had heard a song, by Celine Deon, that said it perfectly: "I'm everything I am, because you loved me." Of course, I went right out and bought the CD!

I do not have the words to describe what it did for me to hear my wife tell me that she is what she is because I have loved her. But what I can say is that nothing that was ever said to me has made me feel more like a man than hearing my wife say that. As I reflect on the book Hosea, I sense there is nothing that makes God feel more like God than when we as his children tell him that we are everything we are because he loves us, as a husband, as a Father. At that point, God knows that all his hurt, all the agony and the sacrifice have been worth it. His joy is complete when we return his great love.

Despite our sin and failure, our rebellion and adultery, God still loves us and accepts us. He will never give up on us because he is God and not a man.

The love of God is what shocks us and changes us. His love soars above the words of judgment, calling us home to the embrace of a husband, to the arms of a father. May God give us the grace to know such love.

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