

Hosea

M. W. Bassford, 6-13-10

Some sections of the Bible are extremely familiar to us. In our teaching, the book of Acts gets a lot of play, both because of its account of the power of the gospel and because of what it reveals about the plan of salvation. At the other extreme, though, we come to the minor prophets. They're tucked away in our Bibles at the end of the Old Testament, and many of us might struggle to locate a particular minor prophet without reference to the table of contents.

Even once we're there, we might still struggle to see the relevance of the minor prophets. Some of the minor prophets spend a great deal of time discussing Jesus, but mostly, they have to do with God's condemnation of the sin of Israel and His warning of the judgment that is to come. In some ways, this is not terribly practically significant.

However, even though we live 2500 years later, the minor prophets still have a great deal to teach us about our relationship with God and His expectations for us. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the book of Hosea. We see its time period defined in Hosea 1:1. This King Jeroboam was Jeroboam II, who oversaw the last great era of prosperity for the northern nation of Israel. However, Israel was just as wicked as it was prosperous, and its people were about to be punished. After Jeroboam II, Israel fell off a cliff. The nation was wracked by all sorts of internal turmoil, and its foreign relations were overshadowed by the mighty Assyrians, who reduced Israel to a client state. When the last Israelite king, Hoshea, tried to make an alliance with Egypt instead, the Assyrians swooped down and carried Israel off into captivity.

The book of Hosea foreshadows all of this, but more than that, it explores God's feelings about all of this: His hatred of Israel's sin, His hurt at His people's betrayal of Him, but also His unwillingness to destroy completely and His enduring love. These things are still part of God's character today. Let's study them in the book of Hosea.

God's Relationship with Israel.

One of the most distinctive features of Hosea is its use of metaphor to describe God's relationship with Israel, especially God's relationship with an Israel that is disobedient and idolatrous. We see the first of these metaphors introduced in Hosea 1:2-3. I tell you, friends, this passage is enough to make me glad that I'm not an Old-Testament prophet! Basically, Hosea is commanded to take a wife who is a prostitute so that his personal life will reflect the way that Israel has repeatedly betrayed God. This was a harsh commandment, and it certainly caused a great deal of personal trouble for poor, undeserving Hosea. We look back at him and we say, "Ouch! That poor guy!" However, it should also lead us to say, "Ouch! That poor God!" All of us who are married can imagine the pain that repeated unfaithfulness on the part of our spouses would bring us. God wants us to see that when we sin against Him, we cause Him that same pain. His attitude toward us is not the detached anger of the judge. It is the hurt of the betrayed spouse. We bring God great joy when we do what is right, but we bring Him equally great sorrow when we choose to sin.

We see how Hosea and Gomer's personal life progresses in Hosea 1:4-9. Notice first of all that this passage is a depressing commentary on Gomer's further doings. The text tells us that Gomer's first child is Hosea's, but it makes no such claim for Hosea's second and third children. In fact, the second chapter comes right out and says what this implies. Even while she is married to Hosea, she is continuing to prostitute herself, just as God knew she would. God then commands Hosea to give these children names to reflect the punishment that is going to come upon Israel. Jezreel is named for the place where Israel will be conquered, and No Mercy and Not My People show how God hates their sin.

However, even after this unhappy tale of adultery and betrayal, we see a silver lining in Hosea 1:10-11. Despite God's rejection of His people and His hatred of their sin, He still loves them. Just as He rejects them now, the day will come when He will welcome them back. This passage saw its first fulfillment when God's people returned from captivity in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, and it sees its second in the church of today, where God is the Father of us all.

The story of the adulterous wife reaches its conclusion in Hosea 3:1-5. Most likely, this text is still about Gomer, who has been divorced by Hosea and sunk to such a low position that she has been sold into slavery. And yet, Hosea is commanded to love this disgraced, enslaved prostitute, to purchase her freedom, and to take her back again. If any of us had a friend who looked to take back a woman like that, we'd probably do everything we could to dissuade him. We'd tell him to quit being an enabler, to find a woman who will treat him right. God's point, though, is that this is His attitude toward us. We can trample all over His law, we can treat Him like dirt, but He will still love us and look to buy us back.

Notice, though, that Hosea isn't taking her back without conditions. This time, she has to live in isolation, away from all of the temptations that did her in before, so that she can learn to be his wife again. Just like that, Israel went into captivity to learn how to be God's people again, to learn how to appreciate the blessings that they had had from Him. This is what our repentance has to be like too. If we want God to take us back, we can't continue to live the same way we did before. We have to separate ourselves from our temptations, so that we can learn to appreciate Him.

The second big metaphor of Hosea begins in Hosea 11:1-4. This time, Israel isn't an adulterous wife. Instead, it's a disobedient child, a child to whom God calls repeatedly, but who just as repeatedly insists in turning away to the Baals. God has done so much for the children of Israel, but they overlook His kindness in favor of the pursuit of evil, just as it is so easy to overlook all that God does for us today. God's angry response to this is quite predictable, and it appears in Hosea 11:5-7. Here, we see a very clear prediction of the doom that is going to overtake the rebellious nation. Despite their attempts to turn to Egypt, Assyria is going to destroy them. Despite their appeals to God for help, He won't listen.

We're used to seeing that from what we think of as the Old-Testament God, but God shows His true character in Hosea 11:8-9. It's hard to imagine that the omnipotent Creator of the universe could be anguished, and yet that anguish is exactly what we see here. On the one hand, His sense of betrayal, His justice cries out that Israel must be destroyed, but on the other hand, even after all that the people of Israel have done, He still looks at them and loves them. Just as none of us could contemplate killing our children, no matter what horrible thing they may have done, God cannot contemplate the final destruction of Israel. He will punish them, yes, but even though He knows He would be justified in exterminating them forever for what they've done, He can't bring Himself to do it. If we want to know why God sent Jesus to earth to die, this is the reason. Even something as horrible as watching His only Son die on the cross was less horrible than losing us forever. He loved us so much that He would give anything to save us.

Our Lessons.

From there, let's turn our attention to three main lessons we can extract from Hosea. The first is how important it is to have the knowledge of righteousness. Consider the situation that God describes in Hosea 4:1-6. Clearly, the people are running wild. As God says, they are breaking all bounds. There is no rule of His law that they obey. They are certainly guilty for that, but God reveals that another group was equally guilty. The priests had a responsibility to teach the people the law, but they failed in that responsibility, so that the people ran ignorantly into the sin that would destroy them. As a result, both the priests and the prophets who had rejected knowledge would be destroyed along with them.

There are two applications in this for us. First, it tells us just how important it is for us to know the law of Christ today. Certainly, we don't get an admission ticket for the pearly gates just because we know the Bible. There are going to be plenty of people who lose their souls because they knew but didn't do. However, if we don't know, there's no hope for us. If we wish to inherit eternal life, we must be dedicated to learning and obeying the Scripture.

Second, it tells us how important it is that we tell others about the gospel. In Hosea's time, God's priests were commanded to teach the people. They failed in that charge, and they were punished because the people remained ignorant. In our time, we are God's priests. Just like the priests of Hosea's day, we are commanded to teach God's law to the people. We're not responsible for their reaction, but we are responsible for the teaching. If we fail even to make the attempt, why should we expect a different fate than those disobedient priests thousands of years ago? As always, friends, we need to remember that when we get involved in saving souls, the soul we save may be our own.

The second main lesson we can take from this book is that God is still a God of justice. Look at Hosea 8:11-14. God's point is that even if His people are ignorant of the law, knowledge wouldn't change their conduct. Just like people would look at us funny today if we told them that the Bible commands them not to tell dirty jokes and does not permit female preachers, the people of Hosea's day would look at him funny if He told them about God's commands for their lives. They went through the religious motions, but they didn't please God with their obedience. For that failure, they were going to be punished with captivity and destruction. Despite God's love for them, it still had to happen.

Today, we also need to remember that God's love does not limit His justice. If the Lord returns and catches us in our lives of sin, we can't just smile up at Him like a cute three-year-old with a hand in the cookie jar and expect that He'll laugh and forgive us. God isn't like that. He hates the thought of destroying any of us, but if we force Him to it with persistent, unrepentant sin, He surely will. He isn't going to have any second thoughts on the day of judgment.

Finally, though, even as we emphasize the importance of knowing God's will and obeying it, even as we highlight His justice, we cannot forget His mercy. Hosea strikingly describes that mercy in Hosea 14:1-7. First, we need to see that God's mercy begins with repentance. If we want God to forgive us, we have to come to Him and admit our wrong. We have to acknowledge our inability to save ourselves, and we have to lean on God the way that the most desperate and forsaken do, because whether or not we want to admit it, that's who we are.

If we do that, though, we can be confident of God's forgiveness. Israel was as rotten as rotten could be. They had hurt God over and over again, through committing every sin imaginable. They had pressed Him well past the point that any of us could endure. If any of us were God, we'd start shopping for a new chosen people. And yet, God promises this relentlessly rebellious nation that if they do repent, if they do seek His forgiveness, then He will forgive them freely, love them freely, and bless them freely. In just the same way today, if we just give God the opportunity to forgive us, we can be sure that He will. It may be that we have provoked him every bit as badly as Israel did, and we can't see that He could possibly take us back, but His love for us is so great that His mercy is certain.