

SESSION #33

HOSEA

1. Setting

Amos, whom we looked at in the last two sessions, has finished his prophetic ministry and gone back to his farming business. The next prophet, who follows directly afterwards, is Hosea. He is the last prophet to Israel before they go into captivity to Assyria. When Judah, much later, goes into captivity, the final prophet to them will be the prophet Jeremiah. Both Hosea and Jeremiah are often called “weeping prophets” because both of those men as the final prophets to God’s people deliver their messages not just in words or actions, but in tears. They reflect the truth that this is how God feels. He is absolutely sad at the state in which Israel and then Judah find themselves at this low point in their histories as they head into judgment.

Since Hosea follows directly after Amos we can understand that the context for his ministry is very similar to that of Amos – politically, socially, religiously, economically – but now even more pronounced. Material prosperity has increased but their spiritual state has become much worse; they are virtually bankrupt spiritually.

2. Message

God sends Hosea into that situation as His final messenger to Israel because God is a tender-hearted God, offering one last chance to a very hard-hearted, adulterous Israel (often referred to in Hosea as “Ephraim”) if they will just hear this message and repent and turn back to God.

Hosea is going to focus on the inner dimension of the people, at what is going on in their hearts. By contrast, Amos focussed on their outward behavior, the way they treated other people with injustice, especially towards the poor.

“God’s love for backsliders” could be a useful title for the message Hosea delivers. Hubert van Zeller puts it this way: *“It [the book of Hosea] is as if God purposed to Himself two things: first, that a book should... proclaim His Mercy and His Love before*

any of His other attributes; and second that a prophet should be raised up to write that book in the scorching tears of his own shame.” That’s what God purposes by what He does through the prophet Hosea. Yes, He’s going to proclaim His mercy, He’s going to proclaim His love to an adulterous, backslidden, hard-hearted people, and He will do it in absolutely astonishing ways. And by doing so, God is going to weep through the prophet Hosea. Tears of shame indeed.

The first 3 verses of chapter 4 give us something of a summary of this book: *“Hear the word of the LORD, you children of Israel. For the LORD brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land: [here’s the charge] ‘There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land. By swearing and lying, killing and stealing and committing adultery, they break all restraint, with bloodshed upon bloodshed. Therefore, the land will mourn; and everyone who dwells there will waste away...’”*

3. Structure

The structure by which God delivers this message to His people just before they go off to exile in Assyria is a little unusual. It’s in two parts. The first 3 chapters give us a symbolic narrative prologue, focussing around the life and experience of Hosea himself.

The rest of the book from chapter 4 onwards give us a national picture as a mirror of what is going on with Hosea personally. What is going on with Hosea personally is meant to reflect what is happening to the nation of Israel itself.

His own personal story is going to be a personal tragedy. A personal tragedy because Hosea, a man of God, will be married to a woman who is not a godly woman at all. She becomes an unfaithful wife, even a prostitute.

Hosea then is a striking picture of God married to the nation of Israel who are supposed to see themselves in the person of Gomer, the unfaithful wife of Hosea.

So, Hosea has to live out the tragedy of a broken marriage relationship in order to reflect what is going on in God’s own heart as He feels the brokenness of this relationship between Himself and Israel. That tragedy at the micro level of Hosea and Gomer is thereby reflected at the macro level of God and Israel.

The true meaning of Israel's sin is going to be revealed in an unmistakable and unusual form in this man's message because sin is going to be seen as spiritual harlotry, adultery, a going away from the love relationship that was spoken of so beautifully in the Song of Songs.

In both the personal situation of Hosea and Gomer, and in the national situation of God and Israel, there are going to be three parts to the relationship.

It begins with a meaningful relationship. Hosea and Gomer have a meaningful relationship in the beginning of their marriage. They have a child born by the name of Jezreel, their own baby. And in the early stages of their relationship things seem to be not too bad. But after the birth of Jezreel things get worse.

And that meaningful relationship with which they started gets broken very quickly as Gomer, the wife, goes out of the home of Hosea and becomes a prostitute. She is unfaithful to him and bears two more children, apparently with other men, not Hosea. And the brokenness of his own personal marriage relationship is seen in tragic terms indeed. It's a clear picture of what Israel has done in going away to other gods, giving their loyalty and affection to other things than God Himself.

As that broken relationship gets to its ultimate dead end, Gomer's situation apparently gets so bad that nobody wants her. She becomes a broken woman and gets auctioned off for sale at the slave market. And Hosea, who still loves his wayward wife Gomer, hears that she will be offered at the slave market. He goes down to the market, he bids for his own wife, and buys her back. He takes her home, bathes and washes her, and begins to show his love and affection for her in gentle, beautiful ways to bring her back to a meaningful relationship with him once again.

Which brings us to stage #3 in their relationship – a restored relationship once more. And that too is God's purpose for His own people of Israel. It began meaningfully with the patriarchs especially – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob – but throughout the centuries that relationship has gotten worse and is now severely broken. But that's not the end of the story. It isn't for Hosea and Gomer and it also isn't the end of the story for Israel and God either. That relationship – badly broken – will be restored indeed.

So, in the outworking of this story in a very personal, painful way for the prophet Hosea, we see the kind of suffering that sin causes to the heart of God. Sin, you see, as Baxter puts it, does not merely break God's law – oh, yes, sin does that. But more than breaking God's law, when we, God's people, sin it breaks God's heart. And that is what is revealed in very painful terms through the ministry of this prophet, Hosea. It's God's broken heart that we see here.

And it's still true, that when we sin we quench the Holy Spirit of God, and we break again the heart of God. It makes Him sad to see us move in a direction that takes us away from Him.

Chapter 3 has been suggested by a Bible commentator (I think it might have been G. Campbell Morgan) to be the greatest chapter in the Bible. Whether you agree or not, it certainly is an outstanding chapter in Scripture. It's a short one, only 5 verses, but it's a beautiful chapter about love. Five times in just the first verse of this chapter you read the word "love". It's what God does in expressing His love toward a rebellious, unrepentant people, that is eventually going to provide the possibility of restoring that people in a relationship once more. God's immense, unbelievable love.

It finds, of course, its climax in love poured out for humanity on the cross of Calvary for an unbelieving, unrepentant, sinful humanity. It's the way God will bring people back into a meaningful relationship with Himself. It will be because... what? – *"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son."* Hosea shows us something of the reality and the depth of this truth in his own personal life reflecting this national situation.

Chapters 4 through 7 deal with the fact that God is holy. And because He is a holy God the sin of His people has reached an intolerable level and God, as it were, files divorce charges against Israel because they have already gone away from Him and made themselves prostitutes spiritually.

Chapters 8 through 10, God is just in how He judges. And they will be punished. God will do what is absolutely right. He said they sowed the wind and will reap the whirlwind. That's what happens. Gal. 6:7 in the NT gives us the same truth: you reap what you sow. When you sow the wind you reap the whirlwind. That's what the OT

people of God have been doing and God will be just in judging them. The consequences are built into their sinful actions.

Chapters 11 through 14 – God, however, is still a God of love, a God of redemption, a God of mercy. There's a moving picture of parental love in chapter 11. God reminds Israel, *"Don't you remember when you were just a little kid, I'm the one who helped you learn to walk."* We see God, like a father, standing over a little child with outstretched fingers holding onto the father's fingers and making his first wobbly steps. God said, *"Don't you remember? That was me. That's how I treated you. I'm the one who helped you learn how to walk."* What a remarkable picture of God as a loving parent. But they have refused God's love and they will be judged for their sin.

But in Hosea's message, as it was with that of Amos, it's not the end of the story. Hosea also has a picture of restoration because God is love. There will be a final triumph of love. We get a picture of that in an unusual way simply by the names of the two children born to Gomer while she was away – child #2 and child #3.

Their names were Lo-Ruhamah, which means "no mercy"; and Lo-Ammi which means "not my people". God told Hosea how to name those two children as He had done for Jezreel, child #1. But now he names this second one, "no mercy" – I will not have mercy. Then #3, "not my people" – *they have gone so far away I don't even consider them to be my people any more.*

But chapter 2:23 gives you the other side of the picture: *"I will have mercy on her who had not obtained mercy; then I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' And they shall say, 'You are my God!'"* To the people who had not responded to the mercy of God, He now says, *"I will triumph with my love and mercy, and they will again experience mercy, they will again be called 'My people'."*

It reminds us of what Peter said in the NT about you and me when he talked about the NT people of God. 1 Peter 2:10 says, *"who once were not a people but are now the people of God (not Lo-Ammi, but Ammi); who had not obtained mercy (Lo-Ruhamah) but now have obtained mercy (Ruhamah)."*

That's us! It's not just OT Israel spoken of in Hosea, it is also us NT people, as Peter makes abundantly clear. God has expressed His mercy to us who didn't deserve it. God has called us His people, who were in the beginning not His people at all. God will triumph in His love and His mercy to the people of God. Hosea's unusual, dynamic message makes that absolutely clear.

The final verse of the book, 14:9, sums it up well for us (using the Message version): *"If you want to live well, make sure you understand all of this. If you know what's good for you, you'll learn this inside and out. GOD's paths get you where you want to go."*

Our next session will get us into the message of the greatest of the writing prophets, Isaiah.
