

HOSEA: The Prophet and the Prostitute

by Ray C. Stedman

Hosea was the first of the “minor” prophets.

Often, we do not recognize the derivation of these Bible names, but this prophet’s name would be “Joseph” in English. And his name is related to the name *Joshua*, which means “salvation.”

Hosea was a young preacher in the nation of Israel, the northern kingdom, and he was a contemporary of the prophets Isaiah and Amos. He lived, as we are told in the first verse, during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (kings of Judah, the southern kingdom), and during the reign of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, the king of Israel.

Jeroboam was one of the wicked kings of Israel and the nation was going through a difficult time when Hosea was preaching. People were “living it up,” as we might say, and didn’t have much time for God. They wouldn’t have said that, of course, nobody ever says that when it is true. Instead they may have said something like we do – that it was just a case of not having quite enough time to meet the demands that God made upon them – they were so busy with so many other important things. The spirit was willing but the flesh was ready for the weekend.

So, as always, people didn’t pay much attention to Hosea. He spoke of judgment and of chastisement. He said that God was going to raise up the Assyrian nation to punish this people and that fierce and ruthless army would sweep across the land like a scourge. But the people paid little attention to him, and they said that Hosea’s God must be a pretty vengeful sort to talk like that. Hosea tried to tell them that wasn’t so. He said that God was a God of love and that his doing this was the very activity of love; that God wanted them to see what they were doing to themselves and that the only way he could get them to listen was to make things rough for them. But they didn’t pay any more attention than people do today about

things like that. Instead, they blamed God, and said, “If God is really a God of love, then why does he let things get in such a mess? How could a God of love ever send a ruthless people like the Assyrians down upon our land?”

And so young Hosea found that his audience was diminishing. People were polite to his face, I suppose, but they sneered behind his back. He found that he was being given the nice-and-harmless treatment. That is what people usually do to preachers.

When I was in England once, I met an Anglican clergyman who said that what bothered him most both before and during the time of the Battle of Britain were the signs in the public squares that read, “All persons must register for the draft except women, children, idiots, and clergymen.” He said he didn’t mind so much being included on that list, but he wished they had at least put him ahead of the idiots.

So Hosea is rather discouraged and in the opening chapter of this little book of prophecy we read a personal note about him. He went to God and God told him to do a strange thing. God said, “I want you to get married.” I think Hosea brightened up at that, because he was a bachelor, and God said, “I have a girl picked out for you.” When he mentioned her name, Hosea’s heart must have fluttered, because the name of this girl was Gomer, the most beautiful girl in Israel. Hosea was definitely interested.

But God said to him, “I want you to know the whole story about this girl. I want you to marry her, but she is going to be unfaithful to you; in fact, she will become nothing but a common street prostitute. But I want you to marry her anyway.” Now, undoubtedly Hosea was very puzzled by God’s strange command – just as Abraham was puzzled by God’s command that he take his son out

and kill him, put his own son to death. God does strange things at times, things we don't always understand, things we can't categorize, things that don't fit into what we think we know of him. And this is one of those strange things. He told Hosea, "I want you to marry this girl and she is going to be a harlot, a common street prostitute. But you are going to have three children, two boys and a girl. And when they are born I want to name them for you." Perhaps Hosea then began to understand a little bit of what God was doing. He knew it was customary in Israel to teach by symbols – God often used this method of instructing his people – and that names were very important. God often used the meanings of names to teach Israel certain truths. And now God was planning to use this prophet and his family as an object lesson for his people.

This was happening also with his friend Isaiah down in the southern kingdom. Isaiah, also, had two boys. Their names are jaw-breakers to pronounce, but they mean something. The younger boy's name was Shearjashub, which means "a remnant shall return." That was God's promise to Israel that even though they were taken into captivity, a remnant would come back. The older boy's name was Mahershalalhashbaz. (I don't know how they ever called these children in for lunch in those days!) *Mahershalalhashbaz* means "haste to the prey" or "haste to the spoil," and it was God's prophetic way of telling the nation that they were in deep trouble. But he also comforted them with the words "a remnant shall return."

So Hosea went courting. Sure enough, Gomer was attracted to this shy young man, and at last he summoned up the courage to ask her to marry him. To his great relief, she said "yes," and they were married. At first it was heaven on earth. Hosea loved this girl. You can't read this prophecy without seeing that. They must have been wonderfully happy together, and then they had their first child. It was a boy, as God had said. Hosea's heart was filled to bursting, and he went to God for the name of this boy. "What should we name the lad?" To his surprise, God picked the name Jezreel. Now *Jezreel* means "cast-away" and was a name of shame in Israel.

Do you remember the bloody story of Queen Jezebel and Ahab? Ahab cheated his neighbor out of his property and stole his neighbor's vineyard, and Jezebel was the wicked queen who put him up

to it. At last God's judgment fell upon her. She was looking out her upper story window one day when a general, Jehu, was down in the courtyard, and he ordered the servants to throw Jezebel out the window. They threw her out and she fell on the pavement and was killed, and the dogs ate her up, and the courtyard has been called Jezreel ever since (2 Ki 9:30-37).

Nevertheless, that was the name that God picked for Hosea's oldest boy, his first son. And that was the name Hosea gave to his baby, for he understood that God was thus warning his people: they too would be cast away if they didn't recognize the folly of their actions, if they didn't turn from going after idols and giving way to abominable practices and trying to be like everybody else around them. God was warning them with this baby's name.

In the course of time, another child, a daughter, was born to Hosea. This one was named Loruhamah, which means "not pitied." Imagine naming your little baby girl "not pitied." It meant that God would no longer have pity on his people if they continued their stubborn rebellion. His patience was wearing thin. After some hundreds of years of trying to reach this stubborn people, he was now warning them that they were getting near the end, that a time would come when he would no longer pity them but would hand them over to invading armies.

When this little girl was weaned, Gomer conceived again and bore a third child, another little boy. And this one God named Loammi, "not my people," for God was saying, "you are not my people and I will not be your God." God had said that he would name these children as a sign to his people, but there would come a day of restoration:

**"And I will have pity on Not-Pitied,
and I will say to Not-My-People, 'You are
my people;'
and he shall say, 'Thou art my God.'"
{Hos 2:23 RSV}**

So that even in this time when God was announcing judgment, his grace also was being shown.

Now after this there were no more children in Hosea's household, and Gomer began to fulfill the sad prediction that God had made when he had told Hosea to marry her. What a heartbreak it must

have been to this young preacher as he heard the whispers that began to circulate about his wife and about what happened when he was away on preaching trips. Perhaps even his own children may have unconsciously dropped some remarks about the men who visited when Daddy was away. And soon the children were left uncared for while Gomer wasted all her time running around with these other fellows.

One day Hosea came home and found a note from Gomer: she had decided to find the happiness she felt she deserved, and she was leaving him and the children to follow the man she really loved. You know how those notes go: "Dear John..."

About this time a new tone came into Hosea's preaching. He still warned of the judgment to come and the fact that God was going to send the Assyrians down across the land, but no longer did he announce it with thunder. He spoke to them with tears. And he began to speak of a day when love would at last triumph, when – after the bitter lesson was learned that the way of the transgressor is hard – Israel would yet turn back to the God who loved her. Instead of "Not Pitied," she would be called "Pitied" and instead of "Not My People," she would be named "My People" again.

But poor Gomer passed from man to man, until at last she fell into the hands of a man who was unable to pay for her food and her clothing. Her first lover had given her a mink stole, but this one made her clothe herself from the Goodwill store. News of her miserable state came to the prophet and he sought out the man she was living with. He knew where he would find him, down at the local tavern, and when he met this man, the conversation may have gone something like this: "Are you the man who is living with Gomer, daughter of Disblaim?" The man must have said, "If it's any of your business, I am." Hosea said, "Well, I am Hosea, her husband." A tense moment followed. But the man said, "What do you want? I haven't done anything wrong." Hosea said, "Listen, I'm not interested in causing any trouble. But I know that you are having difficulty making ends meet. I want you to take this money and buy Gomer some clothing and see that she has plenty of food. If you need any more I will give it to you." The man probably must have thought, "There's no fool like an old fool. If this sucker wants to help pay her expenses, that's all right with me." So he took the

money and bought her some groceries and went home.

Now you may say, "That's a foolish thing for a man to do!" But who can explain the madness of love? Love exists apart from reason and has its own reasons. Love does not act according to logic. Love acts according to its own nature. And so Hosea acted on the basis of love. Undoubtedly he watched from a distance to catch a glimpse of the woman he loved as she rushed out the door to take the groceries from this man's arms and to thank him for what he was bringing to her – the gifts that true love had provided, and that villainy offered, and that folly accepted.

Well, how long this went on we don't know for sure, but at last word came that the woman Hosea loved was to be sold in the slave market. Her current husband had tired of her and she was to be sold as a slave. The brokenhearted prophet didn't know what to do. He went weeping to God. And God said, "Hosea, do you love this woman in spite of all that she has done to you?" Hosea nodded through his tears, and God said, "Then go show your love for her in the same way that I love the nation Israel."

So Hosea went to the marketplace and he watched Gomer brought up and placed on the dock and there she was stripped of all her clothing and stood naked before the crowd. The auctioneer pinched her and prodded her and showed how strong she was, and then the bidding began. Somebody bid three pieces of silver and Hosea raised it to five. Somebody else upped it to eight and Hosea bid ten. Somebody went to eleven; he went to twelve. Then Hosea offered fifteen pieces of silver and a bushel of barley. The auctioneer's gavel fell and Hosea had his wife back.

He went to her and put her clothes on her and he led her away by the hand and took her to his home. And then follows what is perhaps the most beautiful verse in all the Bible. As Hosea led her away he said to her:

**"You must dwell as mine for many days;
you shall not play the harlot, or belong to
another man; so will I also be to you."
{Hos 3:3b RSV}**

He pledged his love to her anew. And that was all this poor woman could take. She had gotten down to the very dregs of shame and disgrace, but

the love of this man broke her heart, and from this time on Gomer was faithful to Hosea. She became an honest, industrious, faithful wife, and the rest of the book of Hosea simply goes on to tell the effect of this story on the nation of Israel. God said to them, “How can I give thee up?” He reminded them of his love for them all those years. He reminded them of his goodness, and of how again and again they had turned their backs on him. The final picture of the book is one of beauty and glory, for it looks to the day when Israel shall at last return to God – her true husband – and shall say, “What have I to do with idols? I have seen him and heard him and he has won my heart.”

Certain outstanding passages in Hosea are remarkable predictions. One occurs at the close of Chapter 3, when right in line with this story of Hosea’s personal life, God says about the people of Israel:

For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. {Hos 3:4 RSV}

That prophecy is being fulfilled today. The children of Israel shall dwell many days without a king – without any open, acknowledged government. Ever since the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. at the hands of General Titus of the Roman armies Israel has been without a king or a prince without anyone who has the recognized right to reign over Israel. And they shall live without a sacrifice. When the Jews of the world celebrate the Passover supper they are remembering that supper instituted in Egypt when Israel was delivered from the hand of Pharaoh. And God had told Israel that every time they ate the Passover they were to kill a lamb. But for two thousand years the Jews have never killed a lamb. Why not? Why do they offer a bone, a burned bone for a sacrifice? God had said that they shall live many days without a sacrifice, and since the destruction of the temple there has never been a sacrifice in Israel – nor a pillar, ephod or teraphim. And they shall live without idolatry. They shall live as a religious people but without giving themselves to idols.

Then after these days are ended,

Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and they shall come in

fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days. {Hos 3:5 RSV}

What a wonderful prophecy that is! And another one similar to it is at the close of Chapter 5:

**I will return again to my place,
until they acknowledge their guilt and
seek my face,
and in their distress they seek me, saying,
“Come, let us return to the Lord;
for he has torn, that he may heal us;
he has stricken, 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 forth is sure as the dawn;
he will come to us as the showers,
as the spring rains that water the earth.”
{Hos 5:15-6:3 RSV}**

That is the hope of Israel – that their Messiah will yet come to them and water them and revive them and raise them up again.

In the closing chapters after all the sorrow in the heart of God you come at last to the final picture:

**Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God,
for you have stumbled because of your
iniquity. {Hos 14:1 RSV}**

After all it wasn’t God who was to blame. He was simply trying to get them to see the truth. And the only thing that can relieve their agony is to return. That’s always the case. God can’t bless us or restore us until we come back. And so God says:

**Take with you words
and return to the Lord;
say to him,
“Take away all iniquity;
accept that which is good
and we will render
the fruit of our lips” [That is, praise.]
“Assyria shall not save us,
we will not ride upon horses [no military
power is going to avail]
and we will say no more, ‘Our God,’
to the work of our hands [idolatry].
In thee the orphan finds mercy.”
{Hos 14:2-3 RSV}**

God's response is:

**I will heal their faithlessness;
I will love them freely,
for my anger has turned from them,
I will be as the dew to Israel;
he shall blossom as the lily,
he shall strike root as the poplar;
his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall
be like the olive,
and his fragrance like Lebanon.
They shall return and dwell beneath my
shadow,
they shall flourish as a garden;
they shall blossom as the vine,
their fragrance shall be like the wine of
Lebanon.
O Ephraim, what have [you] to do with
idols'? [A better rendering than "what
have I"]
It is I who answer and look after you.
I am like an evergreen cypress,
from me comes your fruit.
{Hos 14:4-8 RSV}**

And the prophet adds this lesson from his own heartache and yet in the joy of restored love:

**Whoever is wise, let him understand these
things;
whoever is discerning, let him know
them;
for the ways of the LORD are right,
and the upright walk in them,
but transgressors stumble in them.
{Hos 14:9 RSV}**

Can you see in this beautiful story all the elements of the eternal triangle? There is the loving God, the faithless human heart, and the deceptive attractiveness of the world.

This is your story, and my story, isn't it? So many times we try to satisfy ourselves with the ly-

ing idols of self-importance, or wealth, or a good time. Ours is the blindness that, like Gomer's, cannot distinguish between lust and love.

We try to run from God and drown our miseries in empty pleasures, or drink, or work, or social life, but, as surely as we think we have escaped, as surely as we think we have run far enough, God touches our sleeve with his love saying, "My child, my name and my nature are love and I must act according to what I am. When you tire of all your running, and your wandering, and your heartbreak, I'll be there to draw you to myself again."

That is the story of the Bible isn't it? At Bethlehem God entered the slave market where the whole human race was putting itself up for auction, prostituting itself and its humanity to a cheapened life. But on the cross the Lord Jesus paid the price, the full price for our freedom, and bought us back. This is the story of God's love and God's heart – his loving desire to make of his people the full persons he intended them to be.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for this beautiful story from the Old Testament, and pray that it touches our own hearts and softens us. How we see the tenderness of your love, the irresistible nature of a love that waits and hurts and hungers and pursues. Lord, we pray that we may respond, that we may understand that no other answer can satisfy us, no other power can meet our need, no other love can heal. Help us to return to you, Lord, as Israel will one day turn to you, remembering that if we walk in the light as he is in the light, the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all unrighteousness and restores us by grace. We pray in his name. Amen.

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