

The Message of Hosea for Today

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Hosea, whose name means “salvation,” has been called the tenderest of the prophets, the St. John of the Old Testament. He is the prophet of love. There is more talk and less understanding about God’s love than almost any other divine perfection. Most people define God’s love based on their own experience. Even the Christian’s love for God is generated by an attraction to God: We love Him because He first loved us.

God, however, does not love because He sees something attractive in the object of His love. God loves because He is love. Every Christian must humbly acknowledge that he does not deserve or merit divine favour. Hosea, both in his life and in his preaching, taught vital truths about the love of God.

Hosea preached during the years immediately preceding Israel’s fall to the Assyrians. The list of kings in Hosea 1:1 spans over a century; his ministry began sometime before the death of Jeroboam II in 753 BC and ended about 725 BC, after Hezekiah’s ascension but prior to Samaria’s fall in 722 BC. He ministered to a wicked society, overripe for divine judgment. His list of Israel’s sins reads like an unabridged encyclopedia article on ungodliness. The people were lawless, unjust, rebellious, evil, and completely missed the mark of God’s holy standards. To these unworthy sinners on the brink of national disaster, Hosea issued the summons to repent (6:1) and declared God’s continuing love for His wayward, backsliding people. Hosea’s message was of sovereign grace and love. His theme highlighted the love of God that remained constant, even though Israel scorned him. God’s love is constant and unchanging.

Two lines of analysis sum up Hosea’s message: one was symbolic, and the other was direct to the point.

The symbolic message was Hosea’s marriage to Gomer (the focus of chapters 1-3). It was not uncommon for prophets to employ object lessons or symbolic acts as part of their

preaching, but Hosea was unique in that his whole life of shame and sorrow was linked to his message. Chapter 1 records his marriage to Gomer and the birth of three children. There are differences of interpretations, but most likely Gomer was pure at the beginning of the marriage, but later became defiled as she surrendered to her latent propensity to adultery. The text bears this out when it says in 1:3 that she bore “to him” a son, Jezreel (God scatters), but in the birth of Lo-ruhamah (not pitied; 1:6) and Lo-ammi (not my people; 1:8) that statement is missing. This would suggest that Hosea was not the father of the latter two children. This is part of the picture.

Hosea’s marriage to Gomer parallels God’s marriage to Israel: a good beginning that turned tragic (see Jer. 2:2-3). Hosea 3:1 is the key verse of the prophecy as God instructs Hosea to love Gomer “according to the love of the Lord toward the children of Israel.” Humanly speaking, Hosea’s love for Gomer did not make any sense. She did not deserve it, yet Hosea remained faithful.

But that is the point. Humanly speaking, God’s love for sinners makes no sense, but He is gracious and faithful. It was easy for the people to see Hosea’s grief. They were to learn that what Gomer did to Hosea, they were doing to God, and what Hosea did for Gomer, God does for His people. As Hosea’s marriage was a symbol to Israel, Israel’s marriage to the Lord is a symbol to the church. The message is indeed for today.

The direct message. Chapters 4-14 record Hosea’s direct message to the people. His message about God’s marriage to Israel can be summed up in three points.

First, it is initiated by divine love. In human love relationships, somebody always makes the first move. So it is spiritually, and it is always God. We love Him because He first loved us. The fact of God’s love is expressly stated (3:1; 11:1; 14:4), and it is a love motivated totally by grace. God gave evidence of His love in three ways.

1. He entered into a covenant, a pledge of everlasting loyalty (2:18-20).
2. He gave His people a law, instructing them on how to please Him (8:12).
3. Third, He gave them a land, a picture of rest and fellowship in His presence (2:8-12).

What God did for Israel is typical of what He does for individuals. Every believer must recognise that in Christ, he is the object of God's love, entirely of grace. Every good is a token of His love.

Second, God's love was spurned by sin. The response to God's love should have been humble gratitude and loving obedience. Hosea 6:6 declares what God desired: mercy and knowledge of Himself rather than religious offerings. But contrary to His desire, the nation transgressed and dealt treacherously (a word often used for the violation of marriage vows; 6:7).

Hosea 4:1 sums up God's accusations against the people with three charges:

1. There was no truth. They were unreliable and untrustworthy in fulfilling their obligations to God.
2. There was no mercy. The covenant loyalty that should have been constant was temporary and unsubstantial.
3. There was no knowledge. There was no apprehension of the truth about God and no experience of a personal relationship with Him.

The many references throughout the book to Israel's breaking the law and their preference for Baal testify to the widespread ignorance of God and His law. They rebelled against authority (8:1) and regarded God's law as loathsome and repugnant (8:12). Their spiritual adultery was linked to ignorance of God (5:4), and that ignorance earned judgment (4:6). The lesson is obvious. If ignorance of God was the essence of the spiritual problem, knowing God is the solution. That was true then and is true now.

The third point in Hosea's sermon is that God's love was maintained by loyalty. Israel was bent on backsliding (11:7), but God remained faithful (11:8). Three thoughts sum up this point.

1. Discipline is the evidence of loyalty. Sin had inescapable consequences (8:7; 9:7, 9; 10:13), but the purpose of discipline was not destruction but to awaken spiritual concerns and pursuits (5:15).
2. Restoration is the goal of loyalty. His plan to restore had three steps: He would isolate them, putting a hedge around them until they recognised God's superiority over Baal (2:6-7). He impoverished them in order for them to

learn to depend on Him completely (2:9-12). He enticed them, alluring and persuading them irresistibly with love (2:14-23).

3. Repentance is the proper response to loyalty. There were no shortcuts to repentance, but there was a way back home (6:1-3; 14:1-3). There is hope for the backslider: God has left the door back home open. Other prophets admonished sinners to turn because certain judgment lay ahead; Hosea admonished sinners to turn because God was behind them.

The closing verse of Hosea settles the issue of the book's relevance for today (14:9). It is wise to understand what Hosea says. It is instructive and encouraging to know that there is a way to God open to those so undeserving. This is the gospel.

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