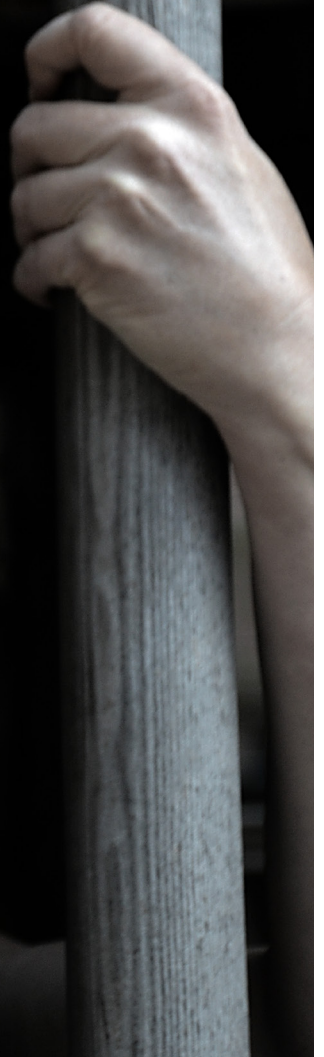


Redeeming Love

Hosea 11:3-4; 8-9



The book of Hosea is one I read often. I'm drawn to the vivid metaphors that describe God and His people, along with the perfect parallel of God's unfaithful people and Hosea's unfaithful wife. Although the story of Hosea and his wife is fascinating, the glimpses of God's character are what make Hosea a truly compelling book. In case you haven't visited Hosea in awhile, here's a quick refresher:

Hosea, instructed by God, marries Gomer, a prostitute—a real-life metaphor of God's covenantal relationship with unfaithful people (1:2-3; 3:1). Two of Hosea and Gomer's children are named No Mercy (Loruhamah) and Not My People (Loammi) (1:6-8). Ouch. God's message is pretty strong. Yet even early on in Hosea, the beginning of chapter 2 gives us a peek into the future: *Say to your brethren, Amni (You **are** my people), and to your sisters, Ru-hamah (You **have** received mercy).* God uses name changes throughout Scripture to indicate a change in character or an encounter with God. This particular name change foreshadows the rest of the book of Hosea, leaving us with a powerful vision of God's condemnation and a promise of His compassion.

A Familiar Story

In the book of Hosea, we read the familiar Old Testament account of God's people getting caught up in the drama of neighboring nations (7:8, 11), ultimately turning to foreign gods. The first several chapters of Hosea are devoted to listing the ways God's people "hath done (acted) shamefully" (2:5) by offering sacrifices to other gods, drinking wine with abandon, and indulging in prostitution and adultery. We've read this story before, throughout the Old Testament. Time and time again, people turn from the blessings of God to their idols.

"For she did not know that I gave her corn, and wine, and oil, and multiplied her silver and gold, which they prepared for Baal" (Hosea 2:8).

Despite the blessings from the true God, the Israelites in Hosea are blatantly serving false gods. Hosea doesn't even try to soften the harsh reality of the Israelites' actions:

"My people ask counsel at their stocks, and their staff declareth unto them: for the spirit of whoredoms hath caused them to err, and they have gone a whoring from under their God" (Hosea 4:12).

In other words, instead of turning to God, the Israelites “ask counsel from their wooden idols” (NKJV), which Hosea compares to not just adultery, but to “whoring.” *Whoa.* It can be easy to read this passage and think highly of ourselves. Come on...when was the last time you compared yourself to a prostitute?

Let’s bring this closer to home. Sure, we don’t keep wooden idols in our home or engage in the kind of drunken partying the Israelites did. We wouldn’t suddenly start practicing another religion. Surely we aren’t the equivalent of Hosea’s unfaithful wife. But think for a moment about the ordinary aspects of daily life that gradually take over, coloring every thought and action. For me, I find it easy to become completely consumed by my work—slowly, insidiously, becoming my top priority. It’s easy for my job and the promise of my future career to become the basis for all my decisions, the “wooden idol” I seek counsel from, and the central relationship I nurture.

How were the Israelites unfaithful to God?

Read Hosea 2:8. What gifts has God given you that you have “prepared for Baal” in a fruitless chase after false promises?

Hosea’s wife was unfaithful to him, an illustration of the unfaithfulness of God’s people, who sought comfort from false gods. Other idols that creep in can include addictions to technologies like cell phone apps, social media, and constant entertainment. Although

these aren't inherently bad, addiction gets in the way of our relationship with God.

What other "relationships" get in the way of us spending time with God? These aren't always visible on the outside. We try (not always successfully!) to keep our bursts of jealousy and pride, insecurities and doubts, hidden from sight. Sometimes we feel discontent and dissatisfied, harboring longings for things we feel God is keeping from us. It's enough to make us want to give God the cold shoulder, stop answering His calls, sneak around, and lie. Do those classic signs of a broken relationship sound familiar?

What leads you to be unfaithful to God, as Gomer was unfaithful to Hosea?

"What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away" (Hosea 6:4 ESV).

*"Let Thy goodness like a fetter
Bind my wandering heart to Thee
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love."*

*Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing
Robert Robinson*

Is the cycle of turning to and away from God familiar to you? What in your life has the potential to make you stray? List a few practical ways you can guard your top priority: seeking the Kingdom of God.

A Change in Metaphor

By the time we come to Hosea 11, the key passage for this study, we have already seen a long list of claims against Israel, along with a long list of punishments. God promises hunger and death to the children of Israel, telling them to *"rejoice not"* (9:1). Hosea 9:16-17 says, *"they shall bear no fruit: yea, though they bring forth, yet will I slay even the beloved fruit of their womb. My God will cast them away, because they did not hearken unto him: and they shall be wanderers among the nations."* In chapters 8-10, God seems pretty set on destroying His people.

Yet suddenly, in 11:8, God seems to waver. The NKJV says, *"My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred."* The ESV says, *"My heart recoils within me"* and the Message paraphrases, *"I can't bear to even think such thoughts. My insides churn in protest."* Our steadfast, solid, sturdy, unchanging God...having second thoughts? How can this be?

As we shift to read from God's perspective, we can hear God's tender, parental tone. It suddenly feels like we're sitting in the Father's lap, with His arms around us.

Why does Hosea change the metaphoric relationship from a romantic relationship to a parental one?

"When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt. As they called them, so they went from them: they sacrificed unto Baalim, and burned incense to graven images. I taught Ephraim also to go, taking them by their arms; but they knew not that I healed them. I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love: and I was to them as they that take off the yoke on their jaws, and I laid meat unto them" (Hosea 11:1-4).

Read that last verse again. The ESV puts it this way: *I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.* This is a God who, like a loving parent, scoops us up to kiss us on the forehead. Keep in mind Hosea's vivid descriptions of the Israelites' sinful activities, followed by lists of appropriate punishments. So why the change in attitude?

With this shift from Hosea's description of God's anger to God's compassion, we catch sight of the dizzyingly mysterious nature of God: a tension between love and justice. We know that God is love—but we also know that He is holy.

"He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love"
(1 John 4:8).

"For I am the Lord that bringeth you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:45).

"And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3).

By definition, God is love. He is also the very definition of holy. We don't get to invent our own definitions of love and holiness and apply those labels to God. Because God is holy, whatever He does is holy. Because God is love, whatever He does is love.

So what happens when holiness and love seem at odds? Does one weigh heavier than the other? What happens when God's holiness clashes with the unholiness of His beloved?

"I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger... I am God, and not man; the Holy One in the midst of thee. They shall walk after the Lord: he shall roar like a lion: when he shall roar, then the children shall tremble from the west" (Hosea 11:9-10).

Hallelujah! God is not like us. The tension still exists: God's fierce, holy anger is still burning, and he roars like a lion. But also *because* He is the Holy One in our midst, He chooses not to execute His anger. God's love and holiness complement one another in a decision that doesn't make any sense. The closest earthly thing Hosea can compare to God is a roaring lion. His holiness is too big for us to understand, and we tremble. Yet, He wants us to know Him.

"Hear the word of the Lord, ye children of Israel: for the Lord hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land" (Hosea 4:1)

"For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6).

Why didn't the Israelites know God? What stopped them from seeking God?

What do you allow to cloud your understanding of God?

What do you need to do to remove that filter?

A Responsibility

From the depth of the Israelites' sin to the emotional pangs of the Father—anxious, angry, and compassionate for his children, we've placed ourselves in this story. We've reflected on the deepest, darkest places of our own hearts, darkness that doesn't always match the goodness for which we strive. But let's pause for a minute to remember: *it isn't about us*. It's not about me. It's not about you. Dark as my sin may be, that's not the point of the story. If our sin is center stage, God swooping in to rescue us each time relegates God to a secondary character, only here to make the leading lady look good. The rescue becomes little more than a get-out-of-jail-free card each time I turn away. **But we aren't the center of our own story. God is.** God's unrelenting love, unwavering passion, and ultimate holiness, His true character, is the star.

How does recognizing the promise of God's grace and unrelenting love shape the way you interact with God?

God uses our sins to highlight Himself at the center, so we can see Him more clearly and know Him even more. God wants His people to know Him. He promises us He will rescue us, have mercy on us, chase after us, bend down and scoop us into His arms because He wants us to know Him.

"And I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord" (Hosea 2:19-20).

What are practical ways you can “get to know” the God who wants you to know Him?

He promises us grace because He loves us. His unrelenting love chases after us each time we go astray because He wants to draw us close so we can know Him, the Holy One in our midst. ❧

We aren't the center of our own story. God is.



About the Writer: Emily Faison works as an editor in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she also serves at Bethany Church. She is a member of the *Shine!* team.