

God's Marriage to His People: Hosea 1-3
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We're in the midst of a sermon series on marriage right now. I preached two weeks ago on the genesis of marriage from the very first chapters of the Bible. Then last week we saw the degeneration of marriage in the Fall. To review for a moment, we saw the specific roles that God assigned to the man and to the woman in creation. God created man and woman to be equal but different. He created the man to be the leader, protector, provider. And He created the woman to come alongside him as the helper fit for him. She is his equal, and she is to complement him, support him, and help him.

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, this beautiful picture was severely marred. In the Fall the serpent undermined God's design by approaching the woman first and deceiving her. Eve, then, usurped her husband's leadership and took the fruit, ate it, and gave it to her husband to eat as well. And Adam abdicated his responsibility to lead and protect. He was standing by during all of this, failing to step in.

Then God stepped in and called him on it. God came looking for Adam. And instead of repenting, Adam blamed his wife—a clear indication that it's now a fallen world. Paradise has been lost. Eve passes the buck, too, and blames the serpent.

The curse that came as a result of sin introduced pain into the lives of the man and the woman. And the pain was introduced at points that are central to their unique roles. For the woman, there is now pain in childbearing. For the man, there is now pain in working to provide for the family. These are results of the Fall, as Genesis 3 tells us.

We also read there that the woman will have an unhealthy desire for her husband, a desire to control him, whereas the husband will rule over her. This is the battle of the sexes that has wreaked havoc in marriages ever since then. So we've seen the genesis of marriage—God's glorious and perfect design in creation. And we've seen the degeneration of marriage when sin came into the world.

This morning we're going to look at another portrait of marriage contained in the Bible, one that portrays God's marriage to His people. It's in the Old Testament book of Hosea, and it shows us in a very powerful way that marriage is about God and His people. We have to understand this about marriage, that it isn't primarily about our marriages. The main thing about the institution of marriage is not human marriages. That may sound like a contradiction if you haven't ever thought about the bigger

picture of marriage, the biblical picture of marriage. Marriage is about God and His people. As the New Testament reveals more specifically in Ephesians 5, marriage is a pointer to Christ's relationship to the church.

This is one of the amazing things about God's sovereignty and God's creativity and God's revelation of Himself. He has ordained everything in this universe in a particular way so that it serves as a revelation of who He is. He has woven various things into the fabric of this universe so that it points to Him and His glory and His mercy toward us. To offer one other illustration of this, God chose to create sheep. We might not think anything of that. But as we understand God's sovereignty and providence over all things, and that He declares the end from the beginning, we can see that God created sheep as a way of revealing to us many spiritual realities. He made sheep so there would be shepherds, and He uses the imagery of shepherds and sheep to teach us things about Himself and about us. And it's not the case that there just happened to be sheep and shepherds, and so those things were used in the Bible to illustrate certain truths. Rather, sheep were created by God for the very purpose illustrating these truths. God didn't create sheep merely to be a source of wool and a source of meat. As God created the first sheep He was already anticipating the words of His Son, who would say in John 10, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." God created the world in such a way that those words could be a profound means of divine revelation.

Similarly with the institution of marriage. God didn't create marriage merely as a building block for society or as a way for individuals to find companionship or as a plan for preserving the species. He created marriage so that He could talk about His relationship to His people in terms of a husband and a wife. In Ephesians 5 Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Then Paul writes, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." That is such a remarkable statement, and it should have this impact on us: it should impress upon us the fact that our marriages are not ultimately about us. Your marriage and my marriage is intended to point beyond us to a greater reality, an eternal reality, and that is Christ's relationship to His bride, the church.

This is also why it's important for us as a church to meditate on God's design for marriage, because an understanding of what the Bible says about marriage is not only important for those who are married. Since it's something that points beyond itself to the Gospel, it's important that we all understand this. And for some of you, you may have never come into contact with a

marriage that reflects God's good design. Maybe your parents were divorced, maybe multiple times. It may be that every male-female relationship that you've witnessed or been involved in has been abusive in some way. And you may react to that by despising marriage. Based on what you've seen of marriage, you may think that it's pretty much the equivalent of hell on earth. In our passage this morning, in fact, we're going to see a very difficult marriage.

But I want to say to you, Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. Just because you've only seen bad marriages doesn't mean that marriage, itself, is bad. Sin is bad, because it forsakes God's design, and thus it brings much pain and misery. But God's design for marriage is unspeakably wonderful.

So whether you are a child or youth, a single adult or married person, let's look into God's Word and see how marriage serves to illustrate for us God's marriage to His people. The text we'll study today is Hosea 1-3, and we read here of a very difficult marriage. This is not a passage we look at to pull out 10 tips for a happy marriage. But I do believe if we can grasp something of what this teaches us about God's marriage to His people, it will strengthen our marriages and our families and our church body.

Here's an outline for how I want to go through this. First, we'll consider Hosea and Gomer—the human marriage that we learn about here. Second, God and His people. This is what it's really all about. The human marriage is a pointer to God's relationship to His people. Third, we'll think about you and your spouse. What are some implications that relate to your marriage? And finally, you and your Redeemer. We'll close by emphasizing the vivid display of the Gospel in this passage.

Hosea and Gomer: Hosea 1:1-9

Hosea was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the years leading up to the fall of Israel in 722 B.C. These were tumultuous years. They were years when the moral landscape was spiraling downward and God was about to unleash His punishment on His people by allowing the Assyrians to come in and conquer them and lead them away into exile (2 Kings 17:6ff). Hosea's prophetic ministry was unique in that he was called to live out a parable of God's faithful love toward his adulterous wife. You see, in the Bible idolatry and adultery are closely related. Idolatry, which is what the Israelites were doing (they were worshipping other gods), is spiritual adultery. God is married to His people. He has made a covenant with them. And when they turn away to worship other gods, they are committing adultery against their husband.

In this unique book and this unique ministry, God called Hosea to live this out in his own marriage. He was commanded by

God to marry a woman who would later commit adultery against him and abandon him in her pursuit of other lovers. In the wording of verse 2 we might assume that Gomer was already promiscuous, “a wife of whoredom.” But it actually seems better to understand that as a description of what she would later become. At the beginning of the marriage, she was faithful to Hosea, and we get an indication of this in the next verse where it says that “she conceived and bore *him* a son.” In other words, the first child was the fruit of their union—Hosea and Gomer. The second and third child are different. In verse 6 and 8 there’s no pronoun referring to Hosea. It just says, “she conceived again and bore a daughter” (verse 6). And “she conceived and bore a son” (verse 8). And the implication is that these children were the result of adulterous relationships.

In 2:4 Hosea says, “Upon her children also I will have no mercy, because they are children of whoredom.” We can imagine the heartache that Hosea must have felt, the pain that was involved in being married to an unfaithful wife. And yet he is instructed to act toward her as God acts toward His people. There is discipline (as you can read in the beginning of chapter 2), but there is also redemption, which we see very vividly in Hosea’s actions in chapter 3.

Hosea goes to redeem, to buy back, his own wife. The picture that is presented here is that Gomer has fallen so far that she has found herself in slavery. She has been an adulteress and eventually her situation became so desperate that her only way to survive was to become a slave. Hosea purchases her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and lethech of barley—not a large amount. But he paid it in order to bring his wife home with him. He expressed his commitment to her and his faithfulness to her and also his expectation that she be faithful to him.

God and His People

Now let’s look at how Hosea’s marriage to Gomer is meant to parallel God’s marriage to His people. Notice first of all in 1:2 where the Lord instructs Hosea to take a wife of whoredom. In the latter part of that verse the Lord explains why He wants Hosea to do this: “for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.” Hosea’s adulterous wife, Gomer, was to be a picture of God’s idolatrous wife, Israel.

We also see this in the symbolic names of the children. With the birth of Jezreel, the Lord points to the punishment that is soon coming upon Israel. The second child is named Lo-ruhama, No Mercy. And then the third child is Lo-ammi, Not My People. The idolatry of the people is bringing upon them God’s severe discipline.

But then look at the remainder of the chapter. There is hope beyond the punishment. God will remain faithful to His bride, even when she is not faithful to Him.

Hosea 1:10-11

This is the language the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 22. And the New Testament uses these verses in Hosea (here and at the end of chapter 2) to speak of the inclusion of Gentiles in the new people of God, the church. Paul quotes this in Romans 9:25-26, and Peter alludes to this in 1 Peter 2:9-10. "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." What an awesome reality this is! Even though God's people sin, and they don't deserve His mercy, He is still faithful to fulfill His promises.

The first part of chapter 2 contains a plea for repentance and threats of punishment. But then verses 14-23 are another display of God's absolutely undeserved mercy. His people have turned away from Him to chase after other lovers, worshiping other gods. And they will face punishment for these sins. But look at how God speaks to His people in spite of this. Look at His tender words that demonstrate His unfailing faithfulness.

Hosea 2:14-23

This is a description of God's marriage to His people. Notice God's tender love in all of this. He allure's His bride. He speaks tenderly to her. He desires her to call him, "My Husband." And in verse 20, "you shall know the Lord." All of these speaks to the intimacy that God has with His people.

Notice also God's initiative in this relationship. He is the pursuer. He is the initiator. He is the One who goes after His bride even when she is pursuing other lovers. In verse 17, He "will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth." In verse 18, He "will make for them a covenant." In verse 19 He betroths her to Himself forever, and He does so in righteousness and justice and steadfast love and mercy and faithfulness. And it's clear from the situation that this is not the righteousness of the people. It is God's own righteousness that is the basis for this marriage covenant.

In chapter 3 we see another explanation of the parallel between Hosea's marriage to Gomer and God's marriage to His people. After Hosea redeems Gomer, buying her out of slavery, it says in verses 4-5, "For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods. 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."

In each of these passages there is much hope held out for God's people. There will be discipline for sin, but there will also

be abundant mercy, which comes through Jesus Christ, the descendant of King David, the One whose righteousness becomes ours by faith. These are the promises that are pointed to in these descriptions of God's marriage to His people.

You and Your Spouse

Let's think now for a moment about what this means for you and your spouse, and then we'll close by focusing on you and your Redeemer. Imagine what your marriage might be like if you were sincerely striving to emulate Hosea in his relationship to Gomer and ultimately striving to emulate God in His relationship to His people.

Maybe your spouse has deeply wounded you emotionally. Maybe your spouse has neglected you and ignored you. Maybe your spouse has been hurtful and hateful toward you. Maybe your spouse has lied to you, done things behind your back, sinned against you in grievous ways. Maybe your spouse has committed adultery. Maybe your spouse has deserted you. What are you to do?

The example for us in this very moving passage of Scripture is that we should respond as Hosea was instructed to respond. We should extend grace to our spouse just as God has extended much grace to us.

I think the message of this book should have a huge impact on us in terms of the permanence of marriage. I know that we can't take the things Hosea was instructed to do and apply all of it to our own lives. Hosea's call to take a wife of whoredom was a unique call, and not something that is transferable to us. That's not the point of the story, that you should go out and look for someone to marry whom you know is going to be unfaithful to you. On the contrary, you should look for someone to marry who has a proven character, who is trustworthy and faithful.

But what Hosea's marriage illustrates for us about God's unfailing love is most definitely something for us to emulate. The fact that Hosea pursued his wife and redeemed her and brought her back home and forgave her even after the devastating things that she did, that should land on us with a massive amount of impact. My challenge to all of us is this: look for ways to be a living, walking demonstration of redemption. Forgive because you have been forgiven. Act in redemptive ways toward your spouse, because you have been redeemed by Christ. When you were committing spiritual adultery, He purchased you out of your slavery to sin. That's redemption. Therefore when your spouse is acting in ways that are destructive to your marriage, you should be thinking and praying about how to extend mercy in a way that will bring your spouse out of their bondage to sin.

If your spouse has committed adultery my counsel to you is to do what Hosea did for Gomer, and what God has done for His people. If your spouse has deserted you my counsel is to do what Hosea did for Gomer, and what God has done for His people. I know there are different kinds of situations, and in some situations a time of separation may be needed. You should seek godly counsel on these things. But the principle that emerges so clearly in the book of Hosea is that no matter what your spouse has done you should remain committed to the marriage and you should be pursuing reconciliation in redemptive ways.

And I want to emphasize, too, that this principle applies to all married couples, not just those where there has been adultery or abandonment. Everyone one of us here who is married is married to a sinner. There are no perfect people here. So what do you do when your spouse sins against you? Do you try to get even? Do you hold it over their head indefinitely? No, that's not redemptive. Instead, you should be patient and gracious. You should speak the truth in love. You should explain the destructive power of the sin and also express your desire to forgive. What an awesome effect it would have on our marriages if each one of us was looking for ways to treat our spouse like Hosea treated Gomer, and like God treats His people.

You and Your Redeemer

Last of all, let's talk about you and your Redeemer. In terms of our marriages, it's appropriate for us to think of ourselves in the place of Hosea and consider how we can emulate him. But this book of the Bible wouldn't have its intended effect on us if we didn't see ourselves ultimately in the place of Gomer. We have sinned against our God. We have run to other lovers. Yet in spite of our rebellion, in spite of us heaping scorn and ridicule upon Him, He has pursued us and redeemed us. I hope that you will see what an awesome God we have. I hope that His redeeming love will bring you to your knees today in repentance and faith and thanksgiving. I'll close with this extended quote from Donald Grey Barnhouse which I think is so powerful.

"The pursuing love of God is the greatest wonder of the spiritual universe. We leave God in the heat of our own self-desire and run from His will because we want so much to have our own way. We get to a crossroads and look back in pride, thinking that we have outdistanced Him. 'My child,' He says in great tenderness, 'I love you; and when I saw you running away from all that is good, I pursued you through a shortcut that love knows well, and awaited you here at the crossroads.' We have torn ourselves free from His grasp and rushed off again, through deepest woods and farthest swamp, and as we look back again, we are sure, this

time, that we have succeeded in escaping from Him. But, once more, the touch of love is on our other sleeve and when we turn quickly we find that He is there, pleading with the eyes of love, and showing Himself once more to be the tender and faithful One, loving to the end. He will always say, 'My child, my name and nature are Love, and I must act according to that which I am. So it is that I have pursued you, to tell you that when you are tired of your running and your wandering, I will be there to draw you to myself once more.'

“When we see this love at work through the heart of Hosea we may wonder if God is really like that. But everything in the Word and in experience shows us that He is. He will give man the trees of the forest and the iron in the ground. Then He will give to man the brains to make an axe from the iron to cut down a tree and fashion it into a cross. He will give man the ability to make a hammer and nails, and when man has the cross and the hammer and the nails, the Lord will allow man to take hold of Him and bring Him to that cross; He will stretch out His hands upon it and allow man to nail Him to that cross, and in so doing will take the sins of man upon Himself and make it possible for those who have despised and rejected Him to come unto Him and know the joy of sins removed and forgiven, to know the assurance of pardon and eternal life, and to enter into the prospect of the hope of glory with Him forever. This is even our God, and there is none like unto Him.”¹

¹ Donald Grey Barnhouse, “Epistle to the Romans,” Part 38. Quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, page 23.