

BIBLE SURVEY - HOSEA

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge..." Hosea 4:6

The Book of Hosea is about God's steadfast love for His people in spite of their continued unfaithfulness, vividly depicted by Hosea's marital experience. The Holiness of God, the depravity of man, the seriousness of sin, the inevitability of judgment and the amazing grace of God are strikingly portrayed throughout the Book of Hosea.

The Prodigal Wife

Hosea married Gomer only to discover that she was unfaithful. Although separation followed, Hosea's love for Gomer, like God's love for His own people, persisted, and reconciliation for the prodigal wife was eventually accomplished. Hosea's life and ministry dramatically portrays God's steadfast love for His Covenant people. In spite of Israel's idolatry and immorality, the Lord seeks to restore His unfaithful bride. The story of Gomer, the wife of Hosea, can be summed up in three words, **sin, punishment** and **restoration**.

Who was Hosea?

Hosea is the first of the twelve minor prophets. Hosea, like his contemporary prophet Amos, prophesied to the Northern kingdom of Israel at the same time Isaiah and Micah were ministering to the Southern kingdom of Judah. When Hosea began his ministry (2 Kings 14:23-17:41), it was during the reign of King Jeroboam II (782-753), when material prosperity and spiritual bankruptcy characterised Israel. His ministry followed that of Amos in the North and he was contemporary with the prophets Isaiah and Micah who prophesied in Judah to the South. 2 Chronicles 26-32 record the historical background of Hosea's ministry.

Idolatry and Harlotry

The Old Testament frequently uses prostitution as an image of the sin of idolatry. Idolatry is like marital unfaithfulness against the Lord. Harlotry (in Hebrew *Zanah*) refers to illicit sexual relationships. The Northern kingdom of Israel is also frequently called Ephraim after its largest tribe.

Historic Context of Hosea

In the 8th century, while Amos and Hosea were ministering in Israel, the great empires of Carthage and Rome were being established. The Olympic Games were beginning in Greece. In the East the Chinese and Indian civilisations were emerging. Israel was strategically placed at the crossroads of Africa, Asia and Europe. God's people had both privileges and responsibilities.

The Downward Slide

The history of Israel in 1 & 2 Kings reveals that the average length of the reigns of the Northern kings was 3 years. Many of these kings were assassinated and there were numerous coups. During the early years of Hosea's ministry the Northern kings of Israel enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity. This was largely because Assyria, the superpower of the day, had been deeply affected by the prophet Jonah's ministry to its capital Nineveh. Their repentance postponed the threat to Israel for over a generation. However, during this time of great prosperity and peace, greed and materialism fuelled bribery, corruption, scandals and injustice. Drunkenness and immorality rotted the society and the people of Israel became bored with the dry rituals being performed mechanically by the priests. There was a resurgence of interest in New Age cults and Eastern religions, so that God's people, who were meant to be a royal priesthood and a holy nation, became just like everybody else. Immorality and idolatry flourished amongst the inter-faith worship and degenerate music.

Warning Signs

God would have been justified in divorcing His apostate people out of hand. However, God hates divorce and He sent prophets to warn them and seek to win them back to Himself again. As Israel persisted in her rebellion, God sent natural disasters, crop failures, droughts, diseases, famines, plagues, storms, earthquakes and wildfires to wake Israel up to its self-destructive and suicidal path. Enemy tribes raided their livestock and life and property became insecure. The economy collapsed.

Catastrophe

Yet none of this seemed to bring the people of Israel to their senses. Eventually God allowed them to be invaded. The Northern kingdom of Israel was subjugated and the people exiled from the land. Amos and Hosea were the last-chance prophets sent to warn Israel of the dreadful consequences of their disastrous disobedience. Hosea was God's last prophet to the Northern Ten Tribes of Israel before their exile.

Love is Loyal

Love is not true love unless it is loyal, exclusive and faithful. The English word *betrothed* seeks to encapsulate the Hebrew word used in Hosea to describe Covenant Faithful Love. God rescued the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. He provided for them, protected them and blessed them. In response, Israel was required to joyfully respond to God's commands, delighting in His Law and worshipping God in grateful devotion.

The School of Suffering

God prepared Hosea for his extraordinary ministry, as he went through the trauma of a marriage to an unfaithful woman. Jeremiah was instructed to never marry so that he could learn how God grieved being rejected by Israel. Ezekiel was instructed that when his wife died, he was not to weep for her, just as God would not weep for the judgment that was to come upon Judah.

Disciplined, Deprived, Disowned

Hosea and Gomer had 3 children, at least one of which was not Hosea's. Their first child born, Jezreel (*God sows it*), was a rebellious, unruly child who needed discipline. The second child, a girl, Lo-Ruhamah (*Not pitied*), was a deprived child, who did not receive love from her mother. The third child was a boy, Lo-Ammi (*Not My People*). Hosea was not the father and this boy was disowned. **Disciplined, deprived, and disowned.** These children's names summarised how God was dealing with the people of Israel.

Rebuked, Redeemed, Restored

Hosea's wife was **rebuked, redeemed and restored.** Hosea was **faithful** to his wife, even when she was faithless to him. He was **firm** with her, bringing her back home, but not sharing the bed with her, representing the period of discipline in the Exile, that God was going to put the Israelites through. Hosea was **feared**, as Gomer learned what it meant to respect and tremble before him with a healthy fear. So too God is **faithful, firm** and to be **feared**.

Seven Deadly Sins of Israel

1. **Ignorance** – *"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge."* The people chose to remain ignorant. They did not want to know about God.
2. **Ingratitude** – Despite all God's gracious provisions they remained unthankful.
3. **Immorality** – Pursuing fertility cults, consorting with prostitutes and indulging in drunken orgies, Israel chose to copy the immorality of the surrounding nations.
4. **Idolatry** – The fertility cults, materialism and idols of the Canaanites were integrated into the daily life and worship of the people of Israel.
5. **Infidelity** – The people had become unfaithful in their marriages, as well as unfaithful to their Covenant God.

6. **Independence** – *"Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft"* and the people had chosen their own leaders and rejected the line of David, which God had set over them.
7. **Intrigue** – Gossip, alliances with pagan nations and disloyalty towards one another characterised daily life.

Half-Baked and Half-Hearted

In Chapter 7, Hosea uses a variety of images to describe the character of Israel. Their evil passions were like a heated oven. They were like an upturned cake getting burned on one side, inedible. Ruined and rotten. Their half-heartedness made them useless. Israel flutters like a dove trapped in a net, turning to Egypt one moment and to Assyria the next, but never to God. Israel keeps faith with no one.

The Guilty Parties

Hosea identifies four groups of people responsible for the apostasy of Israel:

1. The **prophets** – False prophets who tickled peoples ears with what they were itching to hear were plentiful.
2. The **priests** – who should have been reminding the people of the Law of God had abdicated their responsibilities and were as degenerate as the pagans.
3. The **princes** – were corrupt and irresponsible.
4. The **profiteers** – were making serious money out of exploiting the poor, manipulating the markets, charging interest and corrupting society.

Barrenness, Bloodshed, Banishment

God warns that the consequences of disobedience and rebellion would be **barrenness**, **bloodshed** and **banishment**. There would be many miscarriages and much infertility. Their numbers would decline. Foreigners would be allowed to attack and kill many of them and they would be banished and exiled from the land.

A Time of Turmoil

Disaster and judgement seemed remote when Hosea began his 50 year prophetic ministry. But by 732 Damascus had fallen to the Assyrians and by 722, Samaria, the capital of Israel, fell and the people were exiled from the land. Hosea was the son of Beeri (1:1). Hosea prophesied during the reigns of kings Uzziah (790-739 B.C.), Jotham (750-731 B.C.), Ahaz (735-715 B.C.) and Hezekiah (715-686 B.C.) in Judah, and Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.) in Israel. His long career spanned the last six kings of Israel from Zechariah (753-752 B.C.) to Hoshea (732-722 B.C.). The overthrow of Zechariah (the last king of the dynasty of Jehu), in 752 B.C. is depicted as yet future (1:4).

Peace, Prosperity and Corruption

Under King Jeroboam II, Israel was enjoying political peace and material prosperity, but moral corruption and spiritual bankruptcy was undermining the kingdom. After Jeroboam II's death in 753 B.C., anarchy prevailed and Israel declined rapidly. Four of Israel's next six kings were assassinated by their successors. 20 Years after the death of Jeroboam II, Assyria conquered Israel.

Idolatry and Immorality

Hosea focused on the idolatry and immorality of Israel and her breach of Covenantal relationship with the Lord, describing it as adultery and harlotry. Judgement was imminent. Although circumstances were somewhat better in the Southern kingdom of Judah at this time, Uzziah had been struck with leprosy for taking upon himself the functions of a priest (2 Chronicles 26:15-21). Jotham condoned idolatrous practices and opened the way for Ahaz to encourage Baal worship (2 Chronicles 27:1-28, 4).

Weakness and Wickedness

A Revival under Hezekiah saved Judah from a similar fate to that of her apostate Northern neighbour, Israel. Weak and wicked kings on both sides of the border repeatedly sought alliances with their heathen neighbours (2 Kings 15:19; 16:7 & Hosea 7:11), rather than seeking the Lord.

Broken Home – Broken Heart

Hosea was instructed by God to marry Gomer and his traumatic experience of her unfaithfulness was used to dramatize the unfaithfulness of Israel to the Lord. The marital heartbreak of Hosea over his disloyal wife, Gomer, provides the rich metaphor which clarifies the themes of the Book: **Sin, Judgment and God's Merciful Restoring Love.**

Did God Actually Instruct Hosea to Marry a Prostitute?

It is probable that Gomer was chaste at the time of her marriage to Hosea. The words: *"Take yourself a wife of harlotry"* (1:2), can be understood prophetically, looking to what she became in the future. Gomer probably degenerated into immoral behaviour after the wedding. Just as God rescued Israel out of Egypt, and she later backslid and apostatised from the Lord, so Hosea experienced the heartbreak of his wife's violation of the marriage covenant. *"...For she is not My wife, nor am I her Husband! Let her put away her harlotries..."* Hosea 2:2

Love in Spite of Rejection

Gomer is symbolic of ungrateful and faithless Israel who, after being rescued from slavery in Egypt, turned their back on God and ran after the idols and lusts of the world. God commands Hosea: *"Go again, love... just like the love of the Lord for the children of Israel, who took to other gods and loved the raisin cakes of the pagans..."* 3:1.

Inter-faith Syncretism

Israel was mixing their worship of the Lord with the idolatry of the surrounding peoples. This religious syncretism demanded God's judgment. Using the analogies of marital and parental love, Hosea describes how the people of Israel had become polluted by the fertility cults of the Canaanites. Baal worship included pornographic Ashera poles and idols, immorality, drunken orgies, prostitution and child sacrifice. *"I will punish her for the days of the Baals to which she burned incense. She decked herself with her earrings and jewellery, and went after her lovers; but Me she forgot,"* says the Lord." Hosea 2:13

Hardened Hearts

Through corruption, greed, lust and perversion, their hearts had hardened. They were neglecting to instruct their children in the true Faith and were now tolerating, and even sponsoring and promoting, synchronistic religion with all its idolatry and immorality. *"They are deeply corrupted... He will remember their iniquity; He will punish their sins."* Hosea 9:9

The Love of God

The Book of Hosea is not about Hosea. It is about God and His relationship to His Covenant people. The uniqueness, holiness and sovereignty of Almighty God is emphasised. The fear of God, adoration, worship and wholehearted love of Him is the only proper response. *"Love so amazing, so Divine demands my life, my soul, my all!"*

Prostituted People

God tolerates no rivals. God hates idolatry. Idolatry is described as harlotry. When God's people commit idolatry, they behave like prostitutes and they deserve to be divorced, rejected and punished. The prophet Hosea calls backslidden Israel to return to the Lord and re-establish the intimate relationship she had early experienced with Him in the wilderness, after having been delivered from slavery in Egypt. God's people are called to wholehearted intimacy, loyalty and obedience of the Lord in the same way that a wife should be devoted to her husband.

Head and Heart

The Book of Hosea teaches that true knowledge of God is not merely doctrinal accuracy and understanding of correct information. To know the Lord is to have a personal relationship of faithful intimacy evidenced in worship, lifestyle and loyalty to the Covenant of God and the Word of God.

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the Law of your God, I also will forget your children." Hosea 4:6

The Deceitfulness of Sin

Sin can delude people into thinking that they know and understand God, when they are, in fact, far from Him. *"Israel will cry to Me, 'my God, we know You!' Israel has rejected the good... they set up kings but not by Me, they made princes, but I did not acknowledge them... they made idols for themselves... My anger is aroused against them – how long will they attain to innocence? ...they sow the wind and reap the whirlwind... I had written for them the great things of My Law, but they were considered a strange thing... but the Lord does not accept them. Know He will remember their iniquity and punish their sins. They shall return to Egypt. For Israel has forgotten his Maker..."* Hosea 8:2-14

Syncretism Condemned

The prophet Hosea repeatedly condemns the mixture of true and false religion. The attempt by Israel to wed the worship of the Covenant God to Canaanite immorality and idolatry is as abominable as being married to a prostitute. Sin corrupts character. *"Hear the Word of the Lord, you children of Israel, for the Lord brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land; there is no truth and mercy and knowledge of God in the land. By swearing and lying, killing and stealing and committing adultery, they break all restraint with bloodshed upon bloodshed."* Hosea 4:1-2

Like People Like Priest

"And it shall be: like people, like priest. So I will punish them for their ways, and reward them for their deeds. For they shall eat, but not have enough; they shall commit harlotry, but not increase; because they have ceased obeying the Lord." Hosea 4:9-10. People without understanding will come to ruin (4:14).

Everything Has Consequences

"They do not direct their deeds toward turning to their God, for the spirit of harlotry is in their midst, and they do not know the Lord. The pride of Israel testifies to his face; therefore Israel and Ephraim stumble in their iniquity; Judah also stumbles with them." Hosea 5:4-5

Pagan Children

"...They shall go to seek the Lord, but they will not find Him; He has withdrawn Himself from them. They have dealt treacherously with the Lord, for they have begotten pagan children. Now a New Moon shall devour them and their heritage." Hosea 5:6-7

Treachery and Lewdness

The religious rituals of Israel are condemned: *"For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings. 'But like men they transgressed the Covenant; there they dealt treacherously with Me. Gilead is a city of evildoers and defiled with blood. As bands of robbers lie in wait for a man, so the company of priests murder... surely they commit lewdness. I have seen a horrible thing in the house of Israel: There is the harlotry of Ephraim; Israel is defiled."* Hosea 6:6-10

"When I would have healed Israel, then the iniquity of Ephraim was uncovered, and the wickedness of Samaria. For they have committed fraud; a thief comes in; a band of robbers takes spoil outside. They do not consider in their hearts that I remember all their wickedness; now their

own deeds have surrounded them; they are before My face... They are all adulterers..." Hosea 7:1-4

God is a Lion

God is described in Hosea as a Lion: *"For I will be like a Lion to Ephraim, and like a young lion to the house of Judah. I, even I, will tear them and go away; I will take them away, and no one shall rescue."* Hosea 5:14. Powerful and terrifying to the wicked, God will bring swift judgment to those who despise His Law and break His Covenant. *"They shall walk after the Lord. He will roar like a lion. When He roars, then His sons shall come trembling from the West."* Hosea 11:10

As Stealthy as a Leopard

"So I will be to them like a Lion; like a Leopard by the road I will lurk; I will meet them like a Bear deprived of her cubs; I will tear open their rib cage, and there I will devour them like a Lion. The wild beast shall tear them." Hosea 13:7-8. As silent, stealthy and deadly as a leopard. As powerful as a bear, the largest land carnivore. God describes His anger at the insensitivity, immorality and unfaithfulness of His people on whom He had lavished so much kindness, grace, mercy, protection, provision and blessing.

False Hopes Condemned

The unfaithfulness of Israel is exposed. They are trusting in their burnt offerings. They are trusting in kings of their own choosing. They are trusting in foreign alliances. They are trusting in man-made idols. Therefore their treasures will be taken away to Assyria and Egypt. They will become barren and bereaved of children. Their idols shall be carried away and their fortresses shall be destroyed. They have forfeited the love of God and will experience His wrath.

Consequences

In spite of the faithfulness of the Lord, Israel has become unfaithful. In spite of God's Revelations, Israel is worshipping idols. In spite of Israel being led free from captivity in Egypt, they have chosen to go back to copying the idolatrous ways of Egypt. Because of the severity of their crimes against Almighty God, their punishment will be swift, terrible and relentless.

Christ in Hosea

Hosea pictures the relationship between a faithful husband (God) and an unfaithful wife (Israel). Christ permeates the Book of Hosea as the Redeemer of His people. ***"Yet I am the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt, and you shall know no God but Me; for there is no Saviour besides Me."*** Hosea 13:4

Return to the Lord

"O Israel, return to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity... return to the Lord. Say to Him, 'Take away all iniquity; receive us graciously, for we will offer the sacrifices of our lips. Assyria shall not save us, we will not ride on horses, nor will we say anymore to the work of our hands, 'you are our gods'. For in You the fatherless find mercy'." Hosea 14:1-3

A Door of Hope

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her. I will give her her vineyards from there, and the Valley of Achor as a door of hope; she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt. And it shall be, in that day, says the Lord, that you will call Me 'My Husband' ...'I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord... Then I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' and they shall say, 'You are my God!'" Hosea 2:14-23

Healing the Backsliding

The Book of Hosea ends with Words of Hope and Love: ***"I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely... They shall be revived... Who is wise? Let him understand these things. Who is prudent? Let him know them. For the ways of the Lord are right; the righteous walk in them, But transgressors stumble in them."*** Hosea 14:4-9. Hosea looks forward to the day when sin is forsaken, when backsliding is healed and when love triumphs.

Sin is Intolerable: God is Holy

Sin shall be punished: God is just.

The Repentant shall be restored: God is love.

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