

The Greatest Love Story

In this chapter we will be looking at Hosea 1. We will be examining one of the greatest love stories of all time: the love story of Hosea and Gomer. This is a love story between a preacher and a prostitute. It's the ancient world's *Pretty Woman*. It's a story of betrayal, heartbreak, love lost, and hurt, but it's also a story of commitment—real covenantal love—*hesed*.

It's the story of a love that costs something. It's the story of undying love, and it's a story of love that dies for its object. I hope as we go through this story of Hosea, of a preacher and a prostitute, you see that it's really just a shadow of the greatest love story that has ever taken place.

This is a love story that began before the worlds were formed, that still goes on today and is waiting to be consummated when Jesus Christ comes back for his bride. In chapter one, verse one, we look at the call of Hosea: "The word of the LORD that came to Hosea, the son of Beerai, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel."

Why are we reading these names? Because this love story does not begin like other love stories with "Once upon a time...." This is not a fairy tale. This is not a myth. This is a real, historical event that took place when certain people sat on the thrones of certain nations. This is a geographical and historical event. This is a real-life love story.

He goes on in verse 2: "When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, 'Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD.'"

So God comes knocking on Hosea's door and the first thing he says to him is, "Go, take to yourself a wife." It's like what he said to Adam: "It is not good for a man to be alone. There's Eve, go and take her as your wife: perfect, beautiful, pristine, unflawed." But here, to Hosea, he says, "Go, take to yourself a wife *of whoredom* and have children *of whoredom*, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD."

The LORD wanted Hosea to be a picture of his relationship with all of us by going and taking a wife who has had a history. God is telling us through this word that his relationship with us is not just like a king to his citizens or like a father to his children, but also like a husband to a wife with a history. He's saying that his relationship with us is like a marriage—a very bad one.

As we go through the book of Hosea, you're going to learn that Hosea represents God and Gomer represents us. God knocked on his door and told Hosea to go and take a wife of whoredom. That's a tough call. He called Jonah to go to the Ninevites to preach to a Gentile, enemy nation that hated and exploited his people. He told Abraham to leave his family, kindred, tribe, the safety of the city walls, and leave to go to a place that he would tell him about later.

These are tough calls. He called Jeremiah to go and preach to a stiff-necked people and Jeremiah said, "But I'm too young!" He was 14, and he hadn't had the "proper training" or been to the "proper seminary." He said, "How can I do that?" It was a tough call. God called Isaiah to go and preach his message, but Isaiah said he'd go, but not until God dealt with his sin.

And then the mission for Isaiah was to preach to a group of people that were going to reject him and humiliate him. Every prophet has a tough call, and every one of you has a tough call if you are a child of God. But Hosea's call was to go and marry specifically a wife with a past—someone who was very capable of betraying, hurting, and wounding him and breaking his heart.

But it's in that tough call that we learn what it's like to be in a relationship with God. We always talk about how our God Jesus Christ can identify with our suffering; if you want to identify with God and his heartbreak, then go take for yourself a spouse who will betray you. Then you can identify with God. That's the whole point here. That's the picture. God is going to teach us something through all of this.

According to verse 2, God isn't only looking for love. We're all looking for love, aren't we? "We're looking for love in all the wrong places." Johnny Lee taught us that, right? God is not merely looking for love; he is looking to

love. He's not necessarily looking for someone to love him, although that is partly true. But he is looking mostly for an object of his love. And that is what we're going to learn is real love. And so is Hosea.

Look at verse 2 again. God says very carefully, "Take to yourself a wife of whoredom." Now notice what it does not say: it does not say, "Take *for* yourself." It's a prepositional point about marriage. Marriage is not just about taking someone *for* yourself; it's about taking someone *to* yourself. In other words, you're saying, "You're going to be my wife, yes, but I'm also going to be your husband."

That's the difference between taking *for* yourself and taking *to* yourself. Turn over to Hosea 3:2. Hosea says, "So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and letheck of barley." Who did he buy? Gomer, his wife. You have to understand the picture here: Gomer has betrayed him. She has left his home and chased after other lovers and those lovers have turned out to be pimps. Slavemasters. And now she is there in the slave auction naked, humiliated, and surrounded by men who are hungry who want to take her *for* themselves.

And then they begin the bidding: "One shekel! Two shekels!" "Look at her, she's been abused! She's been maligned! She is not worth more than two shekels; I'll throw in a goat." And they laugh and scoff at her. But as she stands there on the auction block, a prostitute, a sex slave, naked and humiliated, she hears a voice from the crowd. Guess who it is.

That's Christ! That's God! She hears a voice from the crowd that says, "Fifteen shekels! And a letheck of barley! And a homer!" And that voice causes her to open up her ears and listen because it is a voice that is familiar to her. She responds to the call of her husband. And she immediately thinks, "Is he coming to pay me back for what I have done? Is he coming to condemn?" He certainly would be just in doing so.

It says in Hosea 3:2 that he buys her for all those things and then says to her, "You must dwell as mine for many days." He's not coming to pay vengeance on her or condemn her; he came to say, "Live in my house. Lie in my bed." "You will be my wife," he says. He is looking for love, yes, but it doesn't end there. Moving on, he says, "You shall not play the whore."

Because he is not only bringing her into his house or making her his wife. He wants to heal her as well. “You shall not play the whore, or belong to another man. We are not for sharing; this relationship is intimate. It is commital. It is covenantal.”

Meet Real Love

And then perhaps the sweetest words in this entire book: “So will I also be to you.” That’s real love. When the new Jerusalem comes down on this earth, God says that we will be his people, and even more beautiful than that, that he will be our God. Though we betrayed him and followed after our loves and were enslaved by sin, naked and humiliated, he paid the price. He says, “Come back into my home. I’ll clean you and heal you. We are not for sharing. You will be my wife and I will be your husband.”

God’s not just looking *for* love. He’s looking *to* love. That’s real love. In other words, God elects. God calls. His sheep hear his voice (John 10:16, 27). He adopts them into his family. He sanctifies and heals him. And then, not only does he make them his bride; he becomes their husband. Real love pursues.

The question is, obviously, *why?* Why would God do that? What did Gomer have to offer Hosea? What do we have to offer God? Why would he do that? Why would we? Just picture two engaged folk—a man and a woman. They’re taking a stroll on the beach at nighttime. Just as they leave the city lights, the man turns to his fiance and says, “I love you, *because....*”

That’s the way we love, right? “I love you because your eyes embarrass the moon. I love you because your hair inspires the silkworm. And your nose is cute as a button. In fact, if I were king of the world, I would decree that all the buttons in the world would be built on the template of your nose.”

But that’s not how God loves at all. God loves us because he loves us, and that’s as far as the Bible goes. Deuteronomy 7:6 shows us a little bit of the heart of God and how he loves. It says, speaking to his people in those

times, Israel, “The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession.” They had left for other lovers and those lovers turned out to be pimps and made them slaves in Egypt. And God bought them on the auction block and brought them out into the desert to make them his wife.

How does an emperor who basically owns everything own a “treasured possession”? He has a special place where he keeps his special, sentimental things. The king owns everything, but he has a treasured possession. Out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth, it was not because the nation of Israel was more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on them and chose them (Deuteronomy 7:7). He did not love Israel because they were anything; in fact, they were the fewest of all peoples. The Lord loved them because he loved them.

That’s real love. That’s how his heart works. Why does God love us? Why does he pursue? Why does real love not only look *for* love but *to* love? Because it just does. God does not love us based on our characteristics; he loves us based on his character. We say things like “love at first sight.” This real love that I’m trying to explain to you shatters this idea.

God did not love at first sight. He loved before he said, “Let there be light.” He loves not based on our characteristics but on his character. And even the ancient pagans without the scripture knew this because Cupid is blindfolded. Real love is not “love at first sight”; real love *loves* because it’s love. Not because the sight has motivated it to love. That’s just typical human love.

Sally Lloyd Jones is a Christian children’s author who wrote this book called *Because You’re Mine*. It’s about a red squirrel that wants to know why his daddy loves him so much. This little red squirrel wonders, “Is it because I’m so friendly?” No. “Is it because I’m so skilled at locating those acorns at the top of the tree? Is *that* why my daddy loves me? Is it because I’m beautiful or because I can run fast or jump high or because I’m the best squirrel he’s ever seen?” At the end of the book, the little red squirrel discovers, “My daddy loves me because I am his.” He loves him because he loves him. That’s real love.

Let's dig deeper, because you know looking for love is dangerous. You've been hurt, betrayed, and backstabbed and gotten the cold shoulder and the silent treatment, right? Looking for love is dangerous because you're putting yourself out there. Perhaps you will be rejected. Perhaps no one will love you.

But looking *for* love is not nearly as dangerous as looking *to* love. When you love someone not based on their characteristics—whether they have a flaw or are “loveable”—but just because you love them, you bring them to yourself, and that's dangerous. Because you're running the risk of being betrayed. In fact, the odds are greater at that point. Because you have not scrutinized them and examined their characteristics to see whether or not they are worthy of love; you have just loved them.

You are putting yourself in a very volatile situation, because the closer someone is to you, the more dangerous it can get. Think of it this way: You're driving down the road and you do something stupid—you stop too short or run someone off the road—and they yell at you as you go by that you're “number one”—on their list, that is.

If you're anything like me, you feel very superior. (That's a confession.) In fact, you laugh. How could someone get so worked up? In that moment they hate you, and their hatred to you means nothing. In fact, it puts a grin on your face. But if a father and son have a spat and the son storms out of the room, and as he leaves, he turns around and gives his father the same signal, it can put the father on his knees or put him on a therapist's couch.

The closer you are to someone, the more you can hurt them. As you get close to another human, you're living on the edge. It's dangerous to look *to* love. Some of you know this danger. And you've decided it's best not to pursue. Not to elect. Not to love. Not to commit or endure in any way. You've been hurt by churches, and churches can be hurtful because they're made up of humans. So instead of pursuing, you bounce from church to church like you're surfing web pages on the internet.

Lots of breadth, but no depth. In breadth, there's no danger. If you keep a lot of acquaintances, if you keep things easy, there's no danger and no risk to yourself. You can say to the church, “I want you to be mine,” but it's a

whole other thing to say, “I’m yours.” And many of you cannot do that because the risk is too great.

The Basis of Love

Many of you have been hurt by friends. And so you relate to people only on a shallow Facebook level. You don’t allow them to get close. You don’t take them to yourself. You don’t relate to them in any kind of covenantal or committed way. You don’t endure with them. You don’t suffer with them. When the risk gets too high, you just unfriend them, because it’s safer that way.

Some of you have been hurt by your spouse. And you can get to the place where you can say, “You can be my wife again,” but can you say, “I will be your husband again”? It’s easy to look *for* love. It is dangerous to look *to* love. But that is exactly what our Father does. It is exactly what Jesus does. It is exactly what Hosea did. And it’s exactly what we’re called to do.

Some of you have become so hard on the outside; you’ve become crawfish—exoskeletons with claws and all mush on the inside. You need the love of God to penetrate that deep shell. You need to learn to take a risk in spite of the fact that you might be wounded again.

Think about what Hosea did. He’s called to pursue love with a woman with a past, with roaming eyes, who is very likely to betray him. Is that taking a risk? You’d better believe it. He’s not looking *for* love; he’s looking *to* love. Now think about what God did. Hosea is just a shadow of God. God comes as a suitor; he sends his son as a suitor.

Do you know what that means? That means he’s not just a king or a father; he says, “I want you to know what it’s like to be in a relationship with me. I am your suitor; I am coming after you. I am pursuing you and chasing you at great danger to myself. Because you are a woman with a past. You have roaming eyes and you are very capable of betraying me, yet I will pursue you in love.”

Jesus Christ came to this earth and he was betrayed. He was wounded. He got the cold shoulder and the silent treatment. He was rejected by his bride. And where did all of that take place? On calvary. At the cross. He came down and he risked it. He had real love for you. Now my question is, should that inspire anything in you?

Hosea was called to go, to take a woman of whoredom. God sent his very son to take a wife of whoredom and to suffer the betrayal that she would give to him. Are we called to do the same? Perhaps not literally, but we *are* called to love the unloveable. Jesus said it very plainly in Matthew 5:44, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your father who is in heaven."

That's what Hosea's doing. That's what God does. He's not saying that if you love your enemies you *will become* sons; he's saying that when you love your enemies, you *are being* like your father. You are *already* a son. We are called to pursue. Not just to look for love but to look to love others, at risk to ourselves.

We are to take people to ourselves and covenant with them, commit to them, endure with them, have patience with them, have lovingkindness towards them, at great risk to ourselves, at the risk of betrayal and woundedness, even if they do it over and over and over again. That is what we are called to do when Jesus says to love your enemies.

And I learned this from C.S. Lewis: All the religions in the world are very similar, ethically. "Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not commit adultery." You can find that in any religion. But there is one thing, one ethical code, that Christianity has that no other religion has: "Love your enemies."

Why is that Christianity has this unique ethical code that says to love enemies? Because Christianity was founded by a God who loves his enemies, and we should be very grateful for that. Real Christianity is founded by real love, by a God who pursues at great risk to himself, who's looking to love and not just for love. He does not love based on your characteristics; he loves based on his character. There is no other god or savior like this in all existence, and that is why Christianity is so unique in

this ethical code. The way we are saved is connected to the way we are to live.

If you've been hurt and betrayed and had heartbreak, you need help. So I want to let you in on some beautiful translation. Hosea's name is not really Hosea. It kind of gets lost in translation as it comes through Latin to English. The name "Hosea" is closer to Joshua in our English language. In the Hebrew, his name is Yeshua. That comes through Latin and to English as *Jesus*. Hosea shares a name with our savior, Jesus. In Isaiah 53, it says that Jesus, the Messiah, Yeshua, the anointed one who would come, would be wounded as well.

Are you wounded and have a hard time pursuing love? Your savior was wounded as well. Isaiah 53 teaches us that he was wounded for our transgressions. The best thing I can say to you, who have had a hard time pursuing love, is that your husband, Jesus Christ, was wounded as well, and he was wounded for your transgressions. And he was wounded by all of us.

In other words, you can become a Hosea. The power to become a person who is not only looking for love but is looking to love comes when you see yourself as a Gomer. If you can see yourself as a Gomer and see that Jesus Christ pursued you at great risk to himself and made you his bride, then you can pursue others as well.

In other words, you need the gospel of Jesus Christ to give you the power of God unto being that kind of person. Paul says, "The love of Christ compels us" (2 Corinthians 5:14, NIV). When you realize that Jesus loves you in that way, it compels you, it pushes you—it's the power or the engine that you need. Not only does the love of Christ compel us, but John says, "We loved because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

When you get real love down in your heart and you experience it, it makes you the kind of person who can really love as well. Do you want to be that kind of person? I hope so. I'll close with a modern love story, one of my favorites. And I might lose some credit for telling it. It's called Edward Scissorhands.

It's about a boy who was created by a mad scientist of sorts. The boy was not completely finished. He had scissors for hands. And that made him incapable of receiving love or loving others. Every time someone saw him, they were horrified. They couldn't get anywhere near him, because they were certain he would hurt them. Also, any time he tried to love anyone, he would wound them as well.

As his master lay dying of a heart attack, Edward tried to caress his face, but all he could do was cut him. He had scars and he gave other people scars. But there was a family that took a risk and brought him into their family, scissors and all. After all hell had broken loose, with the whole neighborhood turned against this wounded soul after he accidentally hurt some people, the mother sat down on the couch with all the children and said, "I never knew what it would cost to bring him into our home."

My heart broke at that point. Later on, the daughter in the family sensed his woundedness. No one loved him; he had been pushed around and bullied by the neighborhood. She came to him, trying to show some love at risk to herself. She said, "Edward, hug me." And he said, "I can't." And then she hugged him, positioning his scissors so she would not be wounded.

And from that hug, Edward learned to live a life of love. It was that display of risky love that made him a loving person, and he lived the rest of his life loving that family in the only way he knew how. Her love had inspired him to love in return. I believe the gospel can do that for us. The reason I love that story, as odd as it is, is because it reminds me of the real love story.

None of the actors or directors are Christians, as far as I know, but they live in a world created by our God, and they borrowed facets of their story from the his love story. That's why I love it so much. If you have not experienced the love of God, read what Jesus said to his disciples: "Whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37).

If you have not experienced his love, if you don't realize that his love is not based on your characteristics but based on his character, I ask that you would cry out to him and ask him to show you and give you a feeling and an experience of that kind of love.