

June 14, 2009

Hosea: Love That Endures

Purpose: To help us examine Hosea's comparison of God's love with human love

Key Bible reference: Hosea 1.1-3, Hosea 3.1-2, Hosea 6.4-6, Hosea 11.1-4, Hosea 8-9

Key Verse: Hosea 6.6

Biblical Interpretation

Hosea 1:1-3. Hosea was not called simply to preach the message of God's love to the people of Israel, he was also asked to symbolize it in his own life. All of us, of course, know that we are to show love for others as God has shown love for us; but Hosea's situation was unique. As recorded in Hosea 1:2, God commanded Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom." God wanted Hosea to marry a prostitute and have children by her. Why? "For the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD" (Hosea 1:2). In this verse God first gives the prophet a command: Hosea was supposed to marry a prostitute. Then God explains why Hosea was supposed to marry a prostitute: In the same way as the prostitute was not faithful to just one man, Israel had not been faithful to just one God.

Hosea 1:3 tells us how Hosea carried out the command of God. Hosea "went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim (DIB-lay-im), and she conceived and bore him a son."

Hosea 3:1-2. The events of Hosea's marriage to Gomer between the time indicated at the end of Chapter 1 and that indicated at the beginning of Chapter 3 are not at all clear. The Hebrew text in this section of the book is difficult to understand. Perhaps the best interpretation we can come to is that sometime after the birth of Hosea's children and before the situation

reported in Chapter 3, Gomer committed adultery, continued or returned to her prostitution, and perhaps even married another man. This series of events can be inferred from the text, for Chapter 3 begins with the report of Hosea taking back his adulterous wife.

Hosea 3:1 describes a second command from God and an explanation of the significance of the action that God was directing Hosea to perform. In this verse (presented in the first person because Hosea is telling the story himself), God commanded Hosea, "Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress." The reason Hosea is to love such a woman is stated in the second half of Hosea 3:1: "The LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes." (Raisin cakes were employed in fertility cult rites.) Hosea duly declares that he "bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer of barley and a measure of wine" (Hosea 3:2).

With Hosea 3:1-2, the religious significance of Hosea's marriage to the prostitute Gomer becomes clearer. Hosea's love for his adulterous wife is analogous to God's love for humans. Hosea's love for Gomer is so deep that he is willing to take her back at great personal cost—even after she has been unfaithful to him. Similarly, as God comments to Hosea, "The LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes" (Hosea 3:1). Israel had been unfaithful to a faithful and loving God; Israel had strayed and even had

become attached to other gods. But in spite of the rejection that God had experienced at the hand of Israel, God continually acted to redeem this people and was willing to receive them back into covenant fellowship.

Hosea's insight remains true today. Even when we are unfaithful to God, God still loves us and, at great personal cost—the suffering and death of Jesus Christ—redeems us and welcomes us back into fellowship.

Hosea 6:4-6. The next two passages of Scripture in our Bible Lesson come from Hosea's sermons. Just as Hosea's life symbolized the love of God for sinful people, so Hosea's preaching focused on the tender, enduring love that God has for his people.

God is speaking through the voice of the prophet in Hosea 6:4-6. The language conveys God's deep distress over the unfaithfulness of Israel; note that Ephraim is another name for Israel. God cries out, "What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?" (Hosea 6:4ab)

The scene is heart rending. God has loved the people of Israel, yet these people have not been faithful to God; and God is at a loss over what to do. In the last half of Hosea 6:4, God describes Israel's love as being "... like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early."

God's love for the people of God has been faithful and enduring. But the people have not loved God with a constant love. Their love has been a love that fades, a love that disperses like a cloud, a love that bums off like dew in the heat of the day.

Hosea 6:4-6 expresses the anguish that God feels when, in response to God's love for us, we

do not return that love. We see in these verses a fundamental difference between divine love and human love: Whereas human love comes and goes, God's love is "steadfast." God will never stop loving us.

Hosea 11:1-4a. The imagery shifts now. God is no longer portrayed as a faithful husband and Israel as an unfaithful wife. In this sermon God is portrayed as a patient, loving parent and Israel as a disobedient, rebellious child. Like Hosea's sermon in Chapter 6, Hosea 11 is charged with emotion. In this sermon God reflects on the love that he has shown to Israel and how, instead of returning that love, Israel has gone further and further away from God. God affirms that "I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love." (Hosea 11:4a)

But Israel did not return that love. Instead, Israel rebelled against God like a child rebelling against a loving parent's kindness and care. Once again we see a contrast between the love of God and the unfaithfulness of human beings.

Verses 8-9. These verses portray the climax of God's emotional struggle. The Lord is in deep turmoil over what to do with Israel. God has loved this people, but they have not returned that love. Therefore, God considers punishing Israel. The Lord ponders over treating Israel like Admah and Zeboiim [zuh-BOI-im], two cities that were destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah (Hosea 11:8; see Genesis 10:19; 19:24-25; Deuteronomy 29:23). But the thought of destroying Israel causes the Lord great grief. "My heart recoils within me," God proclaims, at the thought of punishing the people whom God had loved and cared for (Hosea 11:8e). God cries out in anguish, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?" (Hosea 11:8ab)

No! God will not punish the beloved people of God. Instead, the Lord says, "My compassion grows warm and tender" (Hosea 11:8f). This beautiful poem concludes in Hosea 11:9 with God declaring why the covenant people will not be punished for their infidelity and rebelliousness. God proclaims that Israel will not be destroyed because "I am God and no mortal."

Hosea 11:9 states explicitly the difference between divine love and human love. God is God, and the love of God transcends feelings of revenge and anger. The love of God is shown to humans even when we do not deserve it, even when God could justly cast us off because of our sin and unfaithfulness.

The first three chapters of the Book of Hosea emphasize the similarities between God's love for Israel and the love of a husband for a wife. Nonetheless, God is God and we are humans. There are some essential differences between God's love and human love, differences that the Book of Hosea recognizes. For example, in Hosea 6:4c, God states, "Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away."

The Lord recognizes that Israel's love is not constant, yet what God longs for from Israel is "steadfast love" (Hosea 6:6). However, whatever the quality of human love, God's love is enduring and ever present.

Another important text in this regard is Hosea 11:8-9. This passage expresses the difference between divine and human love in exquisitely poignant language. Speaking as an anguished lover, God exclaims, "How can I give you up, Ephraim?" (Hosea 11:8a). ("Ephraim" is another name for the Northern Kingdom, Israel.) This is, of course, a rhetorical question, one that has an

obvious and implicit answer, which is, "I can't give Ephraim up." The passage goes on to disclose the reason God is unable to divorce Israel: "My compassion grows warm and tender." (Hosea 11:8f)

This imagery portrays God as having the most noble of human affections. We too feel deeply and compassionately about people we love. And God's action toward Israel is guided by those feelings: "I will not execute my fierce anger" (Hosea 11:9a). But what follows may surprise us, since we have just heard about God's feelings: "for I am God and no mortal" (Hosea 11:9c). Everything up to this point in the passage has likened God's emotions to the most worthy human emotions. But here at the end we are told that the reason God will not destroy Ephraim is that God is God.