Hosea's Harrowing Prophetic Ministry (Old Testament Figures)

A prophet's broken marriage and a God who says, "How can I give you up?"

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, May 15, 2022
PASSAGES	Hosea 11:1-9; Hosea 3:1-5; Hosea 1:2-9; Hosea 6:1-3; Hosea 4:1-6; Hosea 12:2-8; Hosea 13:2-11; Hosea 14:4-7; 1 Kings 12:26-30
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:07:51 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Hosea's marriage was a living parable. God had him marry a woman who would be unfaithful and then buy her back, because that is what God had done with Israel. The people had no claim on him, yet he appeals to his own compassion and pursues them anyway – and that is still why he is merciful to us.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Hosea preached to the northern kingdom at the height of its prosperity, when Israel thought itself rich and blameless while it oppressed the poor and kissed golden calves.
- God's complaint goes back to Jacob grasping in the womb. Israel's sin was not a recent lapse but a long litany.
- "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" – not information about God but a faithful, loyal relationship with him.
- Hosea's children carried God's verdict in their names: Jezreel, No Mercy, Not My People.
- God asked Hosea to live out God's own commitment: to buy back a wife still with her lovers and love her as the Lord loves Israel.

- "How can I give you up, Ephraim?" God is not unfeeling; he is torn, and he grounds his mercy in himself.
- God is not a vending machine that reciprocates our behaviour. We are not saved because we said a prayer; his life and work are our prayer.

▶ 1:07:51

Matt opened with two housekeeping notes. First: he will never email anyone asking for gift cards, "kindly or discreetly" – a scammer posing as "fake Matt" had harvested names through the giving portal before Evan closed the gap, and no one's financials were seen. Anything difficult, he said, will come at least as a phone call.

Why the prophets were contentious

▶ 1:10:38

He also revisited the Chili's analogy from the week before, with the prophet who walks into a restaurant and starts talking about abortion. He chose that topic because he is pro-life, but also because nothing is more contentious; his YouTube video "Why Be Pro-Life" draws more hate comments than any other. The prophets were like that. We enjoy a quiet-time chat with Isaiah over coffee, "but if you were to interact with these gentlemen, my goodness, they would bother us a lot." So were the things Hosea said.

Israel at its most comfortable

▶ 1:13:04

Hosea prophesied around the same time as Isaiah, but to the northern ten tribes – Israel, also called Ephraim or Jacob – which fell to Assyria in 722 BC. This was not a weak, dying kingdom. Under Jeroboam II it enjoyed unparalleled prosperity: well managed, idolatrous, comfortable. Roughly two hundred years had passed since Solomon, about the distance from today back to the years just before the Alamo. Matt called Hosea's ministry perhaps the most emotionally challenging of all the prophets, and began not with his life but with his themes.

▶ 1:15:31

> "The LORD has an indictment against Judah and will punish Jacob according to his ways; he will repay him according to his deeds. In the womb he took his brother by the heel."
>
> HOSEA 12:2–3 ↗

Why go back to Jacob? Because the one who wrestled with God was renamed Israel, and Israel is who is being confronted. "Even in the womb he was a grasper. Quite a litany, and quite a way to start it."

▶ 1:16:44

Then the present: "A merchant, in whose hands are false balances, he loves to oppress. Ephraim has said, 'Ah, but I am rich; I have found wealth for myself; in all my labors they cannot find in me iniquity or sin'" (Hosea 12:7–8). Wealth, oppression of the poor by deception, and arrogance. "It's especially true when you feel arrogant about yourself: when you're confronted with your sin, it's not an enjoyable experience."

Calves, kings and a heart that forgot

▶ 1:17:57

"They sin more and more, and make for themselves metal images... It is said of them, 'Those who offer human sacrifice kiss calves!'" (Hosea 13:2). The calves go back to the split of the kingdom. Jeroboam I feared that if his people kept going to the temple in Jerusalem their hearts would return to the house of David and they would kill him, so he set up golden calves at either end of the land and announced, "Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 12:26–30). God had not enjoyed the calf in the wilderness, either.

▶ 1:19:25

"It was I who knew you in the wilderness... but when they had grazed, they became full, they were filled, and their heart was lifted up; therefore they forgot me" (Hosea 13:5–6). And the kings they demanded so they could be like the nations? "Where now is your king, to save you?... I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath" (Hosea 13:10–11). "Congratulations, you are just like all the other nations."

▶ 1:20:36

Nor was it only external. "They do not cry to me from the heart, but they wail upon their beds; for grain and wine they gash themselves" (Hosea 7:14). They break the covenant and still say, "My God, we – Israel – know you," and God answers, "I have spurned your calf, O Samaria... A craftsman made it; it is not God" (Hosea 8:2–6). "Like, y'all made it. You literally carved that."

Torn, that he may heal

▶ 1:21:56

Hosea warns that God will let Assyria expand into Israel and conquer it. But he also sounds a refrain of hope:

> "Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD."
>
> HOSEA 6:1–3 ↗

"That sounds like a surgeon." And on the third day he will raise us up – "things that make you go hmm."

▶ 1:23:18

Why press on to know him? Because the knowledge God wants is relational: he would be their God, they would be his people, and he would dwell among them. "There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land" – and so swearing, lying, murder, theft and adultery follow, bloodshed upon bloodshed (Hosea 4:1–2). Hence, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6): love shown by respecting his words, offering your very self, faithfulness and loyalty.

A marriage as a prophecy

▶ 1:24:24

Hosea conveyed prophetic words, but he also performed prophetic acts. God told him to marry a woman who would be unfaithful, on purpose, and have children with her (Hosea 1:2–9). The biographical details are unclear because they are not the point; whether Gomer was already immoral or Hosea foresaw it, the act was about God.

▶ 1:25:06

Their first son was named Jezreel, for the bloodshed of Jehu's house at Jezreel. Matt's modern equivalent: a prophet confronting America's bloodshed introduces his wife and "my son, Hiroshima." "It's like picking a fight in the name of your kid." Then a daughter, No Mercy, because the Lord has every right to break the covenant with covenant-breakers. Then a son, Not My People. "That must have stung really deeply." At Sinai it had been like a wedding: I will be your one and only; be mine.

▶ 1:26:57

Why would Hosea marry a woman he knew would be unfaithful? Because God told him to – and Matt imagined God saying, "That's exactly what I did. I pledged myself to a nation I knew would be not faithful to me." Why would you do that? "I would do it all over again."

▶ 1:27:43

> "And the LORD said to me, 'Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.'"
>
> HOSEA 3:1 ↗

"This is not just a contract and this isn't just business. This is personal." As deeply as God is hurt by the betrayal and bloodshed, he still loves his children. A man in Hosea's place would have every right to say, I'm done. "God is asking Hosea to walk out God's own level of commitment to his people, and I'm sure that for Hosea that hurt a lot."

A father's heart

▶ 1:29:27

> "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away... Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love... and I bent down to them and fed them."
>
> HOSEA 11:1–4 ↗

▶ 1:30:10

"Do you feel the tenderness here?" The two strongest human bonds, marriage and parenthood, are both shown utterly broken – and even in a prophecy of "you don't get to be a country anymore" there is so much tenderness and pain on God's part.

▶ 1:30:53

> "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath."
>
> HOSEA 11:8–9 ↗

This is not a taunt shouted; "this would be tearful." Anger, then pain, then no, I won't – and the reason is God himself. He had every right to end a covenant they had already broken. "I just feel like I don't understand why people would think that God is unfeeling."

David their king, and a people in bloom

▶ 1:32:26

The nation would end, but the rescue would go on. Israel would live many days without king, prince, sacrifice or household gods, "afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king" (Hosea 3:4–5). Two hundred years after David, that can only mean a son of David to come. The Lord would roar like a lion and his children would come trembling home like doves (Hosea 11:10–11). The one who broke them wants to bind and heal them – but repentance had never lasted, so it would have to be something big.

▶ 1:34:22

> "I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon... They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow; they shall flourish like the grain; they shall blossom like the vine."
>
> HOSEA 14:4–7 ↗

▶ 1:35:46

What motivates it? Not that Israel had grown decent or that God felt sorry they would miss their grain. "His appeal was to his own mercy. His appeal was to his own compassion." Difficult and tucked away as it is, this book is Scripture, and it is beautiful: it shows us what God is like. Instead of walking away from a people who never treated him as he deserved, he presses forward with buying her back.

Not a vending machine

▶ 1:38:18

This fits Jesus perfectly, and it fits the way the Spirit pursues us with mercy new every morning. Yet many of us slip into a religious deception: I showed up, gave money, was nice to my wife and kids, so surely God will be merciful today – or I failed, so of course he won't be. "God in that situation… just reciprocates like some kind of vending machine." Every made-up way of approaching God involves building relational capital: "I did this thing for you, you scratch my back" – which hands us the controls.

▶ 1:40:31

To stand honestly before the Lord is chilling: without his mercy we are beyond messed up, with no claim on his gifts. That is true even for longtime Christians who know the swing between good prayer seasons and weeks without opening the Bible. We do not serve him like repaying "a really low interest loan… maybe that's why heaven lasts forever." His appeal to us is a husband buying back his adulterous wife, a father pursuing a son who turned his back.

▶ 1:42:26

> *"Have you exhausted God's mercy? Is he tired of you? We have such a small God sometimes, with mercies in such small containers."*

We rest in his hand not because we secured a deal with our behaviour this week, but because he is the way he is. Unlike the gods of Gilgamesh and other ancient Near Eastern stories, who made humans to serve them, God needed no butler or chef, and never ate the sacrifices. "He wants us and doesn't need us, and that just messes with us." Look at the worldwide church and wonder if he has enough people? Gideon had too many (Judges 7:2).

▶ 1:45:07

He redeemed a wayward people not to do his chores but so that he would be their love and heal their apostasy. In Christ, God himself is on full display, binding up our wounds even as we spit on him. Matt closed with a string of contrasts:

> *"We are not saved because we said a prayer; we are saved because his life and his work are our prayer. We are not saved because we went to an altar and raised our hand; we are saved because he went to the altar and was raised up. We're not saved because we turned over a new leaf; we're saved because he turned over death itself."*

▶ 1:45:58

Not because we are particularly lovely, but because he is loving. He prayed that God would tear from us "the idolatry of serving a false god, even if we call him Jesus," and reveal his mercy, our waywardness and his goodness – the glory of what he intends, entirely because of who he is.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Hosea 12:2–3
- Hosea 12:7–8
- Hosea 13:2
- 1 Kings 12:26–30
- Hosea 13:5–6
- Hosea 13:10–11
- Hosea 7:14
- Hosea 8:2–6
- Hosea 6:1–3
- Hosea 4:1–2
- Hosea 4:6
- Hosea 1:2–9
- Hosea 3:1
- Hosea 11:1–4
- Hosea 11:8–9
- Hosea 3:4–5
- Hosea 11:10–11
- Hosea 14:4–7
- Judges 7:2

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Israel was prosperous and sure it was blameless. How can comfort make it harder for us to hear where we have gone wrong?
2. Hosea says God's people were destroyed for lack of knowledge. What is the difference between knowing about God and knowing him?
3. What does God asking Hosea to buy back his wife reveal about God's own heart toward his people?
4. Where do you treat God like a vending machine, expecting mercy for a good week or bracing for less after a bad one?
5. Matt asked, "Have you exhausted God's mercy?" What would change this week if you believed his mercy rests on who he is rather than on you?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioBSRbfssP8&t=4071s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.