

## LOVE WITHOUT LIMIT

### The Madness of Love

Perhaps it is true that the people who love you are the ones that can hurt you the most. Perhaps that's why the breakdown of relationships in families can be so devastating: the breakdown of the relationship between parents and children, the breakdown of a marriage.

Because God's love has no limit, he created those whom he loves. His greatest desire is to know, and be known by those he created. Because the human heart has its limit, we choose, often, to rebel and to reject God's love. Because God's love has no limit, he is always working to embrace those he created in his love. And that's why we have a book called Hosea. It is the story of God's love reaching to embrace the people who choose to reject his love.

The name Hosea simply means 'to save' a meaning you might recognise from the name Jesus. The book of Hosea is the story of the madness of God's love.

**1** The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel:

Hosea's Wife and Children

**2** When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, "Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD." **3** So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

**4** Then the LORD said to Hosea, "Call him Jezreel, because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel. **5** In that day I will break Israel's bow in the Valley of Jezreel."

**6** Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the LORD said to Hosea, "Call her Lo-Ruhamah (which means "not loved"), for I will no longer show love to Israel, that I should at all forgive them. **7** Yet I will show love to Judah; and I will save them—not by

bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but I, the LORD their God, will save them.”

<sup>8</sup> After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah, Gomer had another son. <sup>9</sup> Then the LORD said, “Call him Lo-Ammi (which means “not my people”), for you are not my people, and I am not your God.

<sup>10</sup> “Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘children of the living God.’ <sup>11</sup> The people of Judah and the people of Israel will come together; they will appoint one leader and will come up out of the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel. (Hosea 1 v 1-11)

Verse 1 places the book of Hosea in its context. It takes place in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC. You will no doubt recognise the names of the kings listed: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Jeroboam. There were other prophets at work at this time too: Jonah, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah. It is likely that Amos and Hosea were at work at the same time.

By this time in the history of the nation of Israel, the nation had divided into two: Israel (the Northern Kingdom) and Judah (the Southern Kingdom). Amos, Jonah and Hosea prophesied to the Northern Kingdom - to Israel. Micah and Isaiah prophesied to the Southern Kingdom – to Judah.

The nation of Israel divided into two kingdoms after the reign of King Solomon, who was king after David. The 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC had, for Israel (northern kingdom) been a time of growing affluence, but things were beginning to change. Israel had enjoyed a time of peace – the nations around them had been weak and left them alone. Within the nation of Israel affluence had brought an arrogance and a decadence that was weakening their commitment to following God’s ways. And, in the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC, the strong kings of Uzziah in Judah and Jeroboam II in Israel were coming to the end of their reigns, and Assyria was increasing in power and strength. Things were about to change and crumble for Israel. Things are not good in the nation and disaster is looming.

Because God’s love has no limit, he wants to help his people, so he sends Hosea to speak his love to them. God sends Hosea to call the people back to his love, because, quite simply, it will be better that way. And God gets quite

creative! God wants to remind the people of Israel just how much he loves them and it is better for them to live in that love.

Hosea is a single man looking for a wife. One day God tells Hosea to go and find a woman who can be his wife and he tells him to marry a woman well known for her promiscuity – some even say a prostitute!

Wait...What?

God wants to express his love, and Hosea has to marry a prostitute! That was certainly creative! At least for God. A bit more of a challenge for Hosea, don't you think?

The book of Hosea is the love story of God and his people from God's perspective! The best way for God to show his people what it's like for him, is through the image, relationship of marriage. Marriage is a faithful, life-long, covenant relationship between a man and a woman – at least that's how it is designed to be!

God is going to use the relationship of a marriage as a way of challenging his people in their relationship with him. And it may be true that the people who hurt us the most are the people we love. That's the message God has for his people: he loves them, but the way they respond causes him deep hurt. And, maybe, that's the challenge for us as we go through this book together: how much does the way we respond to God's love hurt him?

Could it be true of us, of me, of you, that the way you live your life is damaging your relationship with God? Is there any truth to the challenge that the way you live draws you away from God's love, rather than towards it? Have we become self-sufficient and no longer ready to follow where God leads?

I would not have liked to be Hosea. Hosea is a prophet, chosen by God to speak his word. And, according to the text, after Hosea begins to speak, God tells him to marry a prostitute.

What would you have said?

Here's a challenging thought: what would you do if God asked you to do something that would be difficult and costly? I sometimes wonder if we have managed to develop a way of thinking that suggests following God should be easy. Sometimes we express that thought this way: "If I follow God closely, he will give me my 1<sup>st</sup> choice life, life the way I want and expect it to be."

We've talked before about living in 2<sup>nd</sup> choice worlds – where the world is not how we want or would like it to be, and we've learnt, I hope, that God is as present in a 2<sup>nd</sup> choice world as he ever would be in a 1<sup>st</sup> choice world.

The truth is that following God is not always easy. We are not called to a comfortable life where everything goes the way we want or expect. We are called to follow God however difficult it might turn out to be.

And sometimes, perhaps, God calls people like Hosea to a very difficult path. And here, for Hosea, his calling makes and demonstrates a very powerful point – and is the reason for his calling to marry Gomer. Hosea is called to make the same choice that was before God. Hosea was called to marry a woman who would be involved in adultery and thus unfaithful to the one who loved her. God was confronted with the choice to remain faithful to the nation and people he loved, who had chosen to be unfaithful and rebel against his love.

Perhaps another way of saying that might be that the book of Hosea and the real message God wants to give to his people, is that his unbroken love comes from his broken heart.

Friends, the deep and profound truth at the heart of this book is that God chooses to choose us, even when we choose to reject his faithful love. Our hearts have their limit, but God's love has no limit.

I wonder what God sees as he looks down on you and me now, in these moments.

We would do well, however, to hear what Hosea has to say about God's love. Hosea chooses to marry Gomer, and they have a baby. Perhaps the people of Israel are wondering if it's really his since they know all about Gomer and what she's like. Commentators suggest that this baby is the child of Hosea and Gomer. And Hosea uses the birth of this child as an opportunity to speak to the people. God tells Hosea to name him Jezreel – because Jezreel has history in Israel.

The valley of Jezreel was the place Gideon defeated the Midianites, but later it was also the place of a massacre by Jehu. When Jehu took the throne, God told him to wipe out the previous wicked dynasty of King Ahab, who did evil in the eyes of God. But Jehu went to the extreme and massacred the dynasty far beyond anything God has said. So, the name Jezreel is synonymous with one of the bloodiest times in Israel's history, one that was not pleasing to God.

The problem was that Israel had never really changed their ways after Jehu. They, like Jehu, had started well, following God, but had chosen to reject God's ways and walk away from him. And God, through the naming of Hosea's son Jezreel, is calling time on Israel. Israel, like Jehu, has become complacent and self-sufficient, and God's love can't and won't stand idly by. The judgement of love is coming.

Hosea and Gomer apparently have two more children, although it is most likely that neither of them are Hosea's. The unfaithful wife of a faithful husband becomes a very powerful symbol of how God's people respond to God's love.

The first is called Lo-Ruhamah which means 'not loved' and the second is called Lo-Ammi which means 'not my people'.

The message is clear: God uses the names of these two illegitimate children to warn the people of Israel that he now considers them to be just like any other people or nation. In their names God reminds the people that love is neither blind nor coercive. God sees and knows how his people are and there are consequences to their choices. And, in love, there comes a point where you have to be left to the consequences of your choices and actions.

What we must remember however, is that prophecies are warnings and not irrevocable sentences. Prophecies are always intended to win the people back. Prophecies are always a way of trying to draw the people back to God's great and magnificent love.

We already noted that Jonah was a prophet to the same people – the northern kingdom of Israel. Jonah, you may remember, gets really angry with God precisely because he knows that his prophecy to Nineveh about their destruction, will actually save them because they will repent and God will have compassion on them. And, we must remember that God's judgement itself is always restorative – it is always intended to win people back.

Judgement can seem harsh, but sometimes allowing people to face the difficult consequences of their actions is the only way for them to change their ways. For Israel, to whom Hosea speaks, judgement comes within a generation. In 722 BC Assyria invades and the nation of Israel is no more.

But, whatever happens, that is not the end of God's love. This is the story of unbroken love from a broken heart. God's heart is broken over his people, but his love towards them is unbroken. Hosea must have stunned the people: he married a prostitute, had three children, two of whom were most likely not his,

he prophesies judgement and God leaving the people to the consequences of their ways... but he doesn't end there. And neither does God.

In verses 10 & 11 he speaks of the madness of God's love. For Hosea speaks of the God who not only allows judgement on his unfaithful people, but who is also the God who loves them and forgives them! This is a complete reversal of what has come before. We know what Israel and Hosea didn't know – that this part of Hosea's prophecy speaks of God's great love ultimately expressed in Jesus on the cross: God loves, the people rebel, judgement comes, but God's love far outweighs his judgement, and so, in love, Jesus dies once and for all. God chooses the way of love to save his people from their sin.

When Hosea prophesies that is a long way off. But it is always God's heart of love, always has been, always will be. The people of Israel had their time as Hosea acted out God's great love for them. They made their response.

Now it is our time and we have to choose our own response. God loves us exactly the same way he loved the people of Israel in Hosea's time. He has the same love, the same compassion, the same mercy, the same grace, the same forgiveness, and he longs for the same with us as he longed for with them. He longs for us to love him with an unwavering commitment, to be faithful to his love. He longs for us to follow him as best we know how, however difficult and challenging life may become. He longs for us to know the height, length, breadth and depth of his great love.

And the madness of God's love is the same as it was when Hosea spoke his words, married Gomer, and lived out his life in front of the people. It is the unbroken love of God that comes from a broken heart. God's love is without limit. We can, if we want to, just as the people of Israel in Hosea's day did, say 'No!' to God's love. But we can say 'Yes!'. I wonder, what will your response be?

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