

LOVE WITHOUT LIMIT

Moving to Repentance

Today we continue our journey through Hosea. So far Hosea has been told by God to marry Gomer. Gomer is very likely a prostitute or at least promiscuous. Gomer would prove unfaithful to Hosea, but God told him to love her again. Hosea has been asked by God to live out in a marriage, the relationship that God has with Israel.

God loves Israel. He chose them and cared for them; he led them, rescued them and guided them. God has done everything he can for his people, but his people choose, time and time again, to be unfaithful. Through the marriage of Hosea and Gomer, God has a message for his people: “Come back, it’s better that way!”

Trouble is, the people aren’t listening, so God begins to speak very directly to the people about how they are doing. What we need to remember, is that in Hosea, we have God’s perspective of his relationship with Israel. Israel is going to go on doing the things it, they, want to do, which, by and large, is to ignore God and live however they want to. God is pleading for them to come back to him, because he loves them, and he knows it will be so much better for them if they do.

So, from chapter 4, God is describing what the people of Israel are like. Thank you to Ian, who through some challenging text in chapter 4 and 5 led us to reflect on how we value God’s word. Many commentators imagine this part of Hosea to be like a divorce court, where God is making his case about how his beloved is and where God is making his case as to why he wants to end his relationship with his people – to divorce them.

If God were to talk about his relationship with you, as it is, right now, what would he say? Is it perhaps possible, that God might want to say to you what he was trying to say to Israel: “Come back, it’s better that way?”

For a moment today, I am going to be a teacher! By that I mean that, for the next bit of this talk, I am going to teach about the text! There’s lots in it, and I’m going to give an overview of what I think its saying.

Then, I'm going to be a pastor! That's not a word I use lightly or easily – I am not comfortable with that as a way of talking about myself, but I am going to speak in a different kind of way, and I hope with a pastor's heart, out of the text I will teach.

So, now, for a moment this morning, I am a teacher.

Hosea 6 v 1-3

Israel Unrepentant

6 "Come, let us return to the LORD.

He has torn us to pieces

but he will heal us;

he has injured us

but he will bind up our wounds.

² After two days he will revive us;

on the third day he will restore us,

that we may live in his presence.

³ Let us acknowledge the LORD;

let us press on to acknowledge him.

As surely as the sun rises,

he will appear;

he will come to us like the winter rains,

like the spring rains that water the earth.

Wait! After all I've already said by way of introduction, this looks really positive. The people of Israel have heard God's case and have decided that they will come back to him and return to his ways. They have decided to repent. On the surface at least, it looks encouraging.

It appears that the people have seen the marriage of Hosea and Gomer and been listening to what God is trying to tell them. It seems that, finally, through God's creative communication, his people have heard his words of love. It looks as though the people have realised they have drifted from following God, that they have been living their own way, but that they are ready to change their ways. It looks as if the people have looked at Hosea and Gomer and it has touched their hearts, and their hearts are turning to God once more.

Sadly, their repentance is not real. Sadly, their hearts are still hard and not fully turned towards God. They expect, that if they say the words, revival will come in two to three days. They think restoration in Israel will come as quickly

as the next sunrise. They think that this is a quick fix, and a quick fix is what they want; they want their fortunes restored!

Sadly, tragically, they have not really changed at all. The rest of chapter 6 & 7 is God calling out their sham repentance and finding different ways to describe what they are really like.

I am not going to read all of the text, but I will point to the ways God describes his people. Perhaps you could read it all later, if you haven't already read it before coming here this morning.

God describes the people in the following ways:

6 v 4	they are like the morning mist
7 v 4	they are like an overheated oven
7 v 8	they are Like a half-baked loaf
7 v 9	they are like a deluded old man
7 v 11	they are like a senseless bird
7 v 14	they are like a pre-occupied prayer
7 v 16	they are like a faulty bow

It makes for challenging reading. The people feign repentance, and God calls them out. What would God say about you?

The people say they want to come back to God, but God says they do so like the morning mist (6v4). The picture is one of those who are not really sincere and there's no lasting effect. The point about the morning mist is that when the sun comes up the mist disappears – it simply doesn't last. The people say they will change – but it simply doesn't last. What would God say about you?

The image of an overheated oven, which runs from 6v7 to 7v7, describes the nature of their hearts. It recounts how sin has affected the nation and how evil has found its way into how they act. Verses 5 -7 tells the story of the assassination of a king. God says they devour their rulers. Actually, there had been lots of assassinations of kings in Israel – each king assassinated by the one who followed. If you want to you can read about all this in 2 Kings 15 – it records it all! God says that none of the kings or rulers ever called on him for help or guidance or anything. They became consumed in their sin – they simply went on repeating it.

The fire of the hot oven didn't need much stoking – it simply continued to burn, and sin continued to burn in their hearts. What would God say about you?

They are like a half-baked loaf (7 v 8), a cake in an oven at that time that was not turned over, cooked on one side, but not the other. It is neither one thing or another. God is describing the nation of Israel: it is not a pagan nation, but neither is it a holy nation. Tragically, it is neither one thing nor the other. What would God say about you?

The people are like a deluded old man (7v9-10). My mum would sometimes say to me: "Ian, act your age!" Perhaps today we are obsessed with trying to look younger than we are. Perhaps too, we sometimes want to act younger than we are – as if we could stop getting older! Israel is not mature – it has lost its power of the days of king David and king Solomon. At the time of Hosea, it has enjoyed a long period of prosperity, but it has over-reached. Israel should stop pretending she can do things she once could and face the truth about the future. It was God who helped her in the past, but she will not return to him – and things are not going to go well for her. What would God say about you?

Israel is like a senseless bird (7v11-13). Israel is like a bird that simply never settles. She makes alliances with other nations rather than looking to God, but the act of judgement is coming! Who do you look to for your help? What would God say about you?

Prayer is a good thing, isn't it? But a pre-occupied prayer is one of self-pity rather than crying out to God. The people of Israel are prone to moan to God about how things are, rather than cry out to him from the heart (7v14). What they are really interested in is what God might give them. What would God say about you?

The people are like a faulty bow (7 v15-16). God had always protected his people when they turned to him for help. The people are trained by God, but now they use their skills against him. They look for help but they miss the mark because they don't look to him for help. They say they repent, but they don't really mean it. God is their help, protection, security, joy, salvation... but the people look in a different direction. What would God say about you?

It's not much fun being the teacher! Except it's the teacher's job to point you towards God. So... how are you doing?

Perhaps a better, more challenging question is: How is your heart?

Now, with all my human failings and limitations, I'm going to be your pastor.

Friends, in case you've missed it or haven't realised it yet, the whole point of the book of Hosea is to point you to the God who loves without limit. It is a book that tells the story of just how desperate God is to tell you of his love for you. It is a book that tells of how God hurts when those he loves choose to walk away from him.

It is a book that speaks, shouts, of his desire for you to come back to him, because it really is better that way. Perhaps it is a book that echoes God's words to each one of us: "You have no idea of just how much I love you!"

Sometimes we need to hear the truth about ourselves. Maybe that's what's happening here today, in these moments. Maybe God is speaking truth about us, into our hearts. Maybe, in one of the ways God describes Israel, we have recognised ourselves: the morning mist; an overheated oven; a half-baked loaf; a deluded old man; a senseless bird; a pre-occupied prayer; a faulty bow.

And maybe, in truth, we know we have not been following God with our whole heart. And, friends, fellow followers of God, this is really about your heart and mine. So, how is your heart?

Friends, this is the time to be honest: honest with yourself and with God. How is your heart?

In chapter 6 v 6, God cuts to the core, and addresses this truth: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God, rather than burnt offerings."

God is not interested in the act you can put on to fool other people. God is not impressed when you preach, lead worship, play in the band, serve in CYM, help in the Rainbow Lounge, are part of the SPOT team ministry, or Women's Ministry, serve in Easter Team, or CAP or Lighthouse. His head is not turned if you give lots of money to the poor, spend time with vulnerable people, or give your time as a volunteer.

It's not that those things are wrong or bad, but it's not really about what you do, because, truth is, whatever you do can be a sham. What matters is the heart from which it all comes. And what's in your heart is what matters because it's your heart that's precious to God.

Israel was doing lots of the right things, things that looked good and appeared to be what God wanted for them, but their hearts were not turned to God.

Maybe as you worship today, you do the right things but not from your heart. Maybe as you worship today you hold sin in your heart that you don't want to give up. Maybe as you worship today, you are neither one thing or the other, neither hot nor cold in your relationship with God. Maybe as you worship today, you are really pretending about your relationship with God. Maybe as you worship today, you are looking to other places for your help rather than God. Maybe as you worship today, you have stopped following God in the way you once did and you follow other things. And God wants to say to you today, now, in these moments: "Come back, it's better that way!"

I love you, I have always loved you, I will always love you. I am waiting to love. I long to love you.

So, friends, how's your heart?

Preached and Live Streamed in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 19th
February 2023, by Rev. Ian Phillips.