

LOVE WITHOUT LIMIT

What kind of soil?

Many books have been written about suffering. One of the big questions people have when thinking about God is: What about all the suffering? We understand that because, in truth, we all want to avoid suffering. A good friend of mine once said to me: “Ilan, the problem with most Christians, is that they don’t have a good theology of suffering.” We tend to think, or believe, or certainly want to believe, that if you follow God closely, we will not experience suffering. Suffering is often a threat to faith. Why is it, that when things get tough, really tough, people stop coming to church? It is true that suffering can draw us away from following God.

We tend not to talk so much about prosperity. Perhaps that’s because, unlike suffering, we understand prosperity to be a sign of God’s blessing. But, perhaps it is also true, that, just like suffering, prosperity can draw us away from following God. And maybe this is an old truth, one many generations of the people of God have wrestled with.

When God chose Abraham, he promised him a great nation in a land of their own. It was a land flowing with milk and honey – that’s just a way of saying it would be a great land to live in. God rescued his people from the oppression of Egypt, and, though it took a lot longer than he’d planned, brought them to the edge of the Promised Land. As they stand on the edge of the Promised Land, God has some things he wants to say to the people.

We can read what he says in the book of Deuteronomy. In chapter 8 of Deuteronomy, God says this to the people he loves:

⁶ Observe the commands of the LORD your God, walking in obedience to him and revering him. ⁷ For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; ⁸ a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; ⁹ a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.

¹⁰ When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. ¹¹ Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. ¹² Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. (Deuteronomy 8 v 6-14)

Moses, on behalf of God, reminds the people not to forget about God when they are prosperous. This is how he concludes what he wants to say:

¹⁷ You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” ¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today. (Deuteronomy 8 v 17-18)

Prosperity is a gift from God and the people would do well to remember that...lest they are drawn away from following him.

By the time we get to the book of Hosea, the people are facing the very challenge Moses was talking about all those years ago: the real challenge that prosperity can draw the people away from following God.

Once there was a guy who lived in a lovely suburb of London. He was a busy guy who worked hard; he regularly worked a 14 hour day. Working at weekends was fine too if that's what was needed. He attained his professional qualifications, his MBA. He joined lots of organisations related to his field of work to make sure he was connected in all the right ways. He was keen to learn and better himself professionally so he read widely. When he was not actually at work, his mind was often there, thinking over ideas and challenges. His wife often tried to point out how much time he was at work, they were not as close as they had been at one time. But, it seemed to her at least, he was drifting away. He, of course had never intended to drift anywhere – it had just sort of happened without him really noticing. She wanted time with him, but that seemed the one thing he didn't have to give.

His children missed him too, a fact he was vaguely aware of. From time to time they would complain they never saw him, or they would ask if he was going to

be 'in' tonight? He used to read to them, but that was a long time ago no; mostly though they'd given up complaining realising that life wasn't going to be different. He would say "things will be different," "it won't be long," "as soon as everything becomes steady, then I'll have more time." He had convinced himself he was doing all this for his family anyway. Sadly, this was not true, he'd have lived like this anyway! His family desperately wanted him to make a change, but nobody loved him enough to tell him the truth.

He knew he had some problems with his body, there were things that were not right. His doctor warned him about his blood pressure and his high cholesterol, his diet and his lifestyle. So, he stopped seeing his doctor! He knew his life was out of balance. His wife wanted him to go to church, but Sunday was his time, all the rest was work. Any way you can be a Christian without being part of a church, he told himself.

Then one day his boss told him the company had the opportunity of a lifetime; the market was booming and if they got in now it would set them up to be a major player. It would need major changes in the company but it would set them up for life if they could pull it off. The challenge was, he would be the one to manage the company through the change! And with updated technology they would become a 24/7 outfit, this would be his life! It was the opportunity of a lifetime! He told his wife what it would mean for them – they'd be set up for life, they would be able to relax and have no worries. They would even be able to go on that holiday she had wanted for ages!

His wife had heard this kind of thing before and went to bed. He sat in front of his computer, figuring it all out! The plans, the company, the future, the security! There was only one thing he had missed and of which he was completely unaware. One of his arteries had become hard and blocked, and while he sat making his plans for the future, his body told a different story. His wife woke at 3am and wondered where he was. She found him asleep in front of his computer.... except she could not wake him up. When the paramedics arrived, they told her he'd been dead for a few hours.

The business world gave him a good write up, said he was a good guy, a clever guy. They turned out in force at his funeral and someone said, "I wonder how much he left?" His company put a plaque on the head office wall in memory of him; he was talked of as a man of principles who would never cheat anyone. On his headstone were the words: "A successful life."

God looked down, read the words and said: "You fool, this night your soul is required of you."

How much did he leave? The answer is always the same: everything, everybody always leaves everything!

God says: 'You fool!' that may seem a harsh thing to say. God doesn't say this man was wicked or evil, just that he was a fool. The man didn't deliberately set out to neglect his wife and children; he didn't set out to be greedy and self-preoccupied; he didn't purposefully set out to defy God, he just got busy, and prosperous. He simply set his heart on the wrong things.

You probably recognise this as a story Jesus told. You can read the story in Luke 12 v 13-21. Jesus ends his story this way: 'This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves, but is not rich toward God.' (Luke 12 v 21)

How are you doing, friends?

When God speaks through Moses, many years before Jesus tells this story, he ends it this way:

¹⁹ If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. ²⁰ Like the nations the LORD destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the LORD your God.
(Deuteronomy 8 v 19-20)

Sounds a bit harsh, doesn't it? God appears to be saying that if the people are prosperous but forget who gave them their prosperity, he will destroy them. Well, that might be one way we could interpret what God is saying through Moses, and through Jesus centuries later. But there is something we would do well to remember.

God loves his people. God chose his people. God made his people into a nation, a small, ragtag group of people into a nation. God's desire for them is that they live well, that they reach their God given potential. God wants them to be a demonstration of the best way to live – he wants other nations to see the way his people live and choose to live that way too. God is for his people, absolutely 100% for his people. God wants to protect them from everything that will, in fact, make their lives more difficult. God knows and understands

that prosperity might get in the way of their relationship with him, and draw them towards all sorts of things that will only turn out bad for them.

A better way to understand what God is saying through Moses and Jesus is simply this: be rich towards God. The best way to live is to be rich towards God and not let riches draw you away from God.

As the people of Israel stand on the edge of the Promised Land: “make sure you don’t get distracted by all the good things God will give you. If you do that things will become difficult. Focus on the most important thing – be rich toward God. If you can do that you can live well in the land and know God’s presence.”

So, maybe you’re wondering what all this has got to do with Hosea. Well, that’s exactly what’s happened in Israel. The people of Israel, as we learnt, have enjoyed a time of peace and prosperity. But as we also know, they have been drawn away from following God.

They have done what Moses urged them not to do as they stood on the edge of the Promised Land: they have forgotten about God. And, as we are, I hope, beginning to understand, God is now pointing out to the people what will happen if they go on in the way they are. The way Israel are living is captured in the marriage of Hosea and Gomer: they are unfaithful in their commitment to God, and they are falling for the seduction of wealth and other Gods. They are not being rich towards God.

10 Israel was a spreading vine;
he brought forth fruit for himself.

As his fruit increased,
he built more altars;
as his land prospered,
he adorned his sacred stones.

²Their heart is deceitful,
and now they must bear their guilt.

The LORD will demolish their altars
and destroy their sacred stones. (Hosea 10 v 1-2)

God blessed Israel with wealth, but instead of thanking God for it the people built altars to other gods. Their hearts became hard toward God. Hosea literally says their hearts are divided – they have become distracted by

everything around them. It's got to the point where only something catastrophic will jolt them enough for them to see what's really happening. God wants to bless them, but their hearts are hard and they simply can't receive what God wants to give.

Verse 3-5 reminds us that the people have continually resisted God's call to come back to him, to repent. They've had so many kings, (19 in 20 years) yet they don't see this as a consequence of ignoring God. They now laugh about their need for a king.

God wants them to look to Jerusalem again, but they set up their alternative places of worship. There's a breakdown in community, lying politicians, bitter litigation, and even the idols to which they've turned can't deliver on their promises. And still the people choose to ignore God's invitation and they're way too distracted by all the things around them.

Verse 5-11 speak of the impending evil that will come if they continue in their ways. The tragedy is that the hearts of the people will never become soft enough to listen to God unless they experience the trauma of exile. It will take losing their idols and the death of their kings if they are ever going to return to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem as devoted followers of their true God.

But the truth is this: it didn't have to be that way! The people had forgotten about God. The people had forgotten about the things that God had done for them. The people had forgotten how God had chosen them, formed them, rescued them, provided for them, bought them into a land flowing with milk and honey, made them prosperous. They had forgotten how he loved them and longed for them to reach their full redemptive potential.

They had forgotten what Moses had said to them as they stood on the edge of the Promised Land. They had forgotten that God was reaching out to Moses and longing for them to come back to him, because, quite simply, it would be better that way.

And God says to them: "Sow righteousness for yourselves, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unploughed ground, for it is time to seek the Lord, until he comes and showers his righteousness on you." (10v 12)

It doesn't have to be this way. Hard hearts, divided hearts was a problem for the people of Israel. It didn't have to be that way.

How's your heart, friends?

Hard hearts, divided hearts is still a problem for the people of God. We may not choose to drift away from God, but we, like the people of Israel, like the fool in the story Jesus told, are quite capable of being drawn away from God. And just as suffering can draw us away from God, so too can a life of prosperity, when things are good and life seems to be going well for us.

But the question remains: How is your Heart?

Jesus told a story about a sower some of whose seed fell on hard soil (Luke 8 v 1-15). The seed was lost and got eaten by the birds. The soil simply couldn't receive what the sower wanted to give. Perhaps, in truth, the soil of our heart is hard. Perhaps, in truth, we have got to the place where our heart cannot receive what God wants to give.

How's your heart?

God invites the people to plough up the hard soil of their hearts so they can know him again.

Maybe, this morning, God is inviting you to do the same. Maybe, some place in your heart has grown hard towards God. Maybe, some place in your heart has grown hard towards God so that you can no longer listen to him. Maybe this morning God is inviting you to bring the hard place in your heart to him. Maybe this morning, it is time to seek the Lord. And, just as he was for Israel, God is waiting to rain down his mercy, forgiveness and grace into your heart and mine.

How's your heart?

God has given the people a choice: blessing or curse, you decide. We know what they chose. Now its our turn and we get to choose.

This story is not a parallel of the marriage of Hosea and Gomer. It is not a direct parallel to the story of God and his people. But it is a story of a hard heart changing in a marriage, and it is a story about ploughing up the hard part of a heart. And it is a story about turning a heart again to the one we love.

Maybe it's a story that speaks to our hearts today, that maybe we can be rich towards God.

I made a vow to myself on the drive down to the vacation beach cottage. For two weeks I would try to be a loving husband and father. Totally loving. No ifs, ands, or buts. The idea had come to me as I listened to a commentator on my

car's tape player. He was quoting a biblical passage about husbands being thoughtful of their wives. Then he went on to say, "Love is an act of the will. A person can choose to love." To myself, I had to admit that I had been a selfish husband – that our love had been dulled by my own insensitivity. In petty ways, really chiding Evelyn for her tardiness; insisting on the TV channel I wanted to watch; throwing our day-old newspapers out before Evelyn had a chance to read them. Well, for two weeks all that would change.

And it did. Right from the moment I kissed Evelyn at the door and said, "That new yellow sweater looks great on you," "Oh, Tom, you noticed," she said, surprised and pleased. And maybe a little shocked. After the long drive, I wanted to sit and read. Evelyn suggested a walk on the beach. I started to refuse, but then I thought, Evelyn's been alone here with the kids all week and now she wants to be alone with me. We walked on the beach while the children flew their kites.

So it went. Two weeks of not calling the Wall Street investment firm where I am a director; a visit to the shell museum, though I usually hate museums; holding my tongue while Evelyn's getting ready made us late for a dinner date. Relaxed and happy, that's how the whole vacation passed. I made a new vow to keep on remembering to choose love.

There was one thing that went wrong with my experiment, however. On the last night at our cottage, preparing for bed, Evelyn stared at me with the saddest expression. "What's the matter?" I asked her. "Tom," she said in a voice filled with distress, "do you know something I don't?"

"What do you mean?" "Well.... that check-up I had several weeks ago..... our doctor..... did he tell you something about me? Tom, you've been so good to me..... am I dying?"

It took a moment for it all to sink in. Then I burst out laughing. "No, honey" I said, wrapping her in my arms, "you are not dying; I'm just starting to live!"¹

So, friends, how's your heart?

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¹ Swindoll, C, "Job: A Man of Heroic Endurance!" Thomas Nelson 2004 pages 279-280