

Love without Limit

WELCOME HOME

You could call it the Miracle on West 65th Street. According to the Houston Chronicle, it happened at that address, in New York's Lincoln Centre, during a violin concerto.

The concert hall was bustling with warm, pre-performance hubbub before the announcer spoke. 'Ladies and gentlemen, kindly take your seats now; this evening's performance will begin in two minutes.' People glanced at tickets and hurried to find their rows. They edged their way down the narrow lines of seats to find, at last, their allotted places. 'Excuse me. Thank you. You're welcome. Is this my seat?'

Miracles often come without warning or fanfare, and this time was no exception. There was no hint that they were all on the threshold of an experience that they would never forget, a moment to celebrate decades later.

The purposeful din of the orchestra's tuning faded and the lights dimmed, hushing a thousand conversations. The audience was eager for the concert to begin, ready to savour the talents of Itzhak Perlman, arguably the world's greatest violinist. Perlman is usually the last person to take his place on stage, for though his fingers are staggeringly nimble, his legs don't work nearly as well. He was struck with polio when he was just twelve, and now he struggled across the huge platform to take his seat, his stumbling, ungainly walk aided by crutches and leg braces.

At last, he sat down, removed both braces from his legs, and placed his violin beneath his chin. He was ready – and in more ways than one. Perlman's brilliance is no fluke. He practices for nine hours daily. And for forty-five minutes before every concert, he is alone in his dressing room, with two security guards at the locked door. They have explicit instructions to let no one in under any circumstances. Mr Perlman has finished practising. Now he is praying. Do not disturb.

And pray he must. The concerto is considered one of the most important and difficult works in the violin repertoire. Its technical demands on the soloist are huge. Brahms' Violin Concerto in D Major is simply "unplayable" according to

one virtuoso. That miracle night, Perlman was set to perform this extraordinary challenging piece that would last over six minutes.

A few seconds into the solo, the sound of a string breaking on Perlman's violin ricocheted around the hall. The unwelcome twang was an uncouth intruder among a myriad of perfect notes. The orchestra immediately stopped playing, their music tapering off chaotically. The crowd gasped. Protocol permits a musician to call for a pause, allowing time for them to hurry off stage to replace the string. It's quite impossible to play a complicated violin concerto a string short.

Impossible, that is, unless your name is Perlman. With a wave he signals the orchestra to continue. And then the unthinkable happened. Instantaneously transposing the music for three strings instead of four, Perlman delivered the piece flawlessly, his dancing fingers producing sounds of unprecedented purity and passion. Six minutes later, spent and soaked in sweat, he lowered his violin. The crowd sat in stunned silence for eight seconds. And then they rose as one to their feet, a wall of wild cheering and thunderous applause. The orchestra joined in, banging their instruments in homage and shouting themselves hoarse. Perlman called for a microphone, motioned for silence, and then the man with two busted legs and one busted string spoke:

"All my life, it has been my mission to make music from that which remains." His brilliance was expressed through something broken. The shattered string, which could have stopped the music, only served to accentuate Perlman's staggering talent. Greater glory came because the melody-maker used a temporarily useless instrument.¹

At the beginning of 2023, I read that story. It came at the end of the talk that was an introduction to the series we've followed in Hosea. The challenge of that talk was basically this: the human heart has its limit, but the heart of God has no limit. It was a talk that articulated the truth that, both physically and in its capacity to love, in the end, however hard we try to make it otherwise, the human heart fails. It articulated the truth that we might describe someone as having a kind heart, or a generous heart, or being open hearted or having a

1. ¹ Quoted in: Lucas, Geoff: "Creating a Prodigal Friendly Church," Zondervan 2008 p. 11-13

heart of gold, but that no-one has a heart that is all of those things – because the human heart has its limit.

That talk articulated that however resilient a human heart might be, whatever stress it may be able to endure, through whatever circumstances it may continue to beat, the human heart simply cannot, and does not, go on forever.

It was a talk that articulated that, in the end, the human heart has its limit.

It was a talk that, but for one deep and profound truth, would have been an entirely depressing talk.

It was a talk that spoke of the deep and profound truth that there is another heart that never stops beating. The deep and profound truth that there is a heart that can, and does, endure all things, always and forever. The deep and profound truth that there is a heart which loves without limit. And it was a talk that reminded us that the deep and profound truth about God's heart changes everything.

And the point of that talk, the whole reason for me speaking it to you, was to invite you to live in that deep and profound truth. The truth that, however much we choose to believe it or not, our human heart is limited, but that we can live in the great and magnificent love of God, that, quite simply, is the bigger and better story, because God's love has no limit.

At the end of that talk I read the story I have just read again this morning – the story about a great violinist playing an unplayable violin concerto on only three strings. The story of a great violinist playing stunning music on a temporarily useless instrument.

And here's my question: How are you doing? How are you doing living in the bigger and better story of God's unparalleled brilliance?

That talk at the beginning of 2023 was a kind of introduction to our series through Hosea. It is true that you can always push an analogy too far, or make too much from a story, but it does seem to me that the story of Itzhak Perlman and his virtuoso playing on a broken violin, has at least some similarity to the story told in Hosea, and especially when you get to the end of the book.

As you will remember, the book of Hosea begins with the remarkable story of Hosea's marriage to Gomer. God asks Hosea to marry the prostitute Gomer as a living illustration of the relationship between God and his people, Israel. Hosea is asked to be faithful to Gomer, to his marriage vows and his

commitment to his wife. He is asked to be faithful to Gomer whatever she does. He and Gomer have three children, two of whom are most likely not Hosea's, and yet he is told by God to take Gomer back as his wife and to love her again.

It is a living demonstration of the story of God and his people, who have consistently rebelled and turned to other gods. Gomer, it turns out, is unfaithful in her relationship with Hosea, yet she is welcomed back into her marriage with Hosea.

Because we are observers, and because we have the story to read many, many years after the fact, we know about the story of how Hosea and Gomer reflect the story of God and his people. We have read about how the people of God turn away from following him in Hosea, we have read how the people turn away from worshipping God, the one who heart is for them, and turn to other gods. We have read how the hearts of the people have turned away from God and turned towards idols. We have read of the emptiness of their repentances – that they say they have changed, but in their hearts, they have not turned again to God.

We have read about all the ways God describes the fickleness of the people: that the changes they say they've made simply don't last; that they keep repeating the same sins; that they are neither a holy people or a pagan people; that they are not mature in their faith; that they are always looking somewhere else for their help; that they are only interested in what God can give them – that they look to the wrong things for their security and protection.

We have read about God's many appeals to his people to come back to him because, quite simply, it's better that way. We have read of God's clear message about the future: if you go on like this the future for you is not good.

We have, I hope, been challenged by reading Hosea together. We have, I hope, been challenged as we've wrestled with how this ancient story applies to us today. We have, I hope, been challenged to reflect on how God's people in the past have been, and that speaks to us now, in our day, about how we might be. We have, I hope, heard about how we might describe Israel in the book of Hosea, as a broken people, a people who were not living as God hoped or intended. A people who were living more in the story of the limits of the

human heart, and less in the bigger and better story into which God was always inviting them to live.

And here's the truth, we too, are broken people.

Perhaps one way of thinking about that statement might be to ask this question: How far are we living fully in God's bigger and better story?

I know I'm broken. I have recently been listening to Podcasts about a mega church that became widely known, with many thousands of attendees, but after 15 years imploded and shut down, literally overnight. As I've listened to how that happened, and why that happened, I've found myself reflecting on how I am, as a follower of Christ, as a leader, as part of a church. And I have found myself, many times, reflecting on my brokenness, on the mistakes I've made in ministry, on the people I've hurt. I know I am broken.

How about you friends? How would you describe you?

After all we've read and all we've reflected on, here's how the book of Hosea ends.

Repentance to Bring Blessing

14 Return, Israel, to the LORD your God.

Your sins have been your downfall!

²Take words with you
and return to the LORD.

Say to him:

“Forgive all our sins
and receive us graciously,
that we may offer the fruit of our lips.

³Assyria cannot save us;
we will not mount warhorses.

We will never again say ‘Our gods’
to what our own hands have made,
for in you the fatherless find compassion.”

⁴“I will heal their waywardness
and love them freely,
for my anger has turned away from them.

⁵I will be like the dew to Israel;
he will blossom like a lily.

Like a cedar of Lebanon

he will send down his roots;
6 his young shoots will grow.
His splendour will be like an olive tree,
his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon.
7 People will dwell again in his shade;
they will flourish like the grain,
they will blossom like the vine—
Israel's fame will be like the wine of Lebanon.
8 Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols?
I will answer him and care for him.
I am like a flourishing juniper;
your fruitfulness comes from me.”
9 Who is wise? Let them realize these things.
Who is discerning? Let them understand.
The ways of the LORD are right;
the righteous walk in them,
but the rebellious stumble in them. (Hosea 14 v 1-9)

The worst has happened! These words of Hosea were probably written after Israel went into exile – or if not, during the fall of Samaria – the end of the battle for Israel. The point here is important: all that God has said would happen if the people went on in the way they were going, has happened. And tragically, this signifies the end of the nation of Israel.

And historically, it has been that way ever since. Until 1948 there was no nation or state of Israel. Some people choose to understand the modern state of Israel, created in 1948, as fulfilment of Old Testament Biblical prophecy. There are different views on that – it's a whole other subject, but I'm not one who would hold to that view of the current, modern state of Israel.

At the end of Hosea though, the nation of Israel goes into exile and is a nation no more. After everything we've read and reflected upon, you might think that the first words of Hosea in chapter 14, as God speaks to his people in exile might be: "I told you so!" But that is not what we read. The first words of Hosea in chapter 14, to the people of Israel in exile are: "Return, Israel, to the Lord your God."

Because God is love, he lets the people choose: blessing or curse. But even when the people choose the road to exile, God's love remains. God never wanted the people to go to exile, he never wanted his people to walk that

road. But in love, the love without limit, he gives them the freedom to choose. The people's hearts become hard toward God, and they chose the path to exile.

Jesus tells a story about this. A son chooses to take his inheritance and leave his father and family for a better life. And the loving father lets him go. It doesn't turn out well for the son and he decides to go back to his father. His father could have said: "I told you so! Now you can live with your mess there's no place here for you!" We know that story well – we call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and we know because we've read it many times, that that is not how the story ends. And it's not how Hosea ends either.

You know why neither story ends with: "I told you so!" Because these stories, one real, one a parable, speak of the love of God that has no limit. With all his heart, God's greatest desire, is that the people of Israel, even when in exile, come to live in his great love. With all his heart, God's greatest desire, is that the people of Israel, even when in exile, come to live in the bigger and far better story of God's heart for them.

The people of Israel have got themselves into one huge mess, but God reaches out to them and says: "Return to me. Come back – it's ok – you can come back." In the story Jesus told, the father ran to his son and kissed him – even when he was still a long way off, and broken.

Friends, there is an invitation, an old and ancient invitation, spoken to the people through Hosea, spoken by Jesus, that is being spoken here today to you. It is the invitation to return to the Lord, to come back to him.

Some of us here today know we are broken.

Some of us know that deep in our hearts there is sin – the stuff that keeps us away from God. We may have carried it for years: a habit we can't or don't want to break; an attitude we hold onto; a resentment we will not let go; a hurt that's never been healed; a disappointment that affects how we live; regret for something we did or was done to us. We may have drifted from the relationship we once had with God – not a deliberate choice, but life and circumstances and choices have left us feeling disillusioned with faith. We may be living in the consequences of tragedy that has caused us to question everything we once thought we knew about life and God, and following God.

Perhaps, like me, you've been reflecting on the kind of person you are, or have been, and you're realising there are some things that are not good in you.

Perhaps you've never come to God and asked for his help.

However we come to this service today, the invitation is open to all of us.

What will you do with God's invitation to you this morning?

Hosea ends with a wonderful invitation, and a wonderful promise. God's invitation to Israel to return, comes with the promise of fruitfulness as their hearts turn toward God once more. God says, as they come back to him, he will be like the morning dew that makes them blossom. He will become like underground rivers that cause them to grow tall like the Cedars of Lebanon. He will make them as splendid as an Olive tree, as fertile as a field of corn and as sought after as the vines that make the famous wines of Lebanon. The people are broken but God's desire is for them to flourish. Israel is in exile because they ignored God's words to them through Hosea. But God, in his love without limit, extends an invitation: 'Come back, it's better that way!'

One day a group of people gathered in a shop for the sale of some antiques. The auctioneer brought out an old, dusty violin. He told the audience that it was a rare Stradivarius and that it was worth a great deal of money. No-one, however, was impressed; only one bid for five pounds was offered. Meanwhile a man had entered the shop from the street. He was very tall and thin, and wore a velvet coat. He walked to the front of the shop, picked up the violin, and dusted it. He then held it to his ear and reached for the bow, as he did so, a murmur went around the room, 'Paganini'. For the next few minutes, the great musician held everyone spellbound with the most exquisite virtuoso's performance. Then he stopped. As he did so, the people started clamouring for the violin: fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety pounds. Eventually the violin was sold to Paganini himself for one hundred pounds, and that evening he held a vast audience of thousands in rapt attention as he played the dirty, dusty violin once again.²

So, what will it be friends? Could it be the start of something new and beautiful?

² Quoted in: Stibbe, M., *"Know Your Spiritual Gifts,"* Zondervan 2004 ed. page 1

Preached and Live Streamed in Crawley Baptist Church, by Rev Ian Phillips on
Sunday 23rd April 2023.