

Fatal Attraction or Enduring Love?

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[0 : 0 0] Well, please be seated. I encourage you to open the Bibles in the pews to the book of Hosea. That's page 730 in the English Pew Bibles, page 730.

And as Fiona said earlier, we're beginning today a series of sermons, six sermons in total from the Old Testament prophet Hosea. They say that it's the people who you love the most who can hurt you the most.

And that's certainly true. The closer we are to people, the more vulnerable we are to being hurt by them. And nowhere is that more the case than within marriage.

Many of you have experienced and many of us have seen where a marriage has broken down and the deep, deep pain that comes from betrayal or rejection.

Many of us have seen the anger where love has not been reciprocated or it's broken down in some way. Well, today we're looking at part of the Bible that maybe many of you have never read.

[1 : 0 7] It may be a part that many of us regard as obscure and strange. And certainly this opening chapter in particular is odd, somewhat peculiar in some ways.

And yet, through it all, it directs us to the very heart of God. And we find in the heart of God a heart that is loving and yet pained by the rejection that it receives.

It may be that you don't think of God like that. It may be that you don't think of God as being pained in His heart, a God who is loving and actually concerned.

It may be that you think God is rather unemotional, a sort of beyond borg of heaven or something like that. Well, let me address you particularly today if you're in that situation.

Let me urge you and all of us to open our eyes to a God who loves deeply and yet therefore is pained deeply because it's those whom we love who can hurt us the most.

[2 : 1 4] We know very little of this man called Hosea. Hosea, about all we know really is, to begin with, is that his father's name was Beery, but that probably does not mean he was an alcoholic.

It's just his Hebrew name, probably actually pronounced Beery, but anyway. But it reminds us that what matters most is not the man, but his message.

It's the words or the message of Hosea that matters, not the man himself. Although in this case, unusually for a prophet of the Old Testament, his message is embodied in some of the things he does and how his life is lived.

Some of the other prophets are a bit like that, Ezekiel for example, but Hosea in particular, it seems not only spoke a word or message from God, but actually had to live it out in rather painful ways as we'll see this week and the next few weeks as well.

The book begins, the word of the Lord that came to Hosea. It's about the word of the Lord, really. It's not about Hosea, although as I say, there is some autobiographical part of this book in the opening chapters about Hosea's life.

[3 : 28] Most of us know very little about the 8th century BC. In fact, some of us may know virtually nothing about the 8th century BC. It was actually a fascinating century and the list of kings that is mentioned here in the end of verse 1 may not register much on your radar in your knowledge of history.

Hosea was a prophet in the days of King Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam, son of Joash, king of Israel. Maybe many of those kings' names don't register.

Hezekiah is perhaps the best known of all of them. Two kingdoms and a number of kings. In fact, if the list were complete, it seems that Hosea is a prophet for about 30 years or so.

There would actually be more kings. The two kingdoms that are mentioned are Israel and Judah. Israel is a name we know well because it's used in the Bible to denote the people of God.

But in this period of history, in fact from 922 to 722, give or take a few months, Israel is a divided people.

[4 : 43] Israel is the northern part of the kingdom and in the south is Judah. And yet they all come descended from Abram. It was united under the kings David and Solomon.

But then when Solomon died, the kingdom divided into two. Hosea is a prophet mainly to the northern people, Israel, although there's quite a bit in his book of prophecy that relates also to the southern kingdom of Judah.

In the period of 30 years approximately, 750 to 722 roughly, in the northern kingdom of Israel, there were seven different kings, many of whom were assassinated.

Whenever you get that in politics, in the world, modern or ancient, you are dealing with a nation really struggling, getting weak, unstable, internally divided.

And that was certainly the case with Israel in the northern part of the people of God. Seven kings in that last 30 years and in 722, finally the nation was destroyed.

[5 : 48] In the south, Judah was more stable. Its kings were all descended from King David. None of those in the kingdom of Israel were descended from David. But Judah and Israel were small countries, really, in that period.

They would not have been invited to the G8 summit, for example. One nation that would have dominated it, though, in this period, was Assyria, no longer a nation today.

But Assyria, in those days, had its capital in various places, mainly Nineveh and Nimrud, both of which are ruined towns today in the country of Iraq, which is also another sort of story, of course.

Assyria was on the rise as a world power in the first part of this 8th century BC, the 700s, and by 750 or so was the dominant world power of the day.

And it was threatening to Israel and subsequently destroyed it. All of this might, you might think, well, it's a bit dull and dry and dusty and for some of us it is.

[6 : 57] But what the opening verse tells us is that God speaks into a particular historical situation. In this case, God is speaking in the middle of the 8th century BC at a time of particular kings in particular places.

God is like that. For many people, their conception of God is that He's a bit like the person who had a watch, He made the watch, He wound it up, He put it on a mantelpiece and let it tick.

But God's not like that. That's not Christian faith or the Christian God. God. That's what's called deism, a remote God. But the God of the Bible is involved.

He loves, He cares, He's intervening and He's involved in the creation and world that He's made. It's a God who is not indifferent but a God who is intensely interested in His world.

You see, Christian faith is not just about pithy sayings, so daily thoughts or pious platitudes. Christian faith is not about religious escapism, about getting out of this world and just sort of having nice thoughts and calm ideas.

[8 : 13] But rather what we find with the God of the Bible is that He earths Himself, He's involved and His people are involved in history. Actually, that makes God very relevant.

It's not that God is only speaking in the 7th, 8th century BC. But rather that His words then, His actions then, as indeed all the time, are earthed in history and therefore it's highly relevant to come to the Christian God.

Not to a remote God who is an escapist idea but rather to a God who's made and is involved in this world. God is personal, not remote.

He speaks, He is not silent. And therefore, I think because of His activity in this world illustrated now in just this verse, I think this is a God who commands our attention, a God who is worth knowing, a God indeed who is knowable and a God whose words we ought to hear.

So, what does He say? Well, actually, His first words are not to the people as a whole but in fact to Hosea, the prophet, before He addresses the people.

[9 : 26] And we must feel sorry for Hosea because what God speaks to him in these verses is a bit of a shock, quite a challenge. For many people who are Christians, they have a sequence of what they might call why me moments.

God, why are you sending me to Burma? God, why do you want me to teach Sunday school? God, why do you want me to do this or that? Surely somebody else, God.

Many times, God makes our lives a bit uncomfortable and that's what Hosea finds in this chapter. My guess is for all of us, our why me type moments are insignificant or small by contrast to what Hosea is commanded here in verse 2.

Go, take for yourself a wife of Horden and have children of Horden for the land commits great Horden by forsaking the Lord.

The word actually occurs four times in that passage, Horden, the land commits great Horden is using the word twice, it's actually four times in the verse, it's emphatic and unescapable.

[10 : 40] It's a word that jars, it's talking about a prostitute, a whore, an adulteress and that is the wife that Hosea is to take.

Some people say that the wife that Hosea takes is a nice lady but later on becomes a whore, an adulteress or a prostitute but actually the plainer sense of the language is that she's already one.

Some try to weaken what's said here and say well really it's speaking only at the spiritual level and his wife is worshipping other gods and that's the spiritual level but in fact again the plain sense of the word is she is a prostitute, a whore and Hosea is to choose her as his wife.

It's a ghastly command, something that should horrify us, maybe it even challenges our idea of God's morality. What's even more astonishing perhaps is that Hosea doesn't object.

When Ezekiel is asked to do awful things he objects but not Hosea. Verse 3 simply says he went and took Goma daughter of Diblaim and she conceived and bore him a son. What's going on here?

[11 : 58] The time when this happened, the beginning of Hosea's ministry, the nation was actually fairly wealthy, not politically strong and powerful particularly, small but wealthy.

Jeroboam II was at the end of his reign, a long reign, a prosperous reign but the people were confusing their physical luxuries and wealth and prosperity thinking that somehow this was God's blessing and that therefore they were right with God but actually underneath the surface their religious life was appalling.

There was widespread idolatry, worship of other gods, widespread abandonment of the God of Israel who had rescued them from Egypt, widespread immorality.

clothed and covered by a veneer of religious piety and devotion. The whore language, the prostitute language is used in various places of the Bible to indicate that somebody has turned away and rejected God and by flirting with, cavorting with and worshipping other gods and idols are actually spiritually prostituting themselves.

Well, desperate times require desperate measures and you need to know that in 750 or so when Hosea begins this ministry at the end of this long reign of Jeroboam, the nation is about to nosedive into oblivion.

[13 : 25] By 722, 30 years later, it is no more evil and the sequence of short reigns of kings, many of whom are assassinated, shows the crumbling nature of this little nation and they do not heed God's word.

They are at the end of their life, a life that began in idolatry when the first king Jeroboam set up golden calf idols in the north and south of this land for people to worship and they haven't turned from them in all that history.

And despite God's patience and love for them, time is running out in soon to end. This is the last chance.

Desperate times require desperate measures and Hosea's marriage which jars and shocks us is to be a mirror reflection on the nature of God's relationship to Israel because the people of Israel are thoroughly spiritual prostitutes turning to other gods and yet God had chosen to be in a relationship with them and that relationship is coming to an end.

The language of whoredom though directs us to two features of God that are in fact things that are attractive and good. God loves his people.

[14 : 51] That's the first thing. Not an indifferent remote God but God who loves deeply and is committed and faithful to his people who is pained by their sin and rejection.

If we are horrified that Hosea has to marry a prostitute then think of God who's chosen such a spiritually destitute people for his own people.

God has a heart. That's an attractive God. I don't want a heartless God but a God with a heart, a God who loves. But secondly building on that idea the love that God shows us and wants reciprocated by us is a committed, faithful, exclusive love.

The analogy is of a marriage, of a husband to a wife, rightly demanding a faithful, exclusive allegiance. That's what God asks of us and that's the sort of God that is attractive and appealing.

I don't want a God who is indifferent to my response to him. I don't want a God who thinks yeah it's okay to worship me one day but if you go after other eyes well that's alright come back when you're ready.

[16 : 00] I don't want a God like that. That is the devotion and demand of God is an attractive thing about God. He not only loves us and has a heart but he wants our exclusive allegiance and he demonstrates that by his own persistent faithfulness despite our unworthiness.

That's a commendable God. It's a shock that Hosea is to marry a prostitute but think of God and of his broken loving heart because of the sins of his people whom he's chosen, whom he's redeemed, whom he's stuck with through all their persistent sins to this day of Hosea.

I sometimes wonder about parents when they choose names for their children. School teachers are the worst.

They tell me because they've taught so many children that they can't think of a name that is universally good and so they make up names. So we keep finding in our society more and more completely made up names as though people are just pulling out Scrabble letters and saying, well, I'll call my son that, even if it has no vowels.

We have tiger lilies and sugar plum fairies and all this sort of stuff. I mean, bizarre names. And Christians, of course, are not immune from that.

[17 : 34] Christians like to pick biblical names. So in my sometimes perverse moments, which of course are very rare, I've tried a few times to suggest biblical names to parents who are expecting children.

One of my favourite names, I was working really hard a few years ago on a couple here who are having a child and in the end they named their son, they got the first two letters right, but then they balked and called their son Timothy.

The name I think, this is a challenge to any of you who are going to have children of course, Tiglath-Pilazah. What a great name, Tiglath-Pilazah. Tiki, that's alright.

Tiglath-Pilazah. In fact, somebody back in the 8th century thought it was such a good name that were at least three of them because the one who comes on the scene is Tiglath-Pilazah III. Well, I think it's a great name.

Sadly, Christians haven't yet to pick it. But what about Hosea? Hosea is told what to call his children. But it's not sort of Peter and Mary and Mark and, you know, nice, bland, easy names like that, Biri for example.

[18 : 44] The first one is Jezreel for a boy. Well, that's okay. Seems okay to us. Jezza, of course, he could fly high. But you see, the trouble is that when Hosea has to call his son Jezreel, it's like us calling our son Auschwitz, Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, Gallipoli, a place of a massacre.

The century before, a king and all his consorts and descendants were all wiped out in a bloody massacre. In a sense, that was God's justice on that person, but it's a place of blood, a place of a massacre and he's to call his son Jezreel.

The name is a prophecy. Verse 5 tells us that on that day, a day to come, I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel. And that happens.

In 733, the first defeat by Assyria over Israel, by my man Tiggy, Tiglath, pillars of the third, in the valley of Jezreel.

It's a warning, a prophecy in the name. Think what a clever ploy by God this is though. Every year at school, little Jezreel is asked, why are you called Jezreel?

[20 : 09] And every year and every family occasion and every time a new neighbour moves into the neighbourhood, why Jezreel? Well, that's because and out comes God's prophecy and warning yet again.

What a clever idea from God. He knows that these spiritually apostate people are hardly likely to have their spiritual devotions reading the book of Hosea every week. So he calls Hosea's children to keep his word alive as a warning to these terrible people who keep refusing to turn back to God.

Jezreel's younger sister fared little better. In fact, we might say even worse. Verse 6 tells us that Hosea's wife conceives again and bears a daughter. In fact, in verse 3 it said she bore him, Hosea, a son.

But now for the next two children it doesn't say bears him a son and some suggest that the absence of for him, for Hosea, shows her hoardom at work. She's become pregnant through other men perhaps.

We're not certain on that. And the daughter is given the name from the Lord, Lo-Ruhama. Well that's okay if you keep it in Hebrew because no one knows its meaning these days.

[21 : 21] But they knew then, no compassion. What a name to call your daughter, no compassion. Poor girl turning up first day at school, what's your name?

No compassion. Names of course often denoted something to do with character. No compassion. Again it's prophetic. God's compassion or mercy or pity on Israel which has been going on for decades and centuries even though they don't deserve it is coming to an end.

The nation's existence is soon to finish. No compassion. A warning again. Every time little girl has to explain her name the warning from God is repeated to the people of Israel.

Verse 7 tells us that Judah will keep receiving compassion, pity or mercy from God not because they deserve it. No they don't.

Their time's not yet up. 140 more years later they'll be destroyed by Babylon. But for now not. And certainly it seems in history in 722 the Israel kingdom of the north was destroyed.

[22 : 36] 20 years later Jerusalem was surrounded by a man with another great name that I wish someone had used for their child, Sennacherib. But at the last last point 701 BC failed and Jerusalem still stood.

God's pity or mercy did continue for a while with Judah but not for Israel. And then the youngest brother you can imagine him turning over in the womb thinking gosh what are they going to call me given my sister and brother's names.

Verse 8 when she had weaned no compassion no compassion this means at least three years later so clearly nothing has changed in that time Israel has not repented or turned.

She conceived and bore a son again we're not told explicitly who the father is and the Lord gives the name Lo-Ami it's okay in Hebrew again but it means now something even worse not my people not my people one of the great statements of God in the Bible is I will be your God and you will be my people and so they have been though they don't deserve it but it's coming to an end these are three warnings in three names that God's patience for his people is about to expire and Israel deaf to God's word and deaf to Hosea and his contemporary Amos spirals down to destruction poor Hosea imagine with a faithless wife and children's names like that but his suffering is a pale reflection on the suffering heart of God who loves a spiritually prostituted people you see all of this though it's shocking to us is telling us about God's love

God's love for his people a love which is sustained despite sin but a love that cannot be presumed upon to last forever we cannot simply assume that oh yes God's pity and God's compassion it'll just keep coming so my life I'll live it how I like not at all God's love brings him pain pain that climaxes in the death of his son on the cross for our sins Hosea is like a decree missy a final notice and in 722 the decree absolute came and the nation was destroyed who knows when that day will come for us when we are called to give account before God the day of the Lord's return the day when we're called to give an account to him some of us just presume that God is like a benign

[25 : 30] Santa Claus figure but his love is pure and holy that's even more commendable than being a Santa Claus figure I don't want a God who just ignores sin that's immoral but a God who is holy and yet loving holy and merciful that's the sort of character that commends itself the most and that's what God is like yes we can receive a love that we do not deserve a love that continues on despite our sin but nonetheless calls us to account and that's what we're finding here in Hosea there's no greater love indeed than the love of God for his people a sinful wayward destitute prostitute people and yet his love is faithful and holy and pure and attractive and lasting well the end of Israel when it comes within a generation of these words of Hosea is not the end of God's plans and purposes there's a remarkable turnaround in verse 10 but it's not

God withdrawing the problems it's God saying there is a future beyond the judgment that is coming in verse 10 he says the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea a reference back to promises to Abraham in the book of Genesis a promise that is finally fulfilled through the descendant of Abraham called Jesus and we see a picture of that in the final book of the Bible with a crowd that nobody can number around the throne of God indeed you or I are part of that number from all around the world today anticipating that final vision of heaven and then there is a change of name not that these children of Hosea have their names changed that God backs down but rather that it's not the final word there is still a word of grace beyond judgment so verse 10 continues in the place where it was said to them you are not my people it shall be said to them children of the living God and then at the end of verse 11 the last verse of chapter 1 looking to

Jezreel great shall be the day of Jezreel a reversal of fortune and verse 1 of chapter 2 say to your brother Ami my people not not my people but now my people to your sister now it's not no compassion but compassion that is mercy compassion being the people of God being reunified as the people of God is something beyond the judgment of Israel it's not the end of God's purpose he hasn't finally wiped his hands of people and we see through Jesus how he does that how a love that is pure is also a love that is merciful God's love for us means that we're reconciled and reunited to him through Jesus we're adopted as his children through Jesus we're brought under Jesus our head it says in verse 11 this uses the word head we receive his mercy we are his people because of Jesus his son God's deep deep love has enabled all of that a costly love a steadfast love an enduring and perfect love a love which in the end changes our prostituting hearts to be pure no human love matches that no other God so-called comes close so don't flirt with them don't prostitute with them but embrace embrace fully and faithfully the one true living God there is no no more reason we need really to turn back to God with sorrow repentance and faith to embrace his love a love that lasts for eternity a love that dies for me a love that is faithful despite my sin and the result of that is that though we fail

God and reject him and are like prostitutes spiritually on the final day we'll be clothed pure and holy as God's bride in heaven let me encourage you to embrace God his love for us now while we have time amen