

Chapter 1

Hosea - God Doesn't Give Up

“How can I give you up!” God exclaims in Hosea 11:8. This Old Testament gospel paints a vivid picture of a God who is unwilling to give up - who finds it next to impossible to let His children go.

Sometimes we find it easy to consign people to the consequences of their own rash deeds and foolish, soul-destroying notions - but not God. His tenacity in seeking to salvage those who have even given up on themselves is illustrated in a moving story we first read in the Youth's Instructor many years ago. The author, Peggy Hewlett, told about a pastor who knocked on the door of a rooming house in London, during an evangelistic series there, only to be greeted by a snarled “Why did you have to come tonight?”

“The pastor,” Peggy wrote, “was taken aback by this unexpected reception but managed to conceal his surprise with a proffered handshake and a smile, while he suggested that a later date might be more suitable for a visit.

“With no feeling of hospitality the youthful host threw open the door and snapped: ‘You might as well come in, now that you are here!’

“The caller stepped into surroundings that he would not soon forget. In spite of the cold night air, it seemed that the fireplace had not seen a fire for many a week. And in this great metropolis of London was a room where only three flickering candles gave their gloomy, uncertain light. The place was utterly bare except for necessary and badly battered pieces of furniture, and dirty blankets covered the old iron bed.

“Immediately the man rained a volley of curses down on everything and everybody, including his visitor. With an unearthly stare in his bloodshot eyes, he raged: ‘Why did you have to come? It will do no good! I am going to take my life tonight!’ With those tormenting words he threw a letter across

to the minister. On the page was written a message of farewell to the wife who had deserted him four years before. This poor distraught soul, a young man in the sunrise of adulthood, wanted nothing more than to die.

“With a constant prayer on his lips the minister tried to plead, argue, and explain; he met with nothing but denunciation and vile oaths. Finally he succeeded in exacting a promise from the desperate man. He would delay his rash deed for twenty-four hours - no more - and he reluctantly agreed to spend the night at the pastor’s home.

“On the train they boarded to get to the minister’s house they met a serviceman who launched into a story of a miserable drunkard whom his father had met. This disheveled and discouraged man was also bent on taking his own life. Then Jesus, the lover of all mankind, came into his heart, and a heavenly transformation took place. Now this derelict had pledged himself to the work of rescuing his fellowmen from drunkard dens in the city slums.

“As the Seventh-day Adventist minister and his unwilling companion took leave of the youth and stepped off the train, the minister queried: ‘Now do you think it was God or coincidence that prompted that boy to relate a story so similar to your own?’

” ‘It was coincidence; I don’t believe in God!’ roared the unhappy man.

“Although the hour was late and the pastor’s wife had retired, she was not perturbed to learn of the presence of the ungrateful visitor. She prepared a tasty and filling meal for the two men, and then the trio sat around the fireplace - at that moment the only sign of cheer in the entire room. There followed such sincere pleadings as are seldom heard, but the guest was adamant. Nothing could move him. His eyes blazed with hatred. His tongue lashed out words of fury.

“As the hands of the clock climbed wearily to the hour of 1:00 a.m., the consecrated young couple moved over to the organ and began to sing the old hymns that every Christian loves.

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“Their visitor sat hunched over the fire - unmoved, unyielding.

“The man and wife sang on - sang as they had rarely sung before, every word wrung out of a prayer. These were crucial hours; a life hung in the balance.

“Unexpectedly the man at the fireplace turned and said slowly: ‘I used to like a song once when I believed in that stuff. It was called “Face to Face.” ‘

“Prayerfully the singers turned to that particular piece and began to sing.

“The Spirit of God and old-time memories were too much for this lost and lonely child of the world. He crept up behind the singers, and in a faltering voice, so long stranger to words of praise, he joined in. There were hot tears brimming his eyes. Face to face in all His glory I shall see Him by and by!

“The singing stopped. No one could speak, but the erstwhile prodigal put out his hand and grasped tightly the hand of the young pastor in a clasp that spelled submission. Then followed such prayers of surrender and consecration as set all heaven rejoicing.

“Today this man is engaged in business for himself and is earning a respectable living. He had regained his self-respect and with steady steps is learning to walk as Jesus walked.”

God’s longing that all apostates return to Him and fully walk with Jesus is the underlying theme of the book of Hosea. But before we consider this in some detail, let’s find out more about the writer of the book.

Usually, most of what these so-called “minor prophets” have to say about themselves can be found in the first few verses of their books. However, even there we seldom find much information about the personal backgrounds of these prophets. They seem too engrossed with the message they have to give to tell us much about themselves.

Hosea does mention his father - a man named Beeri. Probably Hosea’s family were not important people as men recognize importance. The one thing that Hosea does explicitly tell us about is the length of time that he worked. He filled the

prophetic office over a long period - that of the kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, in Judah, probably beginning sometime toward the end of Uzziah's reign and running into the first part of the reign of King Hezekiah. During this entire period wicked King Jeroboam ruled in Israel.

Although we aren't given much detail about his background, Hosea does reveal some intimate facts concerning his personal and family life. He learned through bitter experience what it means for God to love us in spite of our unresponsiveness. Hosea knew what it was to sob his heart out while his unfaithful wife threw herself away on those far less deserving of her attention. Yet true love cannot be turned off like a spigot. Out of this trauma and heartbreak Hosea developed a capacity to plead with Israel. He implored them to wake up and sense the inevitable course and result of carelessness and iniquity and to realize how much God loves His erring backslidden children.

In Christianity Today some time ago, we came across an article entitled "Going, Going, Gone." Since we'll be discussing auctions in this chapter - seeing Gomer, Hosea's wife, placed on the auction block - we think a story about auctions is quite appropriate. This is what the writer described:

"When the daily paper arrives, my wife hastens to cut out the auction advertisements and burns them. Otherwise I would attend the auctions - all of them. I have a mania for them, no matter what's being sold.

"One hot summer afternoon I found myself standing for two hours in the blazing sun at a bicycle auction. Nothing else there - just bicycles. That has to be considered a strange use of time for someone whose storage shed already had four bikes.

"To justify my strange behavior I pointed out to my friends that auctions provide an interesting study in the values and tastes of bidders, as well as a glimpse into the lives of those who originally collected the junk - or treasure, as the case may be.

"I have pondered the generation gap while watching a Harley-Davidson motorcycle and a Queen Anne chair being

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auctioned as part of the same estate... . But the most interesting exercise at an auction is trying to deduce why people are willing to pay what they do for some of the stranger items. What inner longing is satisfied by the acquisition of an item that is totally useless and consummately ugly?

“At one sale the auctioneer held up an intricately contrived device incorporating two cogwheels, three prongs, a spring, and a lever arm. It was the kind of thing my teenager would call an ‘ob-golly.’ When the auctioneer called for a starting offer one cautious bidder asked, ‘What is it?’ The auctioneer examined the device with a puzzled look and replied, ‘I don’t know, but if you got another one this would make it a pair.’ Everyone laughed, but somebody bought it.

“At another sale I watched with fascination as two sixtyish women claimed their purchases - two well-shaped vases, garishly decorated with blue-green vines. They were aglow with their triumph in being the successful bidders on the twin monstrosities.

“I have observed perfectly sane people bidding more than the current retail price for items that had been badly used. Over and over again as I’ve attended auctions I’ve found myself saying, ‘They paid that for those?’ I’m sure some of those people later said the same thing to themselves.

“I wonder if some dweller in a far-off planet looks at God’s redemptive transaction on earth and thinks of His choices, ‘He paid that for those?’ But as someone long ago pointed out, ‘Everything is worth what its purchaser will pay for it.’ ” - “Going, Going, Gone.” *Christianity Today*, Oct. 8, 1971, p. 34.

Although it seems unbelievable, Christ paid far more for us than we appear to be worth. But on the other hand, perhaps we undervalue ourselves, because everything is worth what its purchaser will pay for it. We are worth a fantastic price to God.

One thing, however, we can understand in the amazed question “He paid that for those?” We can understand the “those.” When we really stop to take a look at ourselves in the light of what God has made possible for us to become, we begin to appreciate how hideous and heinous sin really is.

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In the Old Testament gospel of Hosea, we discover a greatly misunderstood Bible book. It often is not appreciated as it should be. Some are even embarrassed at the nature of this story. They find it hard to imagine that God actually would tell the prophet to marry the kind of woman we read about. Then, after she wasted her life and no one wanted her any more, God told Hosea to do another strange thing.

Gomer was being sold as a slave. But she was so worn out, so unattractive, that she was “on special.” She was being sold for half price. And Hosea was sent down to buy back his wife, which he did. But he didn’t take her home to be a slave. Instead he reinstated her as his wife, as the mother of their children, and as the queen of the household. This is probably the most beautiful illustration in the Bible of what God is willing to do for each of us.

Those of us who are Christians have taken marriage vows to Jesus Christ, haven’t we? That is actually what our baptismal vow is. Have we ever been unfaithful to those marriage vows? The Bible says, “All have sinned.” Romans 3:23. If we are honest with ourselves, we will have to admit that we have committed spiritual adultery time after time, yet God still loves us. He wants to buy us back. He wants to restore us to the full privileges of life with Him. Hosea learned through his bitter experience with Gomer just what it means for God to do this.

The first child born to Hosea and Gomer was a boy. God told Hosea to call the child Jezreel, which meant “God will scatter.” Later a little girl was born - probably not Hosea’s child - and her name was Loruhamah, which meant “no more pity.” Finally, another child was born who definitely was not Hosea’s child - Loammi, a little boy. His name meant “not my people.”

When Gomer had left home Hosea was left with the three children - two of them probably not his. He had to keep house and be mother and father, besides all his other work. Can you picture Hosea as the evening shadows fell, going out to call the children in? Their very names were a warning - a pleading with the people of Israel. As he called them, the neighbors could hear him shouting, “God Will Scatter, No More Pity, Not My

People.” You can be sure that passersby felt uncomfortable. When they realized that it was the prophet calling his children, they recognized that the names were a description of their own unfaithfulness to God.

The book of Hosea begins with three chapters which illustrate faithlessness. These chapters detail Gomer’s unfaithfulness and the prophet’s almost unexplainable love for his wife, climaxing with the record of Gomer’s return to Hosea and the anticipation of Israel’s return to God. In chapter 1 and 2, God’s promises, appeals, and warnings are recorded. The last beautiful section of the first division of this book is chapter 3. Here we discover God’s love in action.

Incidentally, we only can outline most of Hosea in skeleton form, with the anticipation that you will want to study it for yourself and that this outline will help you understand what this Old Testament gospel is all about.

The next division of Hosea (chapters 4 through 7) portrays how the prophet became a mouthpiece for the Lord, declaring in unequivocal language the sinfulness of the people and the tragic results that inevitably follow unfaithfulness.

Here we find God’s bill of particulars against His people. Interestingly, this is divided into two sections. In chapters 4 and 5 God challenges and warns the people and their leaders. Then He does something that is typical in this book. After the strong message of warning and judgment He appeals in tenderness to His erring people to repent and return. God’s promise of healing and restoration revolves around three specific steps outlined in the sixth chapter of Hosea. Verses 1 to 3 are invitations. Verse 1 says, “Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn, that he may heal us; he has stricken and he will bind us up.” Why does God tear us? The text says, “That he may heal us.” Verse 2 expands this thought; “After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.”

Here is a prophecy often applied to Christ’s resurrection on the third day. But it’s also talking about our experience. We may be raised up to a new life with Jesus and “live before him.”

So in verse 1 we find the call to return and in verse 2 the promise of revival. Then in verse 3 we read, “Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his going forth is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.”

What is the spring rain? It’s the early rain. Notice that we have three r’s here. In verse 1, return; in verse 2, revive; in verse 3, rains. And these are what we desperately need. We believe that one will follow the other in sequence in the experience of God’s people today. First comes the return, then the revival, and then the early and latter rains. We cannot expect the final great outpouring of the Holy Spirit until there is a return to the Lord and a revival.

Our final section in this second division of the book is found in chapter 6:4 through chapter 7. This can be summarized in God’s exasperated last question, “What shall I do with you?” He cannot possibly do more than He has unless His people take full advantage of what already has been done.

The third division of Hosea is marked by chapters 8 through 10, which deal with Israel’s foolishness. What kind of foolishness? The foolishness of depending on other nations and other gods rather than the true God.

In chapter 8 we read about sowing the wind of dependence on the other nations or other gods and reaping the whirlwind of subservience. This is a natural result.

Chapters 9 and 10 foretell punishment and destruction in the land of bondage. This punishment and destruction come as the result of turning away from God and turning to other nations and other gods.

As we have come to expect by this time, God next turns from denunciation and warnings of impending doom to call His people to return and repent. Notice how He phrases this call in verse 12 of chapter 10: “Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain salvation upon you.” In the midst of a strong message of denunciation and judgment to come, God has

tenderly and beautifully appealed to His erring children to come, to sow righteousness, to reap the fruit of steadfast love, and to break up their fallow ground, for “it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain salvation upon you.” What message could be more timely or appropriate for God’s Israel living today in the time when the latter rain is to fall with unprecedented power?

In concluding chapter 10, verses 13 to 15 continue to point out that in spite of God’s often-expressed concern, Israel’s conduct is the opposite of what He earnestly desires from them.

One of the most beautiful chapters in the entire Bible follows. Chapter 11 presents the gospel in all its power and majesty. Again and again, in the midst of messages denouncing unfaithfulness and warning of its inevitable consequences are found tender, loving pleas from God. And chapter 11 is one of the most heartwarming and appealing of them all. The first two verses read this way: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and burning incense to idols.”

Many of us have brought up children who turned away from the Lord. It was a thrill to our family when our older son was rebaptized. As a result of our concern for our son we can better appreciate what God experiences as He tells us that the more He called his wayward children the “more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and burning incense to idols.”

The Lord points out that “it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them.” Verses 3, 4. Despite our handicaps, despite the deformities of sin, God wants us. He loves us; He is pleading with us. But notice the strange reaction of Israel: “They did not know that I healed

them.” Is this the way we react to the God who loves us so much?

The fourth verse brings God’s answer to our carelessness and backsliding. Christ bends down, it says, to minister to our needs - to feed us. He bends down in compassion and interest. But His people are bent in another direction - away from Him.

In spite of it all, God lovingly pleads in verse 8, “How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel!” Previously God has been talking about destruction and punishment to come to Israel. Other nations are scheduled to take them captive. But now God pleads, “How can I give you up! ... How can I hand you over! ... How can I make you like Admah! How can I treat you like Zeboiim!” Admah and Zeboiim were cities of the plain, that suffered destruction with Sodom and Gomorrah. How can I make you like Sodom and Gomorrah? God is asking. Unrepentant Israel deserves total annihilation, but God doesn’t want to visit His fierce judgments on His apostate people.

“How can I give you up! ... My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy.”

Verses 8, 9. God’s compelling love reaches out and binds us when we try to escape from Him. He binds us with the cords of love; His compassion grows warm and tender. His great love will not let us go, yet God cannot force us to receive His love.

The next two chapters of Hosea again return to the theme of Israel’s ingratitude and the resultant impending judgment. In chapter 12 we find God comparing Israel with Judah, who has remained more faithful but also must be punished. Chapter 13 adds that since Israel turned from God, they must suffer the dire consequences.

In chapter 14 Hosea concludes his book with a classic appeal to repentance. God will not allow His people to go into captivity without “pulling out all the stops” in a majestic final

appeal. The gospel of Hosea involves every bit of the beauty and passion of the gospel story. “Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words and return to the Lord; say to him, ‘Take away all iniquity; accept that which is good and we will render the fruit of our lips.’ ” Verses 1, 2. Oh, how God longed for Israel to respond this way! How He longs for you and for me to repent also!

Next God’s voice is heard in verses 4 through 7 in response to the projected prayer of penitence, exclaiming, “I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them... . They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden.”

Once again, in verse 8, God expresses the longing that fills His heart as He sees Israel turning from His love to idols of wood and stone. It is as though He is saying, “Oh, Ephraim, don’t you understand? It is I, not your idols, who care for you and look after you.”

G. Campbell Morgan suggests that the trilogy sin, judgment, and love summarizes the message of Hosea. These fourteen chapters represent a condensation of the burden Hosea bore during his seventy-year ministry. Sin on the part of privileged people - and that’s what we are - is a heinous thing. It might be better to be born in some pagan culture and live up to the light we have than to be born in a Christian environment and turn from God.

God’s judgment is never capricious. He does not act as we sometimes do when we punish our children - on the spur of the moment. Instead God is involved in the irrevocable outworking of sin itself. One great law of the universe states that we obey and live or disobey and die. We cannot escape its implications. In the kind of world in which we live, sin always results in judgment. We can not blame God if we bring these results on ourselves by sinning. “The wages of sin is death” the Bible tells us, and “whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” Romans 6:23; Galatians 6:7, KJV.

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We have no difficulty applying Hosea's warnings to ancient Israel, because theirs seems to be one long history of failure and faithlessness. But it is traumatic to apply the prophet's message to ourselves, isn't it?

Yet it is necessary and timely to do so, because we are made in such a way that we constantly need calls to repentance. We human beings are so constructed that we need to be reminded always of the sinfulness of sin. Otherwise we forget, and sin becomes too attractive to us.

If we take Hosea's book seriously on an individual, personal basis, we must prayerfully consider the impact his message will make on our lives. His epilogue helps us to see what that can be.

Epilogue

Hosea is the only book in the minor prophets that contains an epilogue, which is found in the last verse of the book - Hosea 14:9. It uses two words we might like to have applied to us - wise and prudent. Who wouldn't like to be that kind of person? "Who is wise, and he shall understand these things? prudent, and he shall know them? for the ways of the Lord are right and the just shall walk in them: but the transgressors shall fall therein." KJV.

Powerfully, Hosea pleads with modern Israel to wake up, to sense the inevitable results of carelessness and iniquity, to realize how much God truly loves us. Those who are wise will respond to the compelling power of love, will be drawn to the fullness of pardon and salvation God so eagerly longs to bestow.