

*“Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites”* Hosea 3:1

### God’s Heart of Love

Hosea, like Amos and the other prophets of his era, was called to speak strong words of appalling judgement to the Jews. The future for the wayward nation of Israel was to be one of unmitigated disaster unless it showed repentance. Without it war, death and exile lay in front of them. This was a stern, unbending word, and it had to be said. What Hosea makes abundantly plain, however, is that in the midst of it all God still actually loved his people. God disciplined Hosea to speak as one who personally understood how much God loved his people, despite the severity of his strictures. He had to learn that this God, who threatened so much, was not heartless, arbitrary or callous, but was intimately, even passionately concerned for those he was judging; he longed not to have to judge them. The discipline involved not merely hearing a verbal account of God’s love for Israel, but a life experience whereby Hosea came to feel the reality of that love, and so was able to speak out of a heart touched by it. The life experience had to burn into Hosea the sense of God’s love for Israel. That alone would give his message to have the right tone.

The way God chose to do this was through the experience and difficulty of Hosea’s own marriage. It was through his marriage that Hosea was to learn that despite everything Israel had done, God’s love for the Jews still remained nothing less than the love of a husband for his wife, or the love of a father for his children. He was to learn that God was in the most intimate of relationships with his people, that his heart yearned over them and his deep desire was to bless them, even though they had rejected him. He came to see that even if God spoke judgement, he spoke it out of a heart that was longing to love. Hosea would be obliged to speak in the same way. So God prepared his prophet.

### Hosea’s Marriage

We find, therefore, that Hosea began his prophetic ministry with a word from God that he should get married (Hos. 1:2). The woman he married, Gomer, was, however, “an adulterous wife”. Whether she was adulterous before marriage is not clear but after the marriage she certainly was, and children were born to her who were not the children of Hosea. Hosea came to realise that his adulterous marriage was an exact parallel to the relationship of God with the Jews. God had espoused Israel to himself, but Israel had gone after other gods, abandoning her true “husband”. Like Israel’s abandonment of God, Gomer eventually left her husband, Hosea, for her lover, only to find that her lover in turn forsook her and left her in slavery (3:1ff). God spoke to Hosea and told him to go to Gomer and love her, and to buy her back. God’s word to him was, *“Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods ...”* (3:1). It was at this point that Hosea came face to face with the extraordinary depth of God’s love. God was telling him to love Gomer despite all the deep feelings of disgust, betrayal and anger that her behaviour had undoubtedly aroused in him. He realised that God still loved Israel despite everything, and still wanted to bless Israel. The love of God for Israel, he realised, was deeper than the love that could be expected even of a husband. He recognised that God was no mere judge in a law court, dealing out judgements in an impersonal way. He was a judge, and would indeed judge and discipline, but with the heart of a deeply loving husband. He was frustrated from expressing his love for Israel by her sheer disobedience, but he would make even the harshness of his disciplinary judgement work for Israel's good.

**“God was passionately concerned for those he was judging”**

He learned the same lesson through two children born to Gomer out of wedlock. Though the first child of Gomer is said to be born to Hosea (1:3 –“she bore *him* a son), the next two are not. They were called “Not loved” (Lo-Ruhamah) and “Not my People” (Lo-Ammi). The very names given to them indicate that they were strangers to his love and kin. Likewise the Israelites were to be called “Not loved” and “Not my people” for they were children of spiritual adultery. Yet even as God pronounced such names over the nation, he promised a day when once more they would be loved and would be counted his people. Hearing this word of promise, Hosea would have undoubtedly felt a compulsion to express the same grace to these two children of Gomer’s as God was expressing to Israel. Again he was learning the depths of real love. God is love, and remained a God of love to Israel despite her appalling behaviour. That was what Hosea learned so deeply through God’s attitude to Gomer’s faithlessness.

Hosea also learned of God’s feeling for Israel in terms of a father for his own child. In Chapter 11, God said *“When Israel was a child, I loved him ... It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms ...I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them”* (11:1-4). Israel really was his son, and great affection was expressed for him, culminating in a cry of anguish, *“How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?”* (11:8).

### The Language of Love

Thus, to characterise the God of Amos and Hosea as one who was hard, harsh and unfeelingly in his judgement is wholly mistaken. The waywardness of Israel was a matter of distress to God simply because he loved his people. The strongly emotional language of the prophet is in marked contrast to the language of philosophy, which is rational and impersonal. Rational concepts, originating from the Greeks, have pushed their way into Christian theology, emptying God of any real emotions. This was so with some of the Fathers of the early centuries of the church, and it has persisted right up to our own times. It is certainly not, however, the witness of the bible record, especially the Prophets. It will not do to put aside great tracts of testimony to God’s heart by calling them “anthropomorphic” (i.e. a wrong understanding of God based on purely human experience). The New Testament is very clear that *“God is love”* and *“love comes from God”* (1 Jn. 4:7-12). The same is true of the Old Testament. When God showed Moses something of his glory he proclaimed, *“The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, abounding in love ... maintaining love to thousands”*. (Ex. 34:6). Whatever love is (and

humanity has produced some sordid emotional misrepresentations of it!), it is not without heart and feeling. It is compassionate, it is long suffering, it yearns over the beloved, seeking by all means to bless. It is a great mistake to think that the prophets added human feeling to a word from God. Hosea spoke out of God's love, not his own. This then is the God of the prophets – a God of love, a God who feels deeply – but who, nonetheless, has to speak judgement!

### **Love Destroys Evil**

How does this relate to God's threats of appalling judgement, and all the pain and cruelty that belonged to it?

In seeking to answer that question, the essential fact we have to recognise is that love cannot ultimately co-exist with evil. The very nature of love is such that it abhors evil and must destroy it, just as light must dispel darkness. The two are utterly opposite and irreconcilable. It is part of our understanding of God that in the final analysis he will not be reconciled to evil but will utterly remove it from the place it has usurped in his creation. If there is no removal of evil there is no "heaven" of any consequence, for the difference between heaven and earth is the removal of evil and the consequent full presence of the peace and joy of God. The destruction of evil (but the sparing of us who have been touched by it) is the quintessential hope that God brings to us, and is totally in keeping with his nature as a God of love.

**"The essential fact is that love cannot ultimately co-exist with evil"**

Love is irreconcilable with evil because love seeks the genuine happiness and peace of humanity, whereas evil is inherently destructive. Love, therefore, can never say, "do what you like; anything goes; you are free to express yourself in whatever way you like", because evil lurks to draw people into wrong actions that only destroy. Love is bound to put up barriers to evil. Love is aware that all actions have consequences both for the person who does them and for those who are affected by them. Love involves wisdom, and wisdom

knows what will bring happiness and peace, or distress and anguish. This means that love inevitably has a moral aspect, and to some degree can be expressed in clear statements about acceptable behaviour, such as the 10 Commandments. But love is so much more than a few rules. The love of God is something that has a consummate, burning sense of morality, something that is described as "holiness". God is holy, he is not touched at all by anything that is evil – it is totally foreign to his nature, and cannot come anywhere near his immediate presence without being burned up. He abhors evil. This burning holiness is part of his love, bent on blessing but implacably destructive of evil. This is the essence of what elsewhere is called by the prophets the "wrath of God".

Humanity is always in grave danger, therefore, when it is caught up in sin and deliberately persists in it. For to be caught up in sin, is to be exposed to that burning holiness, utterly destructive of sin. This is a real and serious danger in this world, but infinitely more real and serious in eternity. This is the point that needs grasping fully, and our generation is again lamentably slow to grasp it. It is the fundamental lesson of the prophets. The Israelites had deliberately rejected God and his call "to be holy", and they were contemptuous of his righteous commands, going after pagan gods whose worship involved doing the opposite of those commands. They were, therefore, in grave danger. Instead of accepting his love, the Israelites were constantly frustrating it. Hosea cries out, "*Whenever I would restore the fortunes of my people, whenever I would heal Israel, the sins of Ephraim are exposed and the crimes of Samaria revealed. They practise deceit, thieves break into houses, bandits rob in the streets; but they do not realise that I remember all their evil deeds.* (6:11-7:2).

### **The Pleadings and Patience of Love**

How does God in his love react to this rejection? He certainly does not compromise or move to middle ground, for love, thankfully, does not compromise with evil. Neither does God immediately react in judgement, for love is "slow to anger". Love starts by stating with acid clarity firstly, what it sees to be wrong, and secondly, what wrong-doing is bound to lead to. So Hosea typically exposes evil in unmistakable tones: "*There is no acknowledgement of God in the land. There is only cursing lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds and bloodshed follows bloodshed*" (Hos.1:3). Equally clearly he states the consequence of evil: "*Swords will flash in their cities, will destroy the bars of their gates and put an end to their plans.*" (11:6). Warnings like this, of course, are not idle warnings. God means what he says, but love speaks the truth in an endeavour to turn the beloved from a path of disaster.

It is important to remember also that love allows choice, indeed demands choice. Love cannot make others love, but it can plead with them and reason with them. It is simply because of God's desire that his people should make the right choices that the pronouncements of the prophets are so searching and uncompromising, so graphic and realistic in their description of judgement. Nothing but the plainest of speaking would help, for their corruption was endemic – "*a spirit of prostitution is in their heart; they do not acknowledge the LORD*". (5:4). Moreover love persists, and so the prophecies come out in a constant stream, using every kind of imagery in an attempt to persuade.

Love also offers forgiveness. There is no greater manifestation of the love of God offered to mankind than the offer of mercy and forgiveness, for that is mankind's greatest need in the light of its sin. But forgiveness can only be effective where the offer is received and repentance is evident. The offer of forgiveness is abundantly present in the prophets: "*Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God ... say to him, 'forgive us our sins and receive us graciously.'*" (14:1-2); "*I long to redeem them but they speak lies against me*" (7:13). This is an offer through his prophets which, in the grace of God, went on for years, even decades, right to the very last moment before judgement fell.

### **The Horrors of Judgement**

Love cannot allow sin to go on indefinitely, however, and God's judgement has to come eventually. When it comes it takes the form of allowing what is evil to destroy evil. The Assyrians (and later the Babylonians) were the rod of God's judgement and they were evil, more evil than either Israel or Judah. They were cruel beyond belief; merciless, sadistic and endlessly destructive (see Nahum). It can never be said that God has not warned that this is the nature of his judgement. In his love he pleads and pleads simply because he knows judgement spells an onrush of appalling evil. God does not unveil the origin of evil, but he certainly warns of the horrors of it, and offers a refuge for those who will listen to him. On the other hand, God allows those who wilfully choose to be associated with evil to be caught up in its destruction, for evil has to be destroyed.