

God's Holy Love

Hosea

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You can learn a lot about God by being a parent. The Bible reveals God as a parent in several ways—especially in the way Jesus spoke to and about God. And though references to God as Father are sparse in the Old Testament, there are some. Often, God is the Father of Israel. Sometimes God is also compared to a mother caring for her children. Here in Hosea, we find God expressing his relationship with Israel in terms of a parent and a child. Many of the things we experience and learn as parents give us a glimpse into how God relates to us and how God feels about us. It's just a glimpse, not a perfect picture, because God is the only perfect parent.

I've sometimes felt I'm at my best as a parent. Being a father has taught me a lot about love and caring—and discipline. Sometimes, I've been at my worst as a parent—either holding back or acting out of impatience and anger. I believe that God's image is revealed through human parents—not perfectly, usually brokenly and sometimes not at all. But at our best, we reflect God's image. God relates to us the way we relate to our kids at our best. We try to balance or hold together love and concern with the need for boundaries and discipline. Hosea shows how God holds together love and judgment, compassion and discipline. He shows how faithful love is at the heart of who God is.

Hosea was a prophet in Israel, the Northern Kingdom, prior to Israel's being conquered by Assyria. He ministered from around 758 to 722 B.C. This was a time when the people had left the Lord to worship other gods. Or, they mixed the worship of Canaanite fertility gods with worship of the Lord God.

Hosea uses many images to describe the people and their sin and to describe God and his relation to the people. The primary images he uses come from family relationships. Marriage is one. God's relationship to Israel is compared to marriage. Israel's sin is depicted as adultery and prostitution. Hosea's own marriage dramatizes his message. God tells him to marry a "prostituting woman" (1:2).

Hosea marries her and they have three children whose names announce God's message to the people. The first is named Jezreel, which recalls the violent beginning of Israel's ruling house at a place called Jezreel. The second child is called "Not Loved." God is saying that he will no longer show covenant love to his people. The third child is called "Not My People." God reverses the covenant promise here and says, "For you are not my people and I am not your God" (1:9).

Hosea's message says that judgment will come upon Israel. But there's another theme in God's message through Hosea. Beyond judgment, God will restore the people and receive them as his own again. Soon after God says, "You are not loved and you are not my people," he goes on to say, "But you will be called my children" (1:10-11). This hope and promise of restoration show up in several places in Hosea's prophecy. God must judge sin, but God longs to show love and to forgive and restore his people.

That dual message comes through here in chapter 11 of Hosea. This section is the heart of Hosea's message. It sums up everything he's been saying. Three times God's love is mentioned here: "When Israel was a child I loved him" (v 1); "I taught Ephraim [another name for Israel] to walk, taking them by the arms" (v 3); "I led them...with ties of love" (v 4). And each time, the people reject God's love or ignore it or rebel: "The more they were called...the further they went from me" (v 2); "they did not realize it was I who healed them" (v 3); "they refuse to return to me" (v 5).

Since Israel would not return to the Lord, he says that he'll return them to Egypt. He had rescued them from slavery, but the covenant curse for disobedience was that they would return to slavery. That's what God's going to do. "Egypt" here in v 5 is a symbol of Assyria, the major world power that would soon conquer Israel. God describes the destruction that would come.

But in the midst of describing judgment and destruction, God recalls the beginning of Israel's relationship with him. And God's nature, which is love, begins to overcome the need for judgment. "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I treat you like the cities destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah?" God's heart is changed and God's compassion warms and glows (v 8). Although God has every right to wipe out Israel, he decides that

he won't carry out his fierce anger and won't devastate them. God is greater than any human: "For I am God, and not a man—the Holy One among you. I will not come to destroy" (v 9).

That's not saying that the coming Assyrian conquest wouldn't happen—it did happen. But it is saying that after that conquest and exile, God will re-gather and restore his people. And that prepares for the coming of Jesus, in whom God began restoring his people.

This is a wonderful picture of God as a loving Parent who calls God's children, who draws us and leads us and provides for us. How do we respond? Do we ignore and rebel or do we acknowledge God and trust him?

Hosea reminds me of Jesus' parable of a father who had two sons. The younger son asked for his share of the inheritance immediately. Basically, he was saying to his father, "I wish you were dead, so I could get what's coming to me." But the father gave what the son requested. Then the son left home and went to a far country. And in that far country he squandered all that he had. He lost everything and was nearly starving to death. But the memory of the father's house called him and he decided to return home, not as a son but as a servant. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him (I imagine he had been looking for him) and ran to him. The son started his rehearsed repentance speech, but his father interrupted him by hugging him, welcoming him, restoring him to full status as a son and throwing a party to celebrate his return (Luke 15:11-24). Jesus says that God is like that.

Can we have real relationship without being vulnerable to hurt? C. S. Lewis wrote:

There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become

unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at the least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell. (*The Four Loves* 169)

Tim Keller points out the even God becomes vulnerable in love. "Christmas tells us that God became breakable and fragile. God became someone we could hurt. Why? To get us back." (<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/december/6121310.html>).

In Jesus' death on the cross, God judges sin and displays his love for sinners. In Jesus, God takes on himself the kind of punishment our sin deserves. The cross didn't change God's mind about us, but it shows us the eternal loving heart of God. The cross is God's invitation to return to the Lord, to fall into his loving embrace, to be his people, to be his children.

Bob Benson describes God's parental heart in terms of a common experience parents have:

Nearly a year ago Peg and I had a very hard week.

Wednesday night—

Mike slept downstairs in his room—
where children belong
and we slept upstairs in ours
where moms and dads belong.

Thursday night—

we were 350 miles away and he was
in Ramada 325 and we were in 323—
connecting rooms and we left the door open
and talked and laughed together.

Friday night—

700 miles from home and
he was in 247 and we were in 239
but it was just down the balcony
and somehow we seemed together.

Saturday night—

he was in the freshman dorm
and we were still in 239.

Sunday night—

we were home and he was
700 miles away in Chapman 309.

Now we have been through this before.
Bob Jr. had gone away to college
and we had gathered ourselves together
until we had gotten over it—
mainly because he's married now
and he only lives ten miles away
and comes to visit often....
So we thought we knew
how to handle separation pretty well
but we came away so lonely and blue.

Oh our hearts were filled with pride
at a fine young man
and our minds were filled with memories
from tricycles to commencements
but deep down inside somewhere
we just ached with loneliness and pain.

Somebody said you still have three at home—
three fine kids and there is
still plenty of noise—
plenty of ball games to go to—
plenty of responsibilities—
plenty of laughter—
plenty of everything...

except Mike.

And in parental math

five minus one
just doesn't equal plenty.

And I was thinking about God
He sure has plenty of children—
plenty of artists,
plenty of singers,
and carpenters,
and candlestick makers,
and preachers,
plenty of everybody...

except you

and all of them together
can never take your place.
And there will always be
an empty spot in His heart—
and a vacant chair at His table
when you're not home.

And if once in a while
it seems He's crowding you a bit—
try to forgive Him.
It may be one of those nights
when He misses you so much
He can hardly stand it.

(Come Share the Being 66-68)

That may seem overly sentimental, but I think that's like the God Hosea knew and proclaimed. That's the God who invites us to the table this morning. God calls us to himself and God longs for us to return to him. He will forgive and restore us. In the New Testament, the people of God are no longer "Not loved" or "Not My People." Instead, we're said to have received mercy and to be God's own people. "Once you were not a people, but now

you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:10).

That tells us who we are and what God has done for us. Simply tell God you want to return and be his child. It also reminds us of the message we have to share with others and the invitation we can give them to return to God and be God's dearly loved children.