

The God Who Never Gives Up On Us

From the series: If God Be For Us...

Text: Hosea 11:8-9; Romans 11:32

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Hosea was a prophet who learned in personal experience the nature of the love of God, for Hosea loved a woman and married her, only to find her eventually falling into prostitution and unfaithfulness. And yet, he loved her. And then he heard the Word of God that said, "Keep on loving her. Reclaim her. Redeem her and take her to yourself." Out of that experience of personal love, he understood the love of God for an erring Israel, a love that would not give up.

The great Jewish thinker, Martin Buber, comments on Hosea's experience in these words:

That a particular person should be bound to love another particular person in utter concreteness - is there such a thing as this? The word can only be spoken to one who already loves. He loves. He still loves the faithless one. He cannot suppress this love, but he does not want it, for he feels himself degraded by it.... Into this state of soul, God's word descends: Continue loving. Thou art allowed to love her. Thou must love her. Even so do I love Israel.

The lesson from the 11th chapter:

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. Yet, 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. They shall return to the land of Egypt and the Assyrians shall be their king because they have refused to return to me. The sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates and devour them in their fortresses. My people are bent on turning away from me, so they are appointed to the yoke and none shall remove it. How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How

can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? 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.

The Word of the Lord.

The Epistle Lesson, Romans 11, commencing to read with verse 25:

Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers and sisters. A hardening has come upon part of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles come in. And so all Israel will be saved. As it is written, "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob. And this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins. As regards the Gospel, they're enemies of God, for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you, they also may receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience that God may have mercy upon all. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are God's judgments, and how inscrutable God's ways. For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been God's counselor? Or who has given the gift to God that he might be repaid? From God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever, Amen.

The Word of the Lord.

We conclude this morning the series, *If God Be For Us...*, taken from the 8th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans and the 31st verse, which is a paragraph between all that Paul had said about the grace of God that appeared in Jesus Christ and that terrible struggle that Paul had with the Jewish people, his brothers and sisters according to the flesh, and their rejection of the grace of God in Christ.

If you had asked me about the outline of the Epistle to the Romans, I would have most all of my life told you that, as far as I was concerned, it could have stopped at the end of the 8th chapter. There is no more profound or beautiful statement of the love of God than Paul pens in those words. And I had always assumed that that's where he came to a grand climax. Chapters 9 through 11? Well, that struggle between the Jews, Israel and the Church and Christ - I've never made much of that. Paul's argument is labored, torturous, tedious as he struggles with the mystery of his own people not seeing Jesus as he saw Jesus. And then, of course, there's some good ethical stuff in chapters 12 through 16. But, I wouldn't have minded too much if we lost the last half as long as we had the first eight

chapters. Give me the eight chapters and give me that final paragraph and that letter comes to a magnificent climax, I had always thought.

Then I came across a little book by Krister Stendahl, the New Testament scholar, who will be with us in October. Krister Stendahl has a little, thin book called *Paul Among the Jews and the Gentiles*, and as I was reading, I came to his assertion that the heart of the Letter to the Romans is chapters 9 through 11, that Paul's struggle with Israel's failure to see Jesus as the Messiah was what that letter is really all about. And therefore, that my grand climax at the end of chapter 8 is rather a critical prelude to the real heart of that Letter to the Romans, for Paul was so distressed by the fact that his brothers and sisters in the flesh did not come to faith in Jesus and see there displayed magnificently the grace of God. I reflected on that and I had to conclude that Krister Stendahl is right; that really is what the letter is all about. And what that last paragraph of the 8th chapter is about is a summation of God's grace in Jesus Christ and the foundation for Paul's confident faith that, in spite of the fact that at the present moment Israel was blind to Jesus, nonetheless God was not done with Israel, that the promises to the fathers and mothers of the faith, that covenant of grace that had bound Israel to God's self, was not to be revoked. That God was of such a nature that God could never give up on Israel. Israel in its present disobedience, Paul says, is beloved for the sake of her forebears. Out of covenant faithfulness to Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob and all of those who had gone before, God will not now give up God's people. It was the foundation of the love of God, which is expressed so beautifully in that last paragraph of chapter 8. "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

As we have noted, it's not really "if", it is an assertion - "Since God is for us," or, as the New English Bible translates it, "Since God is on our side." Not on our side as over against those who are against us. Since God is on the human side, since God is for people, since God is for people as is demonstrated in all that God has done in Jesus Christ, therefore, since God is for us, who can be against us? And then, he goes on to say, who can lay any charge to God's chosen ones?

He recites the events of Jesus' life and death and resurrection and enthronement and Jesus' intercession for us, and he says, what then can separate us from the love of Christ? Can all of the things that can go wrong in the world: famine and peril and nakedness and sword - all of the disasters that are possible in the human scene? Can any of that alter that foundational reality of the love of God in Christ? No, he says. No, not anything in our present experience, not anything in the past, not anything in the future, not anything in the heights, not anything in the depths - nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. That I thought was climax. That I find, is prelude, foundation for what he is going to finally conclude in the 11th chapter and the 32nd verse, which is that Jews and Gentiles alike are all consigned to disobedience in order that God may have mercy on all.

Those chapters are tedious and strained and they are worked out under the supposition that very soon Jesus will come and the end of the age will be brought to pass. Nonetheless, what was deepest down in Paul was the conviction that God would never give up on God's people. He admitted his bafflement that his own people did not see Jesus as Messiah, as he had experienced Jesus. He acknowledged the fact that now they were blind to the Gospel; they were in a state of disobedience. But, was it all over for Israel? Not on your life.

I don't think that Paul had figured it out accurately, but he was struggling with it. He didn't really know what God was doing, but of this he was certain - God would not let go of that people. God would not abandon that people. And so, he says, well, maybe it's this way. Maybe the disobedience of the Jewish people has given entree to the grace of God to the Gentiles, and he really speaks to Gentiles here. He warns against arrogance. He reminds them that, in the analogy of an olive tree, if Israel is the natural branch ripped off in a state of disobedience, the Gentile believers are grafted on, but they're grafted on to the pre-existing tree whose roots are Israel. And he reminds them, also, to have a proper humility because, he says, if grace has reached you, then Israel's return will be life from the dead. All Israel will be saved.

He had recognized the universal human situation. Earlier in the letter he had said all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, which is another way of saying if anything good is going to happen to people, it will be by the pure grace of God. And now in chapter 11 in verse 32, he sees Jew and Gentile alike, consigned to disobedience in order, he says, that God may have mercy on all.

That's the way Paul struggled through in order to make some sense of what to him made no sense at all; that he who saw in the face of Jesus the heart of God, that he who saw in the face of Jesus the revelation of the glory of God, when he presented that story to his own people, they saw it not at all. Could he conclude, therefore, that somehow or other that covenant of grace with the forebears, that long history of God nurturing that people, had come to an end? Paul said, "I can't believe that. I can't believe that God ever gives up on us. I don't know exactly how, and I don't know when, but I believe that, just as all are disobedient, so all will experience the mercy of God."

Where did Paul get that kind of an idea? Well, Paul was a Jewish scholar. Paul had sat at the feet of Gamaliel. Paul knew the Hebrew scriptures, and I could go most any place in that old book in order to demonstrate that what Paul was holding forth here for Jew and Gentile was rooted in that Hebrew conception of the love of God. But, let me take you to what may be my favorite story, my favorite prophet, Hosea, whom I said had that poignant experience of loving a woman who proved faithless, and of having the sense of the Word of God coming to him saying, "Love her still; bring her back; claim her for your own. Love her into faithfulness."

Hosea was an 8th century prophet speaking to the Northern Kingdom in those years before the Assyrian empire came in, conquered Israel and dispersed the ten northern tribes. He was an authentic prophet in the best sense of Hebrew prophecy. Hosea was no pansy. Hosea was a prickly prophet, as are all prophets. He accused Israel of faithlessness, of forgetting the God Who had brought them out of Egypt and through the wilderness and into the Promised Land, Who had healed them and fed them and nurtured them. In tenderest phrases he describes the relationship of God with Israel. "I picked them up. I held them to my cheek. I bound them with bonds of love. But they have forsaken me. They are bent on turning away from me." And he pointed out all that was wrong with the society of those ten northern tribes that would eventuate in the judgment of God, for the Hebrew prophets saw historical events as the movement of the God Who judged and graced, and so he spoke quite directly to that society of which he was a part.

If he had been in the United States of America this past week, I think he probably would have taken a jet to Washington. He probably would have stood on the steps of the White House and held a press conference and then moved to the Capitol building and held another press conference, and CNN would have been there. And he would have said, "Nice going, Mr. President. Nice going, members of Congress. You have ended welfare as we have known it. Congratulations. You have dealt with a problem that measures 1% of our national budget. You have done it under the cloak of not wanting people to be spoiled by welfare, and thereby, you have saved enough dollars to build one wing of a Stealth bomber. Congratulations, Mr. President. Congratulations, members of Congress, for you are hailing a new day. You have dealt with the little problems. Now when will you deal with political action committees and the pandering to favored classes and election practices and all of that that is so deleterious to our democratic processes?" And, of course, he would not have taken a jet back to Michigan to run in Ottawa County for anything. (And don't expect me at the door following worship. I'm slipping out the side.)

But that's the kind of stuff the prophets did. That's why most of them ended up slain; not many of them died in bed. So, Hosea was no sweet, simpering voice laced with sentimentality. There was none of this kind of superficial love, you know, chirpy "God loves you and I love you, too." There was sweat and blood and tears in Hosea! And he spoke to his people the Word of God, he addressed them in their concrete reality, and, as he was portraying all of their sin and as he reflected what must have been rising in the heart of God, he said, "They'll go back to Egypt; Assyria will be their king; they are bent on turning away from me." And what would be the logical next phrase? "I will give them up!" But, what is the Word of God that the prophet hears?

How can I give you up? How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I make you like the cities of Abmah and Zobeiim, the cities of the plain that perished with Sodom and Gomorrah? My heart churns within me. My

heart grows tender. My compassion warms. I will not give you up, for I am God and not human.

In his own experience of a compelling love that he could not deny in spite of the faithlessness of the one loved, Hosea gained a window into the heart of God Who will never give up on us, in spite of the fact that the exercise of justice and even good judgment would simply cut us off. That is Hosea's conception of the unrequited, unconditional, unrelenting love of God that will never give up, never give up on us.

Paul, steeped in that tradition, when he struggled with the fact that his own people were blind to the grace that he saw, could nonetheless not bring himself even to begin to think that that blindness would result in a final rejection. And so, I've learned that his statement at the end of the 8th chapter of Romans, "since God is for us," was the prelude to his tortured, labored, tedious argument on behalf of his own people because he did not believe, disobedient that they were, that God would give up on them. For Hosea, it was Israel. For Paul, it was Jews and Gentiles. And Paul thought the end of the age would be very soon, when Israel en masse would move into the grace of Jesus Christ. And that, of course, didn't happen. Paul, along with the whole New Testament, was wrong in that expectation of an imminent end.

So, what are we to do? It's 2000 years later, now. Would we see the love of God differently than Hosea and Paul, and would we claim at this point in history that the 30% of the global population that is Christian is the exclusive focus of the love of God? Has God changed? Has God narrowed focus? Has God now crimped God's love to become very particular in the life of the vast human family? If Paul were here today, 2000 years later, he would struggle not only with Israel's immediate rejection of Jesus as Messiah, but with what in the world the Spirit is doing in the world today. He would struggle with the fact that 70% of the world's population does not see the glory of God in the face of Jesus. And yet I suspect that the same kind of fundamental consideration would move him to find a way to suspect that the Spirit of God was blowing in ways that we've not yet dreamed of, for as Jesus said, the Spirit blows where it wills and we know not its whence nor its whither.

But we can be sure that the Spirit of God is the Spirit of God whose unquenchable, relentless love Hosea experienced in his own personal experience and applied to Israel, that Paul experienced in regard to Israel and the Gentiles, and it wouldn't be a great feat for him simply to embrace this whole globe and say, "I don't know how. I don't know when, but I believe that God's love is such that God will never give up on anyone."

On my way here this morning I saw the billboard of a church. The sermon title was, "Heaven's Gates and Hell's Flames." I suspect the message was a bit different from the one you've just heard. But, let me ask you - Where is the

powerful, persuasive, compelling news? Is it to make you inside feel secure that you are loved and lucky, that you are not outside where the flames of Hell lick?

Or, might it better be for us who have experienced the love of God, to go out of here with a body language that is set free by that love and to embrace our brothers and sisters everywhere? And even in their unbelief, to have a spirit over against them such as Paul had over against his own brothers and sisters? Would not the most powerful, compelling evangelistic effort in the world be to let the world in on the magnificence of the Love of God? Is it any wonder that when Paul was all through with his contorted reasoning and strained thinking - is it any wonder that he could not but break out into doxology?

Who has searched the mind of God? Source, Guide and Goal of all there is - to God alone be glory!" Worship, lost in wonder, love and praise, in the light of such love. Can we help but respond, "O God, we love you?"