

CHAPTER *One*

A Mighty Savior

Old Testament Snapshots of Salvation

“The LORD your God . . . is mighty to save.”

—ZEPHANIAH 3:17

WHY DID WESLEY AUTRY DO it? In a daring rescue, he amazed New York City. On January 2, 2007, Autry took his two daughters with him to ride the subway en route to school and work. As they waited for a train, a total stranger named Cameron Hollopeter apparently suffered an epileptic seizure and fell off the platform, landing on the subway track below.

Asking others to care for his girls, Autry jumped down on the tracks and tried to lift Hollopeter to safety. Unfortunately, the train was too close. As it closed in on them, Autry covered Hollopeter, wrapping his arms and legs up underneath while the train went over them.

After he saved Hollopeter's life, Autry made the talk show circuit as an instant celebrity. Donald Trump heard the story and gave Autry \$10,000. Autry also received free tickets to take his daughters to Disney World.¹ Still, no one could account for Autry's extraordinary kindness at such great risk to himself. (I've been to Disney World, and I liked it. But I did not see anything about the place that would make me say, *OK, I will jump down on a railroad track in the subway.*) Of course, when Autry acted, he had no idea that he would receive any sort of compensation.

Autry's compassion to a stranger points to the grand narrative, the bigger story of the saving love of God. Can we see the parallels to Christ's sacrifice on the cross? The danger was real. Like us, Hollopeter possessed no ability or strength to save himself. Deliverance to safety involved enormous risk to the rescuer. One stark contrast reveals the limitation of the metaphor: Jesus not only risked his life but sacrificed it to save the world.

No wonder the Apostle Paul wrote, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Romans 1:16–17). The story of God's saving work in the lives of human beings reaches its dramatic crescendo in the New Testament. But it does not begin there. The salvation story begins in the Old Testament. Unforgettable images of God as Savior emerge in metaphor, in music, and in prophecy. Salvation is the unforgettable story that God told, is telling, and will tell for eternity.

Beginning at the Beginning (Genesis)

Salvation begins at the beginning. Shortly after creation, humankind fell in sin. Adam and Eve, who had known such sweet fellowship with God, disobeyed God. Their choice led directly to isolation and shame. God sought them and found them. Even in God's pursuit of Adam and Eve, we catch a glimpse of the God who desires to save humankind. Presumably through the sacrifice of an animal, God provided a covering for the woman and the man (Genesis 3:21). Nevertheless,

they were punished and removed from the garden, lest they also reach out and take the fruit from the tree of life (Gen. 3:22–24). God forgave them but also held them responsible for their choices.

Sin began with Adam and Eve and inevitably erupted again, disrupting the lives of all of their descendants. This drama unfolds before our eyes in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Adam and Eve's son Cain killed his brother Abel in what might have been the very first worship war. Generations rose and fell with only an occasional reference to one like Enoch, who walked with God (Gen. 5:22–24).

In Noah's story we sense once again God's frustration with sin and see his punishment of all creation. But out of that devastation, God chose and redeemed a solitary family. Preserved in an ark, Noah trusted God to protect him from the flood (Gen. 6–8).

Later, humankind built a tower in Babel to reach up to God and "make a name for [them]selves" (Gen. 11:4). God responded to the builders in Babel by dispersing them across the earth. Pride led to their fall.

Have you noticed that history sometimes repeats itself? The human need to eclipse the work of others and exalt ourselves is still very much with us. Perhaps you have heard about a building under construction in Dubai called Burj Dubai. It reaches more than 800 meters (about 2,625 feet) into the air.² Engineers say it will be the tallest building ever built—so far. Likely the record will not stand long. Likely a taller one will be built.

Warning against greed, Jesus told of a man who tore down his barns to build bigger ones in celebration of his own self-centered success. Soon, he forfeited it all upon his death (Luke 12:16–21).

At the strategic moment in history after the incident of the tower of Babel, God started to move in the life of Abraham, who would be blessed and become a blessing (Genesis 12:1–3). God's blessing promised salvation to future generations through Abraham's descendant Jesus Christ. In the remainder of the Old Testament we find specific portraits of the God who is mighty to save accomplishing his great work of salvation and offering a harbinger of future hope. In the story of Moses, for example, we get a glimpse of the God who is mighty to save.

God, Our Delivering Savior (Exodus)

Whose number do you dial when you need help? Last year one of our teenaged sons called me for help because his car had a flat tire. Flattered by his confidence and seizing the teachable moment, I decided to show him how to change a tire. It turned into a disaster. The person who put the lug nuts on the wheel apparently had a better tool than I possessed to remove them. Still worse, the wheel would not budge even after I removed the lug nuts.

So I followed my son's example. I called my father, who, I am thankful to say, doubles as an outstanding mechanic. With dad on the phone and a large hammer in hand, we finally removed the tire from the car. Our victory celebration was interrupted by our discovery that the small spare we found in the trunk was also flat. My father, who lives for the moments when we need his help, coached us to air up the spare with a bicycle tire pump. All the while, my wife Melanie found it highly entertaining as we passed the phone back and forth and pumped up the tire for a very long while. Jokes about how many generations of the Brooks family it takes to change a tire began that very night.

When Israel needed help, the people called on the Lord. The Book of Exodus recounts the plight of their bondage in Egypt. A new pharaoh who did not know Joseph demanded they perform hard labor. When they cried out to the Lord, he saw, heard, cared, and sent a deliverer to save them.

One of the most important Old Testament words for salvation speaks of the sovereign rescue of men and nations. The word *yasha*, which means *to bring out into a spacious place*, also gives us the name *Yeshua*, the root of the names Joshua and later Jesus.³ Nowhere do we see this concept more clearly than in the Old Testament story of the Exodus. When God's people cried for help, God came to their rescue and brought them out into a spacious place of their own in the Promised Land.

God Our Savior Sees! (Exod. 3:7)

It is easy to feel forgotten. Does God know we are here? Does God understand our situation? Does God care? The Exodus story answers

with a resounding, *Yes!* God saw the people's need. The only question was whether Moses would see the God who was seeing him.

As the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it,

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware.⁴

On the whole, sheep require less maintenance than people. After Moses' first failed deliverance of the Israelites (Exod. 2:11–15), he grew comfortable tending sheep. After forty years perhaps, he would have been content for the rest of his life just to pasture and pastor his sheep.

But Moses found himself at Mount Horeb, “the mountain of God,” with his sheep (Exod. 3:1). There he discovered in the wilderness Somebody who knew him by name. God came to him speaking from a burning bush. After Moses looked, saw the bush, stopped, and removed his shoes, we learn that God saw that Moses saw (Exod. 3:3–4). Perhaps, like other reclusive desert-dwellers, Moses did not particularly want to be seen by such a powerful Savior, and so he refused to look at God (Exod. 3:6). Then God revealed his intention to save, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people. . . . I have come down to rescue them” (Exod. 3:7–8). God identified himself to Moses as the Savior who would deliver the people and rescue them from oppression. This offers a marvelous portrait of the great God who loves and lives to save.

On that day Moses discovered that God had a greater and higher purpose for his life. In fact, God revealed to him a purpose that was worth the investment of the rest of his life. Have we found that purpose yet? What is worth the investment of our whole lives?

God said, *Moses, I have something for you to do.* When Moses implied that he would really rather not be involved, God said, “I will be with you” (Exod. 3:12). In effect, God reminded him, *This is not about you, Moses. This is not about your feelings. This is about my plan to rescue, redeem, and ransom my people.*

Powerfully, God revealed himself as the God who is both willing and able to save. God is in the saving business. In fact, God has a corner on the market of that business. God is the only Savior available; the only One who can rescue us from our inescapable dilemmas. God remains the only one who can lift us “out of the mud and mire” and “set [our] feet on a rock” (Psalm 40:2). He is the only God, our Savior. If we would believe it and receive it, God earnestly desires to save us. He is willing to save.

Have we yet seen the God who sees? We remember the slave girl Hagar’s story in Genesis (Gen. 16). This slave girl, who was carrying Abram’s child, was banished from the camp by Abram’s wife Sarai. Fleeing, Hagar found herself alone in the wilderness. At least she thought she was alone. But even there God found her, and she gave God a new name. She said, “You are the God who sees me. . . . I have now seen the One who sees me” (Gen. 16:13). How about us? Have we seen the God who sees us?

God Our Savior Hears! (Exod. 3:7)

God not only sees. God also hears.

One of my college roommates, Mark Johnson, developed as a baritone soloist in the School of Music at Baylor University. He sang on occasion at Pleasant Grove Baptist Church near Rosebud, where I served as a student pastor. Every morning he awakened the dawn and our apartment as he warmed up to prepare his voice to sing. I can still hear the song he adapted from Psalm 116. “I love the Lord, because he hears my prayers and answers them, because he bends down and listens. And I will praise him as long as I live.”

Our God is the God who both sees and hears. “I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers” (Exod. 3:7). We may wrongly suppose we are alone in our sorrow. Lest we think nobody knows when we are crying in the darkness, God has always heard our cries for help. He is the God who hears us well and understands.

In fact, our hearing problem stems not from God’s inability to hear us, but from our inability to hear him. Isn’t this why Jesus would later say, “He who has ears, let him hear”? (Matthew 11:15).

As disciples, we learn to listen closely like Elijah on the mountain (1 Kings 19:9–18). When the rushing of the wind, the rumble of the earthquake, and the roar of the fire ceased, then Elijah heard God’s still, small voice. Similarly, in our turbulent world, over the cacophony of sounds around us, and above all the voices clamoring to be heard, there is only one voice we must hear. Like Elijah, Moses heard God call him by name. Have we heard that voice? Have we, like Isaiah, cultivated the ear of a disciple (Isaiah 50:4–5)?⁵ Our God is the God who speaks. If we will listen, we will hear.

Have you heard of the *mosquito ringtone*? Our young students at our church know this subtle sound. At 17 kilohertz high, the tone is a very high pitched, almost squealing sound, imperceptible to those of us over the age of twenty-five or so. Younger people, however, hear the *mosquito tone* well. Supposedly, it was invented by an enterprising businessman in England who was trying to disperse a group of teenagers loitering around his business. Alas, the displaced teens laughed last. Not without recourse, teenagers in many places have turned the tables, choosing the largely inaudible tone as the ringtone for their own phones, thus eluding the detection of many of their parents and teachers.

How did I learn about it? Without my knowledge, during a recent sermon, one of our young sound technicians, Miguel Ortiz, played the *mosquito tone* over the sound system to illustrate my point. Unaware of his actions, I looked around the room and noticed the students were all covering their ears while I was preaching. This was likely not the first time they had wanted to do this, but I was puzzled by their honesty. Meanwhile, most of the adults listened to the sermon, unaware of the tone. Anatomically speaking, students can still hear it because they still have the microscopic hairs in their ears that enable them to detect it. As we grow older, these hairs diminish and deteriorate, depriving us of the ability to hear higher-pitched noises.

Voluntarily, we sometimes surrender the ability to hear the still, small voice of God. Does this happen because we are tuned in to every other frequency except the tone of our Father’s voice? Do we still hear the God who hears our cries? The news gets better. Because our God hears, he also cares.

God Our Savior Cares

“I am concerned about their suffering” (Exod. 3:7). God showed compassion to the Israelites when they languished under the oppression of the Egyptians. We must be careful to note that this is not an indictment against all of Egypt for all time.⁶ Instead this story relates to a particular time period of great oppression in Egypt. God had used Joseph’s captivity to preserve Jacob and his family during a time of famine.

Centuries later, a pharaoh emerged who did not know the story of Joseph or the original host and guest relationship (Exod. 1:8). Unfortunately, the relationship had changed, with the Egyptians becoming masters and the Israelites slaves. In this incredibly dark time, God expressed his concern from a burning bush. God our unchanging Savior still cares. As God cared about the oppression of the Israelites, God cares about us. Even now, God cares for the last, the lost, and the least in this world more than we can comprehend. In the New Testament, Peter reminds us, “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). There is still “a wideness in God’s mercy.”⁷

God’s love extends well beyond our own concern for others. In the Old Testament Book of Jonah, the prophet expressed little concern for the Ninevites when God told him to go to Nineveh and proclaim God’s message so that they might repent. Hearing of a similar need, the prophet Isaiah had offered, “Here am I. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8). By fleeing the opposite direction, Jonah said, in effect, *I am not here. Send somebody else.* En route to Tarshish, God sent him a *whale-o-gram* and garnered his undivided attention (Jonah 1:17). There Jonah repented. After he was spared and delivered to the shore, he decided to obey, although he did so grudgingly. One suspects that Jonah really hoped the Ninevites would not repent so that they would be destroyed. After preaching, he took a front row seat on the east side of the city just to watch the fireworks as God destroyed the city (Jonah 4:5).

Jonah was a better preacher than he knew or wanted to be. The people of Nineveh, following their king, responded with surprising

repentance. Imagine Jonah's shock when God saw their repentance and relented of sending calamity on Nineveh. It burned Jonah that Nineveh was not burned.

To teach Jonah a lesson in compassion, God graciously appointed a vine to grow up and give him shade. Jonah loved that vine. Later, God appointed a worm to destroy it. As the vine fell, so did Jonah's countenance. Some of us understand better than others that there is no sunburn like a sunburn on one's head.

God asked Jonah the same question he asks us when we get angry: "Have you any right to be angry?" (Jonah 4:4). When Jonah defended his anger, God indicted him,

You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city? (Jonah 4:10–11).

God cares. This is how we know our God. He is the God who cares, who is willing to save—indeed, who desires to save all people.

God Our Savior Comes to Us

How much does God care? He cares enough to send the very best. In Exodus 3:8 God said, "I have come down to rescue them. . . ." This story foreshadows the incarnation and first coming of Christ. Similar to what Wesley Autry, the subway hero, did, our God dives in and delivers us. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). "God so loved that he gave his only Son" to come into the world (John 3:16). Once again we see God taking the initiative. Salvation belongs to our God!

We celebrate our God's willingness and ability to save. He comes down to rescue. The Exodus account strongly implies that God plans to succeed. When Moses gave all kinds of excuses, God made it clear that he knew Pharaoh and had a plan. God said, in effect, *I know how powerful Pharaoh is, but when this is all over, Pharaoh will know how*

powerful I am. He will know that I am with you. I am mighty to save. God promised to lift the Israelites up and out of this bondage. Can you believe it? God wants to deliver us even more than we want to be delivered.

Later the Israelites lamented leaving Egypt at all. They preferred slavery in Egypt to freedom in their own land.

Ian McConnell was one of the pilots who flew the helicopters into New Orleans on August 30, 2005, when the levee broke after Hurricane Katrina came. In his first three missions, he safely delivered eighty-nine people, three dogs, and one cat out of windows and from rooftops. Still, he remembered the fourth mission best. Why? On that trip he delivered nobody. Unfortunately, the people decided to stay and take their chances there, not knowing how desperate their situation was.⁸ If only they had known that their only chance of deliverance had come, they would have gone willingly and gratefully.

This idea may well explain the reticence of some to trust God to save. Perhaps we do not know how desperate our situation is. *Status quo* is just another way of saying *the mess we are in*. Our desperate situation calls for a deliverer, a savior, one who can rescue us. God wanted to bring the Israelites out of Egypt.

Not only did God save them *from* something. God also saved them *for* something and *to* something. God explained, *I want to take them back to this mountain so they can worship me* (Exod. 3:12). Early in the story we learn what God wants for us: worship. Intimacy with God is better than any other thing God gives to us. To know God and be known by God exceeds by far God's other gifts in this world.

Not only did the Israelites leave their Egyptian bondage, but they came into a spacious land, fulfilling the word *yasha*, which means *to come into an accommodating space, to have breathing room, to be free of captivity and bondage*. Jesus asked the lame man by the pool of Bethesda, "Do you want to get well?" (John 5:6). Literally Jesus inquired, *Do you want to be made whole and complete?* This remains God's question today. If we will receive it, our God not only rescues but also redeems.

God as Kinsman Redeemer (Ruth)

When I think I have had a bad day, I remember James. James grew up in our extended family after his mom died of an aneurysm on the night he was born. Early in his life, James was raised by his dad, who remarried after his mom's death. His parents and grandparents loved him greatly. Tragically, before James reached the age of twelve, both his dad and his step-mom died. One of my brothers and his wife raised James in their home, taking him to one of our Texas Baptist churches. There James experienced love and grew as a disciple. Recently, while in his early twenties, he was killed by a drunk driver. Our family wondered, when all of life caves in, what then? We may wonder aloud in times like this: *Is God there? Does God care?* Pastor Jeff Warren's sermon at James's funeral confirmed God's compassion to our whole family. God gave our family the chance to know and love James for the season we shared. Even that tragedy is redeemed by the promise of eternal life. Having endured multiple tragedies, Ruth and Naomi may have wondered also, but they found a redeemer.

God saves us by redeeming us. The Hebrew language offers us a number of words that speak of redemption. One is the word *goel*, which speaks of a kinsman who redeems.⁹ The classic example of the kinsman-redeemer is the love story of Boaz and Ruth. Their love story started in the biblical time period of the Judges. In a season of great famine, a man named Elimelech took his wife Naomi and his sons Mahlon and Kilion, left Bethlehem, and moved over across the Jordan to Moab. There the sons broke God's covenant by intermarrying with the Moabites, who worshiped different gods. Mahlon and Kilion married Orpah and Ruth, respectively.

Then things became worse when Elimelech, the father, died. Not long afterward, Naomi's sons both died, leaving three widows in Moab. Naomi decided to go home, but she didn't want to take her Moabite daughters-in-law with her, thinking their best chances for remarriage and survival were in their own country. Taking the opportunity, Orpah stayed, but Ruth would not. We remember her extraordinary words of devotion:

Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die and there I will be buried. May the lord deal with me be it ever so severely if anything but death separates you and me (Ruth 1:17).

Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem. When her relatives saw Naomi, they were glad to see her, but she was bitter. She said, “Don’t call me Naomi. Call me Mara because the Almighty has made my life very bitter” (Ruth 1:20). Clearly, she was grieving the loss of her family. But things were about to change. The barley harvest had begun. Ruth went to the field to pick up the leftovers—to glean after the workers harvested. While there the Lord smiled on her, and grace transformed her great grief into great joy.

You have heard of Murphy’s law? *Everything that can go wrong, will go wrong.* Ruth might have considered Murphy an optimist. First, Ruth was a young widow in a time when a single woman was defenseless and helpless, without rights or income. Second, Ruth had no children. In the Old Testament, children often served as an asset rather than a financial liability. In Ruth’s case, when they were grown up, they would have helped to support their mother. Third, Ruth lived in a foreign land where she had no rights at all. The Israelites did not look with favor on the Moabites.¹⁰ In some cases, a foreign woman turned to prostitution for survival. Ruth had three strikes against her.

Nearly everything that could have gone wrong in Ruth’s life at this point had gone wrong, but things were about to change. God’s law trumps Murphy’s law. Paul captured this in his letter to the Romans. He wrote, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

When everything had gone wrong, the one Person who could help Ruth was working actively for her welfare. Even though Ruth was totally incapable of saving or helping herself, Someone was looking out for her. Out of all the fields in Bethlehem, when she went out to work, she happened to choose the one owned by Boaz, a relative of her husband’s family.

First among Boaz's amazing credentials was his personal knowledge of the Lord. He knew the Lord, and he blessed others in the name of the Lord, trusting God's providence in his own life and Ruth's (Ruth 2:4, 12). Boaz was all about God. If we ever find anyone who has a heart for God, we should knit our souls to that person.

We counsel our young people at Tallowood Baptist Church that at the top of the list of qualities they look for in a mate, they should seek this one first: a heart for God. Once one determines to seek a person with a heart for God, then nobody else need even apply for the job.

Boaz talked a lot about God, but how do we know he really knew the Lord? We see it in the way he treated people—his employees and Ruth, a stranger in Israel.

After 9/11 in the United States, we have witnessed considerable *xenophobia*—literally *fear of foreigners* but in many cases *dislike of foreigners*. We may be sure of this: when we are kind to a stranger and help a helpless person from another country, we are very near to the heart of our God. God has welcomed Gentiles like us into his family.

We marvel at the way Boaz provided food for Ruth (Ruth 2:8, 16) and protected her (Ruth 2:9, 22). The law of the Old Testament was to be kind to strangers, but foreigners, especially young single servant girls, were often abused. Thankfully, Boaz protected her from harm, not allowing others to take advantage of her. We also learn that Boaz cared enough about her to know her story (Ruth 2:11). She wondered at his grace, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?" (Ruth 2:10). He talked to her and invited her to eat with him.

Ultimately, Boaz became her kinsman-redeemer. In Israel if a man died, a close family member could buy his land. The law also required him to take the widow as his wife, knowing that the children born would belong to the deceased. This law kept a person's family lineage alive if he died. Recognizing this possibility, Naomi sent Ruth to lie at the feet of Boaz on the threshing floor. When Boaz woke up, she proposed marriage to him by putting the corner of his blanket over herself. Depicted in Hollywood, this story might have become steamy, but Boaz lived with integrity. Because Ruth was not his wife,

he carefully protected her and her reputation (Ruth 3:13–15). One other kinsman had a prior claim, but that kinsman refused his right to redeem.

Ruth's love story is a story of grace. Boaz, for no apparent reason, showed kindness to her as her kinsman redeemer, agreeing to purchase her land and also to marry her. Our salvation love story with God is also a story filled with grace. We are empty without God, but God makes our lives full. We do not choose God, but God chooses us, loves us, and saves us. Our God is, has always been, and always will be the God who is mighty to save.

Love does not balk at the cost. Given the chance, Boaz redeemed Ruth because he was willing to marry her, no matter what it cost him.

As a boy, Chiune Sugihara dreamed of becoming Japan's ambassador to Russia. By the 1930s, as ambassador to Lithuania, he was a step away from fulfilling his dream. One morning a huge throng gathered outside his home. Sugihara learned they were Jews who had fled there from Poland, seeking Sugihara's help for Japanese visas that would permit them to escape the German Gestapo. Three times Sugihara wired Tokyo for permission to provide the visas; three times his request was rejected. Sugihara, a committed Christian, had to choose between his dream and the lives of the crowd. Sugihara chose to disobey orders. For the next twenty-eight days, he wrote visas by hand, barely sleeping or eating. Recalled to Berlin, he departed still writing visas and shoving them through the train window into the hands of refugees running alongside. Ultimately his work saved 6,000 lives.

Back in Japan, Sugihara's remaining days were spent selling light bulbs. When his story was finally told, his son was asked, "How did your father feel about his choice?" His answer surprises, "My father's life was fulfilled. When God needed him to do the right thing, he was available to do it."¹¹

What did Jesus give up to redeem us? Everything. He paid a high price to purchase our souls.

Given the chance, God redeemed us. Like Ruth, we are trophies of grace. Ruth later became the great-grandmother of the great King. This is a great love story. Is it ours? Can you believe God redeems us and makes us God's own?

God as Redeemer of Our Rebellion (Hosea)

Did you hear about the man who wanted his kidney back? A Long Island, New York, surgeon embroiled in a divorce proceeding wanted his estranged wife to return the kidney he donated to her, although he says he'll settle for \$1.5 million in compensation.¹² The surgeon said he decided to go public with his demand for kidney compensation because he had grown frustrated with the negotiations with his estranged wife. Dr. Batista fought back tears after talking about a bitter divorce battle he's embroiled in with his estranged wife. Apparently, he gave his kidney to his wife and afterward accused her of infidelity.

Whether or not his allegations are true, the story raises a question: If someone saved your life, could you ever be unfaithful to that person? Just as unfaithfulness frequently makes the news today, God's people proved unfaithful to him again and again.

Another Old Testament word for salvation is *padah*, which means *to redeem by giving something in exchange*.¹³ An example emerges from the story of the Old Testament prophet Hosea.

A preacher named Hosea in the Northern Kingdom of Israel received a word from God telling him to marry Gomer, a woman who had a rather poor reputation. We can imagine that she lived up to the meaning of *Gomer*, her name, which means *beautiful*. Perhaps for a season, their union was beautiful. Over time, Gomer began to stray, eventually leaving Hosea altogether.¹⁴ God sent Hosea to find her. Hosea's personal story mirrored the story of God and the Israelites. As Hosea married Gomer, and then lost her to unfaithfulness, so God loved Israel, but Israel pursued other gods.

Unquestionably, God has been faithful to us. We sing, "Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!"¹⁵ What if we changed the pronouns? Could we sing to God, "Great is [our] faithfulness, Lord unto [you]"? The real question is, *Have we been faithful to God? Have we loved anyone or anything more than we love God?* Like Gomer, we sometimes rebel and run from God's love. What if we walk away from God? Will God stop loving us? No. God has redeemed us with something more precious than silver and barley (see Hosea 3:2). He bought us with the

precious blood of his only Son. Our God answers our rebellion with redemption!

Like Hosea, God redeems his people and brings us back to himself. God pleaded with Israel to return to him. He agonized over their sinful choices. Sometimes we think of our sin and skip immediately to the forgiveness. But Hosea reminds us of God's anguish over sin. Even so, God says to those who are not his own, you are loved; you are my people (Hosea 2:23).

The Lord told Hosea to go and love his wife again. Years ago, my pastor Larry Nixon interpreted these verses in a powerful sermon. After Gomer left Hosea, she came back through the town on an auction block. At first, Hosea bid pieces of silver, all the money he had, but it was not enough. So he added to his bid a homer and a half of barley, perhaps all the food they had left in the house (Hosea 3:2). He gave everything he had to buy his wife back out of adultery. The Book of Hosea shows us God's redemptive love for us.

In Paul's Letter to the Romans, Paul told our story in similar terms, "God commends his love toward us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). In our story of salvation: it is not our love for God that brought us to him, but God's love for us!

This divine love draws us inexorably to God. Will we return to God? "Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD until he comes and showers righteousness on you" (Hosea 10:12).

This Amazing Story

I once heard an amazing story of redemption. Years ago during war-time, an American went to a foreign country on assignment, leaving his wife behind. For a period of time, he wrote and declared his love for her. Then one day the letters stopped coming. After a while, the wife's worst fears were realized. Her husband had fallen in love with a woman in the other country. He would not be coming home after all. His wife was heartbroken. Sometime later, word came that he had died there. A strange letter bearing an unthinkable request followed

in the mail. The woman her husband had loved in the other country had borne two children to him. Would she, the forsaken wife, bring them to the United States so they could escape the ravages of war? Amazingly, the wife brought them. This is redeeming love, like the love of the heavenly Father. What would we do if someone loved us like that? Wouldn't we love in return?

These amazing words and stories of salvation remind us that our God is our Savior, our Kinsman-Redeemer and the Lover who remains faithful even when we are not. From the beginning our Lord has always been the God who saves.

A pastor at my ordination at Westside Baptist Church in Great Falls, Montana, prayed with these unforgettable words, "Lord, you are a great God and a mighty Savior." He was right. This is good news for us, because more than anything, we need a Savior. In the next chapter we'll discover the reason.