

God's Burning Heart

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 00] Well, I wonder if you've been with us the last few weeks in Hosea, how you think this book is going to end. There's no spoilers when it comes to the Bible, of course.

If you've read to the end, that is okay. Perhaps you want to read to the end to see how it will end, because where we finished last time in chapter 10, we might have been left asking, where is there left to go for God and his people?

We saw the big picture at the beginning of this book, how God promised to put back together the broken relationship with his people, to fix his broken marriage with his bride.

But from chapter 4, God has led us down a track that seems to go only in one direction, and that seems to be to judgment. The track has gotten narrower and narrower, darker and darker the further we've gone on, because as God puts it in our passage today, the more I called, the more they went away from me.

His voice is now fading into the distance. His people can barely hear him call. Surely now then, Israel has come to the end of the track.

[1 : 19] Where is there left to go with this story? Well, this morning, as he has done so often, Hosea wants to shock us again. Remember, if you can, how you pictured Hosea's living room.

You sat, didn't we, looking at the family photos on the wall. And today, we are back in that living room, and Hosea gets out another picture album, and he tells us another story, this time the story of a father and a son.

And if we were beginning to feel like we know how this story is going to end, we feel like we're beginning to get a grasp on God's heart.

Hosea wants to blow our hearts wide open again today, to see again that God is not tame. His love is not chained down.

For we find that even to the furthest, the narrowest, the darkest end of that track of sin and punishment, God's heart still burns with a pure, a fierce, a holy love for his sinful people in his desire to save them.

[2 : 34] So let's listen then to Hosea as he tells the story of the father and his son, beginning, firstly, with the son's stubborn rebellion. When Israel was a child, I loved him.

And out of Egypt, I called my son. My son. Now, someone said to me the other week that the number of illustrations that Hosea seems to flick back and forth between can feel quite dizzying at times.

The bride, now the vine, now a son. That's not unique to Hosea. It's part of the way the prophets wrote. They love an illustration. And so if you're feeling a little bit dizzy, that's normal.

But this story should by now sound familiar to us because with each new illustration Hosea uses, each new story he tells, he's simply deepening our understanding of the one truth that he has been preaching to us.

So what's the story? God saying Israel is like a son to him who he loved and called out of slavery in Egypt.

[3 : 47] Nearly a thousand years earlier, he sent Moses with these words to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Israel is my firstborn son. And I told you, let my son go, that he may worship me.

Imagine the intensity with which a father would work night and day to free his son from slavery. You would not rest, would you? You would think of nothing else until he was free.

Well, that was God, the father of his firstborn Israel. So strong with his love. He threatened Pharaoh, the most powerful man on earth at the time.

If you refuse to let my firstborn son go, I will kill your firstborn son. This is the fierce love of a protective father, isn't it?

But what did his firstborn Israel do once he was free? Out of Egypt I called my son, verse 2, but the more they were called, the more they went away from me.

[4 : 54] Dad, thanks for saving me, they say. But now I'm free. I'm going to live my own life.

And I'm going to live it without you. And if that wasn't tragic enough, the more God called after his son, the faster Israel walked. The harder Israel rebelled.

The less Israel cared. They found themselves new gods, surrogate fathers. They sacrificed to the Baals. They burnt incense to images. So Israel, Hosea wants us to see Israel as like a rebellious teenage son.

He's not at home with mom and dad, Hosea and Goma. They don't know where he is. Hosea gets out that photo album. He dusts off the cover.

He opens up. Look, he said, this is when he was learning to walk. And I held his hands. Verse 3.

This is when I held him in my arms and rocked him to sleep.

[5 : 57] Verse 4. This is when I knelt down to feed him when he was hungry and wailing. Friends, do you see that this is God remembering being a new dad?

It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms. But they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love.

To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek. I bent down to feed them. But now my firstborn wants nothing to do with me, says the Lord.

If you have difficult relationships with your grown-up children, perhaps especially if they have not gone the way that you directed them in life, you know how this feels.

It is heart-wrenching, isn't it? That is what Israel had done to God. And this is not a new story to us, is it? This has been the story Hosea has told us from the start of this book.

[7 : 03] And it is our story. Our story. Perhaps this morning this story fits your story, your life more vividly, more closely than others.

Perhaps. Perhaps you know what it's like to have wanted nothing to do with God. Perhaps even now you are sitting outwardly in church.

But inwardly you are running and hiding from him. If that is you, Hosea is telling your story. This is your life.

But on another level, friends, whose story isn't this? Who of us hasn't taken God's tender care and fatherly love for granted?

Told him in our words, our hearts, our lives, even in light of the cross. Even in light of his taking us out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his son.

[8 : 04] Which of us has not ever told him, this is my life? And I'll live it with ye or without ye.

Brothers and sisters, we might not, I hope we are not, worshipping at shrines to other gods.

Shouting vitriol at God. But this is not someone else's story, is it? We know that in various times, in various ways, we ourselves have turned from God's voice.

Thrown his love back in his face. Lived unfaithfully to him. We personally have done that. Whether or not we are Christians today.

And we collectively have done that as God's church. We have been the rebellious son. Perhaps some of us still are today.

So we know where this goes next. If we know the story, on to our second point. The son's wrong return. Or we think we know where it's going.

[9 : 04] Just glance down at verse 5 with me. Will they not return to Egypt? Will not Assyria rule over them? Because they refuse to repent. We saw last time the threat of God's punishment for them back then, for Israel, was the Assyrians were going to invade.

They were going to wipe them off the map. That's what verse 6 is describing. But something we didn't have time to pick up on was that strange kind of pairing of Assyria and Egypt together.

See that? Will they not return to Egypt? Will not Assyria rule over them? Two ways of asking the same question. The answer to both of them is yes.

But how can that be true? I've got a map just to flash up on the screen here to help us see it. Here's the problem. Assyria is there at the top. Okay, see that?

Israel is down in the bottom left-hand corner. In the middle is a little dot that says Jerusalem. So how can returning to Egypt be the same thing as being conquered by Syria?

[10 : 11] How can they go north and south at one and the same time? Well, it's as if Hosea is playing a word association game with us. Have you ever played that sort of game?

He's played it with us a few times. I say a word, and you tell me the first word that pops into your head. God, he says, and we say, Father.

Israel. And we say, Son. Assyria, he says, and we say, Egypt. He's played this game before. Nine verse three.

They will not remain in the Lord's land. Ephraim will return to Egypt and eat unclean food in Assyria. What does he want us to see? That being conquered by Assyria is the same thing as returning to slavery in Egypt.

If God's handing his people back over to the same fate he rescued them out of, it's an undoing of the story of the Exodus. You wanted to live life without me, says the Lord.

[11:16] Well, don't worry. You will. If you wanted your old life back, you can have it. Okay, it won't be Egypt, but it will be as good as going back there.

Okay, it won't be slavery, but it will be dread and darkness and death. Do you see what he's saying? Israel's teenage rebellion is leading straight back to the place where God found him. And while, yes, it is a punishment for his sin, it is a punishment that this son has chosen. That's there in verse 5. There's a telling kind of play on words there.

If you just have a look in verse 5. Will they not return to Egypt because they refuse to repent? Return, repent.

It's telling because in Hebrew, those two words are the same word. Shuv, to turn, to return. So we could put it like this. Will they not return to Egypt because they refuse to turn around?

[12:20] Israel is walking the old road back to slavery. And when he gets there, it will be because he has refused to turn back.

He will have no one to blame but himself. Like the son in Jesus' parable, he asks for his share of the inheritance, he goes and blows it, living the life of his dreams, and ends up eating pig food out of a pig trough.

How did he get there? Well, he chose to be there, didn't he? By following his own heart, doing his own thing, and refusing to turn back to the Father.

See, do we know today, friends, what is the worst thing God could do to us? What is the worst thing that God could do to us in our sin? The worst thing God could do to us in our sin is give us what we want.

Hand us over to our rebellion. Let us find out for ourselves where the broad and easy way ends. C.S. Lewis is right when he says that there are only two kinds of people in the end.

[13:25] Those who say to God, thy will be done. And those to whom God will say in the end, thy will be done. All that are in hell, he says, choose it.

Hosea has told us much about God's judgment, but if we only learn one thing about judgment from Hosea, let it be this. Hell is what we deserve. It is the right punishment for our sins.

But if we find ourselves there, it will not be because we have sinned. It will be because we have refused to turn to God for his forgiveness.

Because we have not repented. Because we have not stopped in our tracks when we heard God's voice and gone back to him and his life and his love.

I long to redeem you, he says. Remember Jesus' words. How often would I have gathered you under my wings? He is so willing, friends, to receive us when we turn to him.

[14:28] Are we willing to turn? Are we willing to turn? That is the question. The reason this destruction is coming, verse 7, is because my people are determined to turn from me.

They are hell-bent on their own destruction. And that is just what they will receive if they do not turn from their sin to the Lord. That is what we will face if we do not repent.

So where is there left to go with this? Well, this is where Hosea shocks us again with who God is in his holy love.

Way back, I said this book kind of turns from anger to love to jealousy to warmth. God is not a man like us. He says that here.

His heart does not change. But a human father's heart would be churning endlessly, wouldn't it, over his rebellious son.

[15:30] And Hosea wants us to feel something then of the passionate love of God that still burns for his sinful people. Wants us to see, thirdly, the father's burning hearts.

Okay, just have a little look at verse 8. Can you take this in? Can you just take that in? He's just said he will punish them. But now what does he say, verse 8?

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Adma? How can I make you like Zebion? What's his question?

How can I? How can I? It's the question that God asks himself as he considers this punishment. How can I do it? My heart is changed within me.

All my compassion is aroused. God is saying that. Can we let that just rest on our hearts? Here is God. And his people have treated him like dirt on the bottom of their shoes.

[16:35] And yet, from the depths of his heart, he cannot bring himself to give them what they truly deserve. In fact, this verse is where we got the title for our whole series, God's Burning Heart, because it captures the heartbeat, the pulse of this book.

What is God's heart towards people like us? Rebellious and sinful people. Well, here are a couple of translations to help us get what this verse is saying.

My heart is torn within me, and my compassion overflows. My heart recoils within me. My compassion grows warm and tender.

God's heart is overcome. And it burns. His compassion burns towards a sinful people.

And with what kind of love? Well, here's the shock. Here's the shock. What kind of love? It is holy love. Holy love, verse 9.

[17:42] I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God and not a man, the Holy One among you. The Holy One.

Okay, this is God as we rarely see him, even in church. We tell ourselves, don't we, that God's holiness means he must punish sin.

But here is God saying, because I am holy, my heart burns with love towards sinners. How can he say that?

Well, the problem is not in God, is it? The problem is in our understanding of God. We imagine sometimes that we, his holiness and his love are in conflict.

But that cannot be. God cannot be conflicted or torn. What then is holy love? Well, we tend to think of God's holiness as being his purity, his freedom from sin.

[18:44] Now, it is not less than that, but it is much, much more. God's holiness is his being who he is. His uniqueness, his perfection.

That he is completely other than us in his character. Unlike us with our human makeup, our culture, our psychology, our history.

God is completely free from needing or having to think or feel or say anything other than what arises from within his own heart.

God is why he does not. That is why he does not ever change. Because he is only ever true to himself. What he thinks, what he says, what he does, he thinks and says and does simply because he is who he is.

Is that not what he said way back? What shall I tell people you are? I am who I am, he said. And none of us can say that, can we? None of us can claim to simply be who or what we are.

[19:51] We want to find something to kind of compare God to. And he says, I am incomparable. He is who he is. I am who I am. So then where is there left for God to go with this relationship so far gone, so near the bitter end?

Anywhere. There is still anywhere for God to go with it. God can take this relationship any way that he wants. You see that?

Because he is not following the standard processes and procedures. He is not reading the textbook for how to deal with sinful people.

He's not putting formulas into a spreadsheet to try to work out how he should do it. It is in that sense that God is saying he is God and not a man, that he's the holy one.

We think that because God is holy, he must punish sin. Well, Hosea says it is because God is holy. That he is free to love and to forgive and to show grace.

[21:03] God puts it better than I could in Isaiah 55. For my thoughts are not your thoughts. Neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways.

And my thoughts than your thoughts. His thoughts are not just better than our thoughts. It's like comparing the tiny patch of earth that we can see with the whole expanse and the glory of the cosmos.

It's stars and galaxies. He's saying, I have holy thoughts. You have lowly thoughts. And what are those holy and high thoughts? What has he just said in Isaiah 55?

He has just said this. See, friends, it is because our God is holy.

Because there is none like him. That he can freely love us and offer forgiveness in the face of our sin. However far down that track to destruction we have gone.

[22 : 18] We talk lightly about unconditional love. We do not see it, though, do we, out there or in here. Today, our human love has limits, as few as they might be.

We quickly run out of love when we ourselves are not loved. But God is not like that. He can love truly and freely, unconditionally, unstopably, and forever, even when we have sinned so long and so deeply against him.

Because he does not need to be loved. He doesn't punish us because he needs to. He doesn't love us because he needs to. Instead, he withholds his punishment.

And holds out instead his love because he wants to. He wants to. What did God want to do?

Well, he says he wants to turn his wrath aside. He says, verse 9, I will not carry out my fierce anger. How is he going to do that? Well, he's going to rewrite our story in Christ.

[23 : 30] Now, it's one of the lesser known Christmas verses. He said at Christmas, okay, still a couple of months away. But did verse 1 ring a bell for anyone when we read that?

When Israel was a child, I loved him. And out of Egypt, I called my son. Matthew quotes that in his gospel. When the angel tells Joseph to take Mary and the child Jesus to safety.

Because Herod is coming to kill the firstborn children. He's coming to kill the newborn king from God. So the family go down to Egypt. And Matthew writes to verse 15.

Last week, we saw Jesus is the new true vine.

In place of the old false vine of Israel. So this week, the gospel tells us Jesus is the new true son. In place of the stubborn and rebellious son.

[24 : 31] And it is in this son that we today can be saved from our sin and its punishment. God called his firstborn son Israel out of Egypt and he rebelled.

But now God was to send his one and only son into the world to rewrite the story. He, the son, Jesus Christ, would go down to Egypt.

And out of Egypt, God would call his son once again. But this time, his son would not rebel. He would obey his father's will in everything.

Even to death on a cross. Jesus, God would say, this is my son who I love, with whom I am well pleased. Jesus lived the perfect, the obedient life that we have not lived.

But how did he die? Well, he was overthrown. As God laid on him the rebellion, the sin, the guilt of his people, of us ourselves, and crushed him on the cross.

[25 : 37] Because not only was his son to give us his righteous life, but he was to take away our sin. That is where God turned aside his wrath from us.

That is where God fulfilled this desire of his heart. When at the cross, his true and perfect son suffered and died in our place. We heard from John's gospel earlier, For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

That is what our holy God did, because that is what he wanted to do. That is what he planned for eternity. As he said of his sinful people, Me and you, how can I give you up to what you deserve? My heart is overcome within me. All my compassion burns. And God's heart still burns, friends, to this day with an un failing love for sinners, a desire to spare us from the punishment that we deserve.

What then can we say to this love? Well, finally, let's turn. Let's come to him, to the sound of the Father's sovereign call.

[26 : 59] God said in chapter 5, he was a lion hunting down his people to get them back. Well, now God says he is a lion with a different strategy. Just have a look at verse 10.

They will follow the Lord. He will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west. They will come from Egypt, trembling like sparrows, from Assyria fluttering like doves.

I will settle them in their homes, declares the Lord. What will God do? He will simply roar for them. And at the sound of his voices, people would return.

Broken, humbled, chastened, trembling to him again. Lots of people think that chapter 11 is the most beautiful chapter in the book of Hosea.

I happen to think these verses are some of the most beautiful verses in the Bible. Because we know that whatever God has done, whatever he has tried, his bride, his son, his people have refused to turn.

[28 : 07] The more I called them, the more they went away, he says. But now, in the last hour, the 11th hour, just one step between his people and the outer darkness and the fire that is not quenched, what does God do?

He roars from heaven with such love and such power that even these ears that were deaf to his calls are opened. Even these hearts that were stone-cold dead come alive again.

At the sound of his call, the son determines not to come home, cannot help but turn back and come home to the father again.

Where is there left to go in this relationship? Well, brothers and sisters, so great is God's power that the sound of his voice reaches to the very edge of destruction.

The sound of his voice, our sinful will is broken. Our hearts are made near and we see our need to return to him whatever it costs us, to come to him trembling.

[29 : 16] This love is a holy love and it is an unstoppable love. You know, I said God spares us his punishment. He loves us in Christ because he wants to.

And God always gets what he wants. God always gets what he wants. Those he calls, he also justifies. And those he justifies, he also glorifies.

So what do we say to such power and love today? Well, such fierce and holy love should strike a kind of fear into our hearts. Remember, friends, his love is not pain.

He is not safe. He is the holy one who today roars from heaven and his voice makes his people tremble like sparrows as we come to him.

This is a loving cry that breaks our hearts and brings us to our knees and should strip us of our pride. And so we turn to God then in worship, in awe, in wonder of the one who loved us and gave himself for us at such cost to himself to bring us home to him.

[30 : 30] His love is free. It is infinite. But if we have learned anything about his love from Hosea, friends, it is this. His love is not cheap and it is not light.

We do not come and go from God as we please. We come in fearful wonder of a God who would love us enough to save us from our sin.

And so we must come asking his forgiveness. We must come trembling to his voice. Hosea puts it like this. These are the ones I look on with favor.

Those who are humble and contrite in heart and who tremble at my word. Israel's foot hangs over the edge of destruction.

Ultimately, the nation was to fall. But a day would come when the voice of God was heard again in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

[31 : 27] And his people, hearing his cry of love, would come to him again to be forgiven of their sins, to be put right with him. And that day is today. And those people are us if our trust is in the Lord Jesus.

And friends, if it is not ye, well, today, God calls from heaven again as his word is open and as Christ is offered and held out to ye.

Friends, do you not hear him calling ye to himself to come trembling to him to receive his eternal love in Christ.

If you have not turned, would you not turn to him now and put your trust in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and know his love that lasts forever.

Let's pray together. gracious God and loving heavenly Father, would you come to ye trembling in awe and wonder at such a love that would go to such lengths to save us from our sin against you?

[32 : 46] Father, we thank you that you are one who does not give us what our sins deserve, but instead have taken them away through the death of Christ as far as the east is from the west, that you have instead poured out your love and grace upon us.

And so, Father, we pray that if we are in him today, that we would know the height and depth, the breadth and length of the love of Christ for us, that we would rest secure in your love, that we would come to you daily trembling, trembling at your word, thanking you that you have called us to yourself so freely.

And, Father, we pray for those who today as yet do not know your love. And, Father, how we pray that you would call them, that you would break their hearts and that they would come to you asking forgiveness of their sins, knowing that you freely forgive. this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.