

Tough Love

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 September 2022

Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 00] I saved every letter you wrote me. From the moment I read them, I knew you were mine.

You said you were mine. I thought you were mine. Do you know what Angelica said when we saw your first letter arrive? She said, be careful with that one, love.

He will do what it takes to survive. Now I'm rereading the letters you wrote me. I'm searching and scanning for answers in every line for some kind of sign.

For when you were mine, the world seemed to burn. How does it feel to be cheated on by someone you are married to?

We began a new series in the book of Hosea last week. And we saw that that is the question that God puts to us as he invites us to understand his heart towards his people at this point in his story.

[1 : 09] How would it feel to be cheated on by your husband, your wife? Some of you might recognize the lyrics that I read there. They come from the musical Hamilton.

It tells the story of one of America's founding fathers, Alexander Hamilton. And that song is sung by his wife, Eliza, when she finds out that her husband has spent the last year paying to sleep with another woman.

How does she feel? Well, distraught. Doesn't quite get it. She rakes through their history together. She doubts their relationship all the way back to the beginning.

She tears up his letters. And as she does so, her heart burns with wounded love and jealousy and fury and pain.

And at the start of this book, that is how God invites us to see him. It's an incredible thought, isn't it?

[2 : 18] He told Hosea to become the husband of an unfaithful wife because that is what I am, he said. Remember those shocking words we read from chapter 1? Go marry a whore and get children with a whore.

For the country itself has become nothing but a whore by abandoning Yahweh. Hosea is telling us the story of God's broken marriage to his people.

We saw last time that despite Israel's unfaithfulness, that God would remain faithful. He pledged himself to keep his wedding vows, to keep his covenant promises, that he would not give up his people.

His heart still burned with love towards them. But today in the first part of chapter 2, we're going to see that God's faithful love is sometimes tough love.

Tough love. He is a husband who would stop at nothing to get back his bride. But such fierce love, such burning passion, well, it has terrifying consequences for a bride who is determined to leave and not come back.

[3 : 36] Let's see then God's tough love. We see it first in his condition on their relationship, his condition. We finished last time hearing God speak to the children of his marriage.

Chapter 2, verse 1. Say, of your brothers my people, of your sisters my loved one. And in verse 2, he's still speaking here to the children. If you glance down there at verse 2 with me, where he says, Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife and I am not her husband.

And it's as if the relationship has broken down so far that husband and wife are no longer on speaking terms. They have to pass messages back and forth through the children.

Tell your mother to stop. Tell your father it's no good. You could cut the tension in this home with a knife, couldn't you? But what is the message they're sending?

Well, that word rebuke in Hebrew has the sense of presenting a legal case to someone. So it's as if Hosea has taken us to family court. God has begun a legal process.

[4 : 44] And it seems to be a process to dissolve the union. She is not my wife. I am not her husband. But how final is verse 2? Is this where God draws the line?

Is this the final word? Or is there a bit more to say? In the marriage analogy, it's the equivalent of God saying, as he did in chapter 1, verse 9, you are not my people and I am not your God. But we saw last time that isn't God's final word, is it? The very next verse. He said in the very place it was said to them, you are not my people. It will be said, children of the living God. And so it is a serious thing to say, isn't it? But it doesn't have to be that way. It doesn't have to be that way. It's a threat.

But it is still a condition. What is the condition? Well, look, here are God's terms, verse 2. Let her remove the adulterous look from her face and unfaithfulness from between her breasts.

[5 : 50] What does he want? Well, he wants the flirting and the flings to be over. An end to the late night visits from the idols and the kings of the day.

In short, he wants his wife back, his people back, doesn't he? Not in name only, but in reality, body and soul, her love to be set apart for him.

Remember what he promised on our wedding day, he says. Forsaking all others. Well, now that has to be more than words. Forsake all others.

Forsake all others. And notice it's more than a condition. In a way, it's an ultimatum. See that verse 3? How does it begin? Otherwise.

Here's the ultimatum. Let her stop being unfaithful. Or, verse 3, I will strip her naked. I will make her like a desert. I will not show my love to her children.

[6 : 55] It's like three wedding vows in reverse. I will. I will. I will. Now, I hope I don't need to say that this book is not God's handbook for husbands and wives.

Okay? This is not God's advice for how to deal with breakdown in the home. No, remember, it's telling the story of God's covenant relationship in history to the northern kingdom of Israel as it was in the 750s BC.

This is how God deals with a nation that he took to himself, that he called by his name, and that has thrown his love back in his face again and again.

And so what does it mean for him to strip Israel naked as on the day she was born? Well, it's God saying that he will take them right back to where he found them.

It's a bit like Eliza tearing up the love letters her husband had written her back to where they started. I found you in the desert, he said. You were naked, and I clothed you.

[8 : 05] You were hungry, and I fed you. You were thirsty, and I gave you water. I led you to Sinai where I married you. I made my covenant there with you.

But all of that is undone. If you are determined not to be my bride, it's back to the desert, back to the hunger, back to the nakedness, back to the thirst.

I will take you back there, he says. That's what God is threatening here. And that is a vivid, vivid picture of the end of the northern kingdom as the empire of Assyria swept through and took the people out of the land back into the wilderness to enslave them.

And once they were evicted from the land, then that final I will, I will not show my love to her children because they are children of adultery, he says. He is threatening them the end of the northern kingdom, the end, end, if, if condition.

They did not stop their unfaithfulness. That is the ultimatum that God gives them. Now, friends, this is intense, isn't it?

[9 : 23] It is intense. And maybe we feel a bit threatened by it. But we need then to see where we stand today as God's people, if we are in Christ, if we are Christians.

Well, how do we hear this message in this drama? Well, remember that this is God speaking to his children to go to their mother and correct her, to remind her who she is and what it was that she promised to be to him.

She is the bride of Christ. She was lost and he found her. She was dying of thirst and he fed her living water.

She was hungry, starving. He gave her bread from heaven, the bread that never perishes. She was naked. He clothed her with his own robe of perfect righteousness.

She was set to die in her sins. And he gave his life, poured out his blood on the cross, that she would not die, but be washed clean of her sins and live with him forever.

[10 : 28] Friends, is that not who we are? Is that not us? Is that not the church of Christ today? Is that not our identity, his bride, his loved one, the ones who he gave his life to wed to himself, to be united to?

Friends, we are not today in relationship to Christ, the girlfriend, okay, waiting for the proposal, being on our best behavior, trying to live up to his expectations, waiting, hoping, longing for a wedding day.

The wedding day has happened and we are his bride. That is our identity, his loved one, the ones who are united to him forever. This is the identity that we have by his grace.

And so the ultimatum God gives us, it's not a call for us to try harder, to brush ourselves up, dust ourselves clean, get dressed up for church on a Sunday, anything like that.

No, it's a reminder of who we are now. That we are his bride. That we are his loved one. And a call then to live as his bride.

[11 : 44] To live as his loved one. To live out of that identity. He has set his everlasting love upon us. And so bride of Christ, church of the living God, do not forget who you are.

Let us give our love to him wholeheartedly. Let us belong to none other. Let us live our lives under the shadow of his love.

Let us keep our vows to him. Let us not stray from him. We love, don't we? We love because we have been loved. We love because he first loved us.

God is reminding us, isn't he, friends, that if a church forgets who she is and cheats on Christ and throws his love back in his face and does not keep her vows to him, he will not stand idly by.

There will be consequences. When he is not on speaking terms with his church, when his word is not being opened and read and preached and heard, well, sometimes he will send his children, individual Christians, to go and correct and challenge sin and idolatry.

[13 : 03] To deliver his ultimatum. If a church does not give up her idols and turn back to Christ, if that goes on long enough, well, eventually he will take her back to where he found her and strip her and leave her naked.

We know that, don't we? We see it in our city. We see it throughout the northeast of Scotland.

Church buildings that were once built to house healthy gospel churches turned now into what?

Restaurants, flats, hotels left empty. What changed? What changed? Our society would tell us that this is inevitable.

Church conversions are just part of the steady march of society towards a secular society. It's all part of progress. Christ would tell us differently. What did he say to those churches on the day that the doors closed for the last time?

You have forsaken the love you had at first. You have forsaken the love you had at first. That is what he said. Friends, that's why those churches are gone.

[14 : 20] And so if we are the children of God, well, let us then be ready to call the church to wholehearted devotion to Christ, where we see sin and idolatry not being turned back from.

Let us say so. Some of you I know have suffered for doing that. Some of us here have suffered for challenging that. Felt the anger, the rage of the church at being challenged in her idolatry.

If that is you, however painful that has been for you, know that you did what was right when you did it. God calls us, his children, to remind our mother, the church, who she is, that she is his bride, and to live like it.

And let us as a church. And let us as a church, let us as a church then never forget our identity is bright. And let us strive to live in union with him, to love, honor, and obey him for as long as we shall live.

But what did Israel do then with that ultimatum? Did she listen? Did she turn? Well, she ignored it.

[15 : 31] But why? Well, secondly, we see her calculation, her calculation. What does Israel say in response, verse 5, to this warning?

She said, In short, tell your father, if he's making me choose, I'm going to choose my lovers.

Now, how could she ignore this great threat? Well, notice the logic in verse 5. Do you see what she's saying? It's my lovers who give me food, water, clothing, the very things that the Lord had threatened to take away.

Back in verse 3, well, if you threaten to cut me off, she's saying, there are plenty of others who will keep me fed and watered and clothed, and I will just go to them. So notice what it's become about for Israel.

Well, she doesn't care anymore where she gets it or who it comes from. She will go after what she thinks is hers. In short, it stops being about the relationship.

[16:43] It's become about the reward. She is after the gift and not the giver. And so she is happy to walk out on her husband and go with the highest bidder, which is not the behavior, is it, of a wife, but to use God's own word, of a whore.

Now, why? Because, notice, she ultimately thinks that she is entitled to those things. Do you see that in verse 5? The lovers don't only give her food, water, wool, linen, but what?

My food and my water, my wool and my linen. In her head, in her heart, these are not gifts given in love.

They are wages that are paid to her, something that she has a right to. And she will go to whoever she needs to go to to get paid. But here's the twist.

Okay, when she realizes in verse 7 that her income from her lovers is drying up, what does she do? She makes a cold-hearted calculation. See that verse 7?

[17:50] And then she will say, I will go back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off than now. Better off. Now, on first reading, that might sound like a really good choice.

We might cheer, mightn't we? She's going back home to her husband. Brilliant, that's just what we want. But what tells us that her heart has not changed? What she missed in the calculation?

The Lord tells us in verse 8 what she has missed. She has not acknowledged that I was the one who gave her the grave, the new wine and all, who lavished on her the silver and gold, which they used for Baal.

As if Israel had been keeping a log of how much she was getting from the Lord, how much from Baal. When it looked like she was getting more from Baal, well, over she would go to him.

And when the Lord looked like he was being generous back, she would go to the Lord. The error in her calculations, though, is what? That Baal's column did not exist.

[18:56] That Baal had never given Israel anything that was his to give, only what he had stolen from God. Tim Chester, in his book, *The Passion of God*, compares it to a husband that he, for Christmas, buys his wife a really precious, a beautiful diamond necklace.

And he wraps it. He puts it under the tree. Christmas morning comes. His wife goes. She opens it. But she thinks it's from her lover. In the afternoon, she phones him to thank him.

Of course, he's happy to take credit for it. As she puts it on, she tells everyone, this is from Baal. And all the while, she is blissfully ignorant of the fact that it is a gift from her husband that she is wearing.

Of course, on the ground level, Israel isn't being paid in necklaces, is she? But in the things that their economy ran on back then, grain, wine, and oil, wool, and linen.

And all those things grew. They had to grow every year from the ground or trees or on sheep. And Baal promised every year he could make those things grow a lot.

[20:13] The next harvest would be a really good harvest. And his worship was a fertility cult. So you can see the logic in a way.

If they wanted Baal to fertilize the ground for the coming year, while the men would have to go to his shrines to sleep with the cult prostitutes to ensure that Baal would get on with his work and give a good harvest and fertilize the earth.

And so in trying to guarantee the steady supply of these things, food and water, wine, oil, wool, linen, that she thought she was owed, well, Israel turned gladly to Baal when he seemed generous.

And back to the Lord when he went bust. And so we need to see that even when she was turning back to the Lord, Israel's heart is still running a cold calculation.

She's still more interested in what she can get out of it than who she is going to. Because it's seeing that heart problem that helps us to reflect on our own hearts.

[21:18] The question for us is whether and to what degree do we share this calculating heart that values the gifts that God gives above, God the giver himself.

Okay, here are some ways we see this in the church today. These are just a few that I thought of this week. Maybe you can think of others. But I wonder if anyone's ever said anything like this to you.

Or perhaps it's something you've thought yourself. I can't get the job I want unless I work on a Sunday. Here's another one.

I've worked hard this year to get this raise, this bonus. I'm already giving more than enough to the church. So this is mine to spend how I choose.

Or maybe the kind of more sanctified version than that. I've done my years serving at church. Now it's someone else's turn. And I'm going to go and spend some time treating myself.

[22 : 25] Here's a really big one today. There are no Christians my age that I'm interested in. And so I'm going to go out with that guy, that girl, on my course and just see where it goes.

Now to be clear, none of those things is full-blown idol worship yet. And yet it is the seed of the same sin, isn't it? I'm entitled to X.

And I'm going to go and get it, whether or not God is involved. If this career, this lifestyle, this relationship pays best, then God and what he says will come second to me.

Because my heart is going to the highest bidder. And right now that doesn't seem to me like God.

Or, even more subtly, I'm taking my faith more seriously right now because Christianity seems to be working for me.

God is giving me the life that I want. And so I am turning back to him. But do you see the problem? Our heart is still going to the highest bidder.

[23 : 39] Only today it is God. But what about if our heart makes a new calculation tomorrow and it isn't anymore? Friends, is this not Israel's problem?

That she thought she had a right to God's gifts wherever she had to go to get them. Sometimes it was the Lord. Sometimes it was Baal. But whoever it was, it was always her food, her drink, her clothing, her wages.

What was missing in her calculation? That every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, in whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

I was the one, he says, who gave her the grain, the new wine, the oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold. Brothers and sisters, what do you have that God has not given you freely out of his mercy and love?

We know that the textbook answer is nothing, don't we? But what do our hearts say in answer?

What does our heart say is ours and not God's?

[24 : 56] God is good perhaps at the church on a Sunday, but what about my rest on a Saturday? What about my work on a Monday? Do we treat these things in our lives as if God had given it to us as a gift?

Or as if we had a right to it? I have worked hard enough for this. Somebody else has given it to me. Do our hearts belong completely to the giver? Or are our hearts after really the gifts?

Hard, hard questions, brothers and sisters, but questions that we have to ask because Hosea doesn't for a second allow us to think that the problem exists out there somewhere, in that church or in those Christians and not deep, deep in our own hearts.

It was Calvin who said, Calvin, that the human heart is a factory of idols. And however long that we have been a Christian, we have sin in us.

We are capable, aren't we, of making, chasing, serving, worshiping, loving the idols of our hearts instead of God.

[26 : 09] And so we need to see this dynamic in ourselves, how our hearts work and stop producing idols. We need to guard ourselves against this cold, calculating heart that Israel had and turn instead undividedly, wholeheartedly back to the Lord to seek Him for all that He is, for all that He gives, not His gifts alone.

Now, did Israel do that? Did she heed the warning? Well, no, she did not. But we see next, finally and more briefly, you'll be glad to know that the Lord is not taking no for an answer here.

Finally then, we see His final, final call, His final call. Someone asked me after the service last week, is Hosea one of those prophets who just comes to preach doom?

Or is there hope at the end of the tunnel? Well, there is hope. Okay, next week it is very bright hope, I promise, and from verse 14, there's a therefore that turns the lights back on in the room.

But we need to see here that there is hope too, just in a way that we would never dare to imagine, because verse 14 is the last of three therefores.

[27 : 27] Can you see that? There in verse 6, therefore I will block her path with thorn bushes. And verse 9, therefore I will take away my corn when it ripens.

And then verse 14, therefore I will allure her. See, we love the sound of the last therefore in verse 14, but these three therefores are all ways that the Lord pursues His wandering bride in love.

Now, it doesn't sound so romantic, does it, to block her path with thorns or take away her food and drink, but friends, think what God is saying. He's saying, you have used and abused me, you've

thrown my love back in my face, you've cheated and lied to me, but I'm not going to let you go without a fight.

Can you see His burning passion, His holy love underneath the discipline and the punishment? Last week we thought of the imaginary husband, didn't we, whose wife is cheating on him.

He finds out and he shrugs and says, oh well. Well now imagine that the wife leaves home and goes off with her lover and he doesn't go after her.

[28 : 38] He doesn't even pick up the phone to text or to call her. Doesn't he love her at all, we think? Friends, God is not like that. He is going to get His bride back.

But like last week, it's a display of His love that we don't often consider. We sang His love, didn't we? His holy, pure, and perfect.

We know that. But do we know what that means? That His love is a jealous love that will not tolerate any rival. That His is a fierce love that fights for His bride.

That His is a stubborn love that stops at nothing to cling to those who He loves. These are not things we normally say of God, are they? They're not things we often think of as a good thing, as virtues.

But what did we say of the husband who wasn't jealous over his wife? Who wasn't prepared to fight for the relationship? Who wasn't stubbornly refusing to watch her walk away?

[29 : 43] Does He not love her? So friends, seeing these therefores not a petty revenge or a merciless rage, but the pure, burning heart of God, burning with fierce and jealous and stubborn love over His people.

I cannot let you go, He cries. For without this love, we know the marriage is doomed, don't we? If God did not love like this, the covenant would be at an end.

It is tough love. We can't deny that. But what is the worst thing that God could do? What is the worst thing that God could do to us?

The worst thing that God could do to us is to leave us to walk away, to let us go without a fight, to give us up to our idols, to live the rest of our lives chasing His gifts and not knowing Him, to walk in blissful ignorance into death, not knowing that there is an eternal punishment for sin and idolatry. Our only hope is that in our sin, God's jealous love for us in Christ will not let us go. That is our only hope, even when it is tough love.

[31 : 03] Do you see that? So when our paths are blocked by thorns so that we cannot find our comfort and happiness and security elsewhere, however hard we try, well, do you hear His loving voice telling you to come home to Him?

Ultimately, Israel wouldn't listen. She kept walking away and the end is terrifying. So holy is God's love that in 722 BC He said, if I can't have you, then no one can.

And all of the curses of verses 9 to 13 came true. These seven I wills, a complete withdrawal of His blessing, a complete giving up of His bride.

In history, that was the Assyrian invasion. But in eternity, we know the reality will be hell. Next time, we will bask in the light of verse 14 and onwards.

But this morning, Hosea's message is simply this, that our one and only hope in life and in death is God's holy, faithful, jealous love for us in Christ.

[32 : 16] And so, friends, do not leave here today and count God's love cheap or weak or small. It is a foolish person who throws his love back at Him.

Do you not test Him to see how far His love will stretch, how far He will go to keep you? He will hold on to you whatever it costs. But as Israel learned the hard way, that cost might be far, far higher than we ever bargained for.

His love took Him all the way to the cross where He gave His life so that we would be His. He bore the cost Himself of our sin and idolatry. He poured out His blood to cleanse us from sin.

We know how far He has gone for us. We know how far He has gone, so we do not need to put Him to the test. Let the cross be enough to convince us that His heart burns with holy, fierce, and jealous love over His bride, the church, today.

And let us then live gladly and faithfully as His holy bride under the shadow of His love. Let's pray for that together.

[33 : 32] Let's pray. Let's pray.