

God's Marriage

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[0 : 00] Well, we had two weddings here over the summer, and neither of them were quite like this. Imagine, if you can, going into Hosea's home.

We go through the door, and there are the usual coats hanging on the hooks, the pile of trainers and wellies and school shoes by the door.

And Hosea leads us through to the sitting room, and he goes to make coffee in the kitchen. And on the far side of the room, as we wait, we see a wall full of family photos.

And from a distance, they look like normal, typical family photos of a normal, typical family. But then we have a closer look, and we see that this is anything but a normal family.

There are pictures of the wedding day. One of the family is standing together. The bride's parents over on one side look like they don't quite know where they are.

[1 : 08] Their smiles can't quite disguise their shock and confusion. They never thought that their daughter would have a wedding day. But that's nothing compared to the groom's parents on the other side.

They look defeated. Their eyes bloodshot, full of tears. Their heads hanging in sorrow. Their shoulders hunched.

They always thought their son would get married. But to a good, godly girl. And what about the newlyweds themselves?

Well, here's another picture from the front of the church. Hosea, young, fresh-faced, but not beaming with happiness. His eyes not peering down the aisle to get a first glimpse of his new bride. But his face lined with worry. And his eyes turned upwards, searching heaven in desperation. And behind his shoulder, walking towards him, is his bride, Gomer.

[2 : 17] But not a blushing bride. In fact, fresh from a night out. Her hair matted. Her dress torn.

Stained. Her lipstick smeared. She doesn't quite look steady on her feet. And in fact, looking at the other pictures of the wedding day, there's hardly one where bride and groom can be seen together. Gomer seems to have danced with every other man at the wedding but her husband. There are some pictures also of the children at the birth of their firstborn son.

Hosea's cheeks are stained with tears. But we can't quite tell whether they are tears of happiness or sadness. His arm is around Gomer's shoulders.

His son is still covered in blood. Baby number two, a daughter. Gomer holds her newborn, but her eyes are glued to her phone. And she is checking her dating app while Hosea stands in the background.

[3 : 22] And number three, another son. And this time, Hosea is nowhere to be seen. But Gomer hands the baby to another man, the baby's father.

And we think to ourselves, a normal family. A normal family? What word would you use for this family?

A what family? A broken family? A dysfunctional family? A heartbreaking family? A broken family? But friends, here is the shock. Whose marriage is this? It is Hosea's, of course. But who is Hosea standing in for? Well, just have a look at verse two.

When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, Go marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her. For like an adulterous wife, this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord.

[4 : 22] Friends, here is the blunt force trauma of the beginning of this book. Chapter one, verse two. That Hosea's marriage is God's marriage in miniature.

That Hosea's family photos give us a window into God's family. And what were the words we used to describe that family? Broken, dysfunctional, heartbreaking.

But Hosea comes back into the room with coffee. Ah, he says, you found my family photos. Now let me tell you the story. Let me tell you the story of God's marriage.

Friends, up to the end of the year, we are going to be listening together as a church to the story of God's marriage in the book of Hosea. And as you might have guessed, it is a hard story to listen to. There will be tears. But it is a story that we need to know because in this story, we are not a guest in Hosea's home. We are the bride in the story.

[5 : 32] This is a story that we don't stand outside of and apart from. It is a story about us. And our family, our home, our history, and our relationship with the living God.

And it is not the clean and tidy story that we want to tell ourselves. But notice in that scene in the sitting room, in the devastation, the carnage of Hosea's home, Hugh is still there, but Hosea. Hosea, Hosea, the prophet, God's representative. God has not left the story. He is still in the family home, still with his bride, still committed to his covenant.

And so while this story is heartbreaking, what Hosea wants us to see in the heartbreak is God's burning heart of love for his straying people.

God's burning heart. So today as we begin, we're just going to meet the characters, as it were, and begin to reflect on how this book speaks to us as a church today.

[6 : 42] Beginning then with our first character, a promiscuous bride. A promiscuous bride. When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, go marry a promiscuous woman.

Now God has called people to do all sorts of things for him, but he's only called one person to do this thing at one time. Lots of people have wondered whether God really wanted Hosea to go and marry a promiscuous woman.

Doesn't that contradict God's will for our lives? Wouldn't it disqualify Hosea from being a prophet of God? And those are the right questions.

It is scandalous. Imagine Hosea going to his parents, mom, dad, God's called me to be a prophet. He wants me to get married. Great, they say.

Brilliant, son. Oh, we know loads of nice, godly girls, loads of families who'd love to have a son like ye. No, mom, dad, he wants me to marry a whore.

[7 : 51] It is that shocking. Okay, the NIV that we read, that we read together, it pulls the punches, I think, that the rawness of this language is caught by the Jerusalem Bible translation.

Go marry a whore and get children with a whore, for the country itself has become nothing but a whore by abandoning Yahweh. Okay, now we're squirming.

Can God really speak like that? It's not language that we're used to hearing in church, is it? But isn't that the point? Isn't that the point?

God was saying to his people, I know what you get up to. I know you have been sleeping around with every god and king that's caught your eye. You're not even bothering to hide it from me.

You thought I would turn a blind eye, but there's a word for what you're doing, and I'm going to call it what it is. Friends, God does not mince his words.

[8 : 51] Sometimes he has to say it how it is to get through to us, but words on their own, we're not going to cut it this time. He needed his people to see what he saw, to feel the revulsion in their hearts that he felt.

It was one of our own poets, Robbie Burns, who wrote, didn't he, oh, would some power the gift he give us to see ourselves as others see us? Haven't you ever thought that about someone, you know, so obvious what they're doing, so obvious.

Why can't they see it? You know, we just wish we could hold up a mirror, show them what we see. Well, isn't that what God is doing here?

His people couldn't see what they were doing to him. It stopped seeing their idolatry as God sees it. It was only harmless flirting, they said.

It was only a fling. But God wanted them to look at Gomer and see what he saw when he looked at them. Friends, Hosea's marriage had to be real because God's covenant with Israel was real.

[10 : 02] And Gomer had to be real because Israel's idolatry and unfaithfulness was real. The words of Derek Kidner, what Hosea had to do was in miniature, what God had done in giving his love to a partner with a history and a wandering eye.

Now, what did that unfaithfulness look like in Israel at this point in the story? We do need a bit of historical background to understand. We're in the 750s BC and Hosea is speaking here to the northern kingdom of Israel that had split off from the southern kingdom about 200 years before.

I think I've got a slide. If you can see there, we've got great King David. His grandson in 930 splits the kingdom apart.

So down below, we've got the northern kingdom of Israel and up above the southern kingdom of Judah. And you can see in the middle there that list of kings that we got in the first verse of Hosea. That is when Hosea is speaking. And importantly, you can see on the bottom there that if Hosea is speaking here in 750s roughly, that there's only about 30 years left until the northern kingdom he's speaking to is going to end.

[11 : 27] And that's important because it reminds us that we are not here in the first half of the game, but we are well into the second half of extra time in this story.

200 years of unfaithfulness and it is going to end very, very soon. Now, why is that? What kind of unfaithfulness?

Well, the northern kingdom had been praying to other so-called gods in the hope they would give them the life they dreamed of. Israel was in bed with Baal.

At this time, Baal was a god of the other nations around that Israel had taken a shine to. But what she hadn't yet worked out is that Baal is bankrupt, but is giving gifts to his new lover that she has stolen from her husband.

But Israel hasn't figured out yet that she's been taken for a ride. We also need to know that as part of the breakup of the kingdom, the first king of the northern kingdom put two golden calves, one at the top of the country, one at the bottom, and told people, you should go to those calves, golden calves, to worship God.

[12 : 41] So people were going to metal statues of a cow and saying, this is the true God. But of course, it's a total fraud.

It's as if the king has set up a fake online account to try to seduce God's wife, trick her into thinking it's her husband she's speaking to. But really, it is another god on the end of the line.

And the Bible's word for all of that, worshiping other gods or worshiping God in the wrong way is idolatry. It's a word we're going to come back to a lot in this book. Politically, too, Israel's promiscuity looked like turning to other kings, other kingdoms in the hope of protection.

The new superpower at this time in the ancient world was Assyria. But this is serious self-sabotage. A bit like a woman choosing to stay in an abusive relationship because she doesn't know where else to turn.

Israel is choosing to stay in the arms of the very kingdom that is getting ready to wipe them off the map. So that is what God is speaking into.

[13 : 54] There's a catalog of lovers. But what do they all have in common? Well, here are all things that Israel had trusted in to be and do for them what only God could be and do for them.

Where does that leave us today? Well, today, we see Israel's idolatry most clearly in churches that have long enjoyed the privilege of having the gospel, but who have chosen to set that aside in order to get behind causes of the day, what the world celebrates, whatever that may be.

We see it, too, in individuals who would call themselves Christians, take the name of Christ, but whose lives are in fact consumed by the gods of this age.

Take your pick, sex, success, comfort, privacy, freedom. And God is there when they need him to help them get those things, but mainly he's out of the picture.

Christianity in name only. Now, that could be you today, and Hosea is speaking directly to you. But even if it is not, seeing the heart of this problem helps us all, whoever we are, to reflect on our own faithfulness to God as we go through this book.

[15 : 25] It helps us to ask questions like, in what ways are we seduced by the passions and the fashions of this world? Or how quickly do we turn to other things to satisfy us in ways that we don't think that God will or could?

Israel, at this point in the story, has not yet realized how disastrous and deluded and deceitful it is to cheat on God like that. So don't let us be fooled, brothers and sisters.

Do not let us be deceived. This is why God calls his prophets to marry a whore so that we can see what idolatry does to us. So his people would be shocked into recognition as they find themselves looking at their own matted hair and their own torn wedding dress and their own smeared lipstick and see what they have become in God's eyes, a promiscuous bride.

But out of God's marriage to her has come our second character or characters, children of wrath. Children of wrath. Now, choosing a name for you and you, baby, it's a special time.

Maybe you think of a list, you write a list of special names, family names, biblical names, names that mean something to you. Well, the Lord gives these three children names that are certainly meaningful, but for all the wrong reasons.

[17:00] The first child Goma has with Hosea, they call Jezreel. Now, what does Jezreel mean? Well, it has a meaning, but its importance here is more what it's come to stand for, because Jezreel was a historic battlefield.

If you just glance at verse 4, the Lord said to Hosea, call him Jezreel because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel. So, this is a reference to a battle earlier in the Bible in 2 Kings 9 and 10 where this guy, Jehu, assassinated the king of Israel and then killed his whole family, 70 people, and then another 42 relatives who turn up late to the party.

It is a bloodbath. And God says, call your son that. Today, it would be like calling a child butcher after the terrible war crimes that were committed in that village in Ukraine, a reminder of what has happened.

And God is saying, I haven't forgotten. It's time to punish Jehu's dynasty for that cold-blooded slaughter. I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel, he says.

As we've seen in our timeline, that day was coming very quickly. Now, God could have told Hosea simply to say that, couldn't he? Instead, he has Hosea name his child that.

[18:30] So what is God saying? Well, God is saying, isn't he, bloodbath, slaughter, is the offspring of my union with you. I made a covenant with you and you have given birth to violence.

Not the children of God, not the fruit of the spirit, instead violence and bloodshed. But that is only the beginning. It's the three children Goma has. Notice Jezreel is the only one that we are told is Hosea's.

Verse 3, she conceived and bore him a son. But verse 6, we read, Goma conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. So we are supposed to wonder whether the baby is Hosea's or another man's. In the parable that is Hosea's home, is Israel still bearing the Lord's children or getting pregnant by another God. This baby is called Leruhima, which means, verse 6, not loved.

Can you imagine the sadness of her life at home, at school, at work, wherever she went, not loved, not loved.

[19:39] And again, this was a product of Israel's promiscuity. Call her that, says God. For I will no longer show love to Israel that I should forgive them at all. These are the words of a distraught husband, aren't they?

His wife has gone off with another man. She's had his child. His love has been thrown back in his face. The word literally means, I will no longer show compassion.

God's willingness to bear with and suffer patiently the sin of his bride is coming to an end. But if we have any sympathy with Goma or Israel at this point, well, verse 8 tells us that even then, even then, neither of them were yet finished with their lovers.

After she'd weaned Lo-Ruhima, Goma had another son. Then the Lord said, call him Lo-Ami, which means, not my people, for you are not my people, and I am not your God.

friends, this is the sound of the last thread snapping. This is the phrase that is at the heart of God's covenant with his people, but in reverse from Genesis onwards, God's promise over and over and over had been, I will be your God, you will be my people.

[20:55] It's like the wedding vow, if you like, that holds together God's marriage to Israel, and now what does he say? Call the baby, not my people, for you are not my people, and I am not your God.

It's the sound of God's union with Israel dissolving, his covenant breaking apart. And did you notice who's not in the room when the baby is born?

Before God has said to Hosea, name the baby, or where is Hosea now? If you just skim verses eight and nine, he is not there.

He's not there. It's a tragic symbol, isn't it, of what God has said. He is no longer present with his people because this is what Israel has given birth to in the time that we have been married.

He says, bloodshed, not loved, not my people. She is born children of wrath. Now again, what are we supposed to take from this?

[22:03] How does this come to the church today? Well, Hosea's family reminds us, doesn't it, that it is possible for churches to be God's bride, to take God's name, to be in covenant with him, and yet to get to the point of such spiritual promiscuity, such compromise with the gods of our age that God will bring to an end his union with us.

Listen to the words of Jesus in Revelation chapter 2, a letter to the church in Ephesus, I hold this against you. You have forsaken the love you had at first.

Consider how far you have fallen. Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

He holds out the hope of change, doesn't he, but also says that the light and life of the church would be snuffed out if nothing changed. If this church did not return to her first love, Christ himself.

And can you see why that is? Brothers and sisters, God's heart burns with love for his people, fierce, jealous love, and because of that love, he cannot sit idly by and watch his church go off, flirt, and get into bed with the gods and the kings of this world.

[23 : 32] Some of you, I know, have been hurt deeply, deeply by churches that have done that, lost their first love. Well, imagine how it hurts God to see his people go off with other lovers.

You picture a husband who, when he hears the news that his wife is cheating on him, shrugs. So what, he says? Oh well, at least she has my name.

But what would we say? Does he not care? Does he not love her? Does he not want her? If he loved her, we would expect him to be angry. And so, friends, God's anger here with his people is a symptom, isn't it, of his pure, burning, holy passion for his church.

Where his home is broken, where his family is dysfunctional, where his bride is unfaithful, God's heart burns. You so often, even as Christians, we can kind of turn God against himself, can't we? You know, I believe in a God of love, we say, not a God of wrath. But in the Bible, we meet a God who loves so fiercely that he cannot simply shrug when his love is betrayed.

[24 : 51] As C.S. Lewis so often puts it best, you ask for a loving God, he says, you have one. The great spirit you so lightly invoked is present, not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, but the consuming fire himself, the love that made the world.

And brothers and sisters, it is that paradox of God's holy love, his burning, fierce passion that Hosea wants to transform us through this book as we gaze into it.

See, here is the paradox, isn't it? God has just said, I am not your God. And then what happens, verse 10? What happens? Hosea walks back into the room and says, but that wasn't the end.

That wasn't the end because there's one more character to meet in this story and it is a compassionate husband. A compassionate husband. Where does verse 10 come from?

Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, you are not my people, they will be called children of the living God.

[26 : 10] Now what has changed? What's changed here? Has Israel changed? Has Israel turned around? No. Well, then has God's heart changed? Has God turned around?

Well, we'll see Hosea do this sort of lurching from rage to compassion, from shouting to tears, so that in human terms we can understand something, something of what our sin does to God.

God does not change. He doesn't change. He doesn't have better days and worse days. But a human husband would. And Hosea wants us to see that and get that in human terms we have broken God's heart.

And so he portrays God as turning in his response from anger to compassion, from compassion to anger, but underneath the emotional swelling and dipping, God's heart is constant love towards his people.

She has been unfaithful. She's given him children of wrath. Yet, verse 10, God will not end his covenant fully or finally. He promised Abraham, he promised that his family would be like the sand on the seashore, more than could be counted.

[27 : 26] And so they will, he says. Here is a husband who would keep his wedding vows even when his bride won't. They would still be his people because God would be her God.

Where it was said to them, you are not my people, they will be called children of the living God. They would even be replanted or resewed in fresh soil.

It's that word Jezreel again. But now it's a hopeful word. It stood once for bloodshed. But what does the word mean? Well, it literally means God plants.

God plants. God gave them a name that reminded them of their sin against them and yet a name also that reminds them of his grace and power to save and renew.

But why would he and how could he turn this marriage around? Well, friends, here is the secret about the book of Hosea. Do you know the secret about the book of Hosea?

[28 : 28] What does the name Hosea mean? The Lord saves. And who does Hosea share his name with? But the Lord Jesus.

This whole marriage hangs, verse 11, on Judah and Israel coming together to appoint one leader over them, a new king over a reunited kingdom.

And Hosea, Hosea in his broken marriage foreshadows the promise of that king, that husband, that savior, Jesus Christ, one who has come and loved us.

And when did he love us? Was it when we had got cleaned up and got dressed again and got our lives sorted out and in order?

No. No, it was not, was it? It was while our hair was still matted and our dress was still torn and our lipstick still smeared when we were still in bed with other gods and kings.

[29 : 34] That is when he loved us. Take this in. Can you believe this? that God's command to Hosea was the same as his plan for his own son?

Go and marry an unfaithful bride. Take her to yourself. Unite yourself to her. Love her. Give your life for her. To wash her clean.

To save her. To redeem her. And like Hosea, Christ did not hesitate to do it, did he? He went to the cross not for our loveliness but to suffer and die for all our unfaithfulness to God.

Not when we had finally decided he was worthy of our love or turned to love him back. But while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. See, friends, by showing us the burning heart of God for his people, Hosea wants the drama of the gospel to be burned into the back of our eyes in a way that we would never forget.

Hosea is the story of God's love for his bride, the church. To what shall we compare the kingdom of God, says Hosea? It is like a husband married to an unfaithful wife.

[30 : 54] He keeps his vows even to his own heart and lays down his life to redeem her from her sin. Sometimes God has to use strong words, doesn't he?

Strong pictures to get through to us. Even about his love. His covenant love has been renewed through Christ's death and so we are replanted, restored, renewed, reborn if our faith is in Christ. And so, brothers and sisters, if your faith is in him today and God looks at you, what does he say? What does he see? Call your brothers my people, your sisters, loved one.

And today he washes us, doesn't he, with his word to cleanse, to purify, so that we will one day stand before him a radiant and a spotless church, not because we have cleaned ourselves up and dressed ourselves nicely, but because he is a compassionate husband, full of love, slow to anger, who did not give us up when we deserved it, but instead gave himself that we might live forever in the light of his unfailing love.

And so, friends, let us wonder at God's burning heart of love for us in Christ and have our hearts transformed as we see it played out in this book of Hosea.

[32 : 27] let's pray together. gracious God, how we thank you for your great love for us, love from eternity to eternity, before ever we were born, to beyond even death.

Our Father, we thank you that you have loved us even at our worst. Father, we thank you that you know even the depths of our hearts, you know our secret sins.

Lord, you see all, and yet you have set your everlasting love upon us. How we thank you that you sent the Lord Jesus Christ, your own son, to take to himself a sinful bride.

Father, how we thank you that it was while we were still far from you that he came and found us. How we thank you that it was while we were still in our sin that he died to save us.

Father, we pray that as we see his love for us, that we would be changed and transformed. Father, we pray that he by his love might wash us clean. And above all, our Father, we pray that as we stand before you today, that we might know that in Christ we are your loved one, that in Christ we are your people, and not because we deserve it, but because you have loved us.

[34 : 08] How we thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.