

Not-so-pretty Woman

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn then to our Bibles and to the prophecy of Hosea. You'll find that if you have one of our large visitors' Bibles on page 751.

Otherwise, it's near the end of the Old Testament, after Daniel and before Joel and Amos. Hosea is one of what we call the minor prophets, although it's one of the major of the minor prophets, if I may put it like that.

Some of the minor prophets are very short, but Hosea is quite a substantial book and quite a shocking book. And we're going to read together chapter 1 down to the first verse of chapter 2, and then all of the short chapter 3 together.

And as you'll see, this all hangs together. So Hosea 1 at verse 1, The word of the Lord that came to Hosea, the son of Beri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, king of Israel.

When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom, a whore, and have children of whoredom.

[1 : 30] For the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord. So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

And the Lord said to him, Call his name Jezreel. For in just a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel.

And on that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel. She conceived again and bore him a daughter. And the Lord said to him, Call her name No Mercy, for I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel to forgive them at all.

But I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the Lord their God. I will not save them by bow or by sword or by war or by horses or by horsemen.

When she had weaned no mercy, she conceived and bore a son. And the Lord said, Call his name not my people, for you are not my people, and I am not your God.

[2 : 48] Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, You are not my people, it shall be said to them, Children of the living God, and the children of Judah, and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head, and they shall go up from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel.

Say to your brothers, You are my people, and to your sisters, You have received mercy. Continuing at chapter 3 and verse 1, again with Hosea's personal story.

And the Lord said to me, Go again, Love a woman who is loved by another man, and is an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods, and love cakes of raisins.

So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver, and a homer, and letech of barley. And I said to her, You must dwell as mine, for many days.

You shall not play the whore, or belong to another man. And so will I also be to you. For the children of Israel shall dwell many days, without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods.

[4 : 17] Afterward, the children of Israel shall return, and seek the Lord their God, and David their king. And they shall come in fear to the Lord, and to his goodness.

In the latter days. Well, may God bless to us, his word, full of mystery, and of horror, but also of great mercy, and grace.

What does it all mean? Well, Rupert is going to explain to us. Well, do turn back to page 751, and follow along with me, in Hosea chapter 1.

That way, if you nod off this evening, there's only me to blame. And let's pray that doesn't happen. Let's pray together. Father God, we pray that as we open up your words, you would help us come to know ourselves, and come to know you.

And so help us, Father, in your Son, to love you as we ought to love you. Amen. Well, some words are simply ugly words to say.

[5 : 35] Even today, there are still some words so coarse, or cruel, that nobody uses them, unless they mean to shock. And I don't think there's any English word, quite so ugly, as the word, whore.

It's a word without any varnish, or pretense. A harsh, ugly word, that throws an ugly truth, right in our face.

And it's a word, which God himself, throws in our face, four times, in his very first words to Hosea. Go, take yourself a wife of whoredoms, it's plural, and have children of whoredoms, because the land is a whore of whores, in forsaking Yahweh.

And with that, we're introduced to Hosea, and his message. This is a book that makes the truth, raw, and real.

Because for its writer, the message, was as raw, and as real, as we can possibly imagine. You see, this was a message, which he had lived.

[6 : 53] Hosea was about, as far as you can get, from a cold, detached preacher. His calling, you see, was to embody God's gospel, in the starkest possible way.

To come as close, as a human being can ever come, to feeling what it's like, to love, with a divine love.

And then, from his own, well of deep, and real pain, to pour out, words of, outraged love, on the people of Israel.

All those pleas, which he must have used, time and again, as he tried to make his own wife, and his own children, see sense. And so this book, doesn't start, with Israel.

It starts, with a broken home. Hosea's home. Chapters one to three, are where the message, is made personal. And they work like, a little door, to the rest of his book.

[8 : 00] To hear God's message to Israel, you first have to hear, Hosea's message, to his adulterous wife. This whole book, just falls into two sections, really.

Chapters one to three, and then all the rest. But this little, door of pain, and heartache, and above all, extraordinarily, extraordinarily costly love.

It shapes, everything we see, once we get inside, the house itself. What you notice, very quickly, is that Hosea, was an exceptionally, gifted writer.

In fact, I think he has a more, imaginative way, with words, than any Bible writer, I can think of. He crams his book, full of little pictures, and similes, to try and cut through, our indifference.

He's also, ordered both halves, of his book, much more carefully, than it seems at first. What we read this evening, clearly belongs together, doesn't it?

[9 : 03] It begins with the story, of Hosea's, tragic marriage, and it ends, with Hosea's, incredible, costly grace, as he puts the relationship, back together.

But in chapter two, intertwined, with his own story, Hosea begins to tell, the bigger tale, of God's judgment, and gracious love, for Israel.

And by weaving them together, like that, he's helping us see, right from the start, how one story, explains the other. And that's, important to see, from the start, precisely, because Hosea's writing, is so powerful.

The danger, of this book, is that we're so, grabbed by the illustration, the adulterous marriage, that we lose sight, of what the book, is actually about.

Ask anyone, if there's one thing, that they can tell you, about the prophet Hosea, I suspect, they'll answer, Goma. Hosea, Hosea was the man, called, to marry a prostitute.

[10 : 14] He gives his heart, to a woman, who he knows, will never love him back, who'll betray him, at every step, and then, at extraordinary cost, to himself, he, redeems his wife, from the price, of her adultery.

And that is a powerful story, isn't it? But despite the metaphor, this is not a book, about sex, or adultery.

Hosea waits until, after his introduction, to flesh out, what Israel's whoredom, actually looked like. But we're told enough here, to see, that it's about, wandering hearts, and not, wandering wives.

This is a book, about a nation, who took, God's love, and abused it, horribly. And above even that, it's about, a God, who chose, to love, that sort, of people.

Not in a blind, and sappy way, but in a ferociously, determined, redeeming way. And that, you see, is the real theme, of this introduction.

[11 : 25] It's not primarily, about Goma, or Israel, or even our, spiritual adultery. It's about, God's, inexplicable purposes, for his people.

And so, chapters one and three, give us, two ways of looking, at God's people. There's what Israel was, when the Lord chose them. And there's what will be, one day, when he gets his way.

Once, a whore, a whore, without a heart. And then one day, a bride, without a blemish. So firstly, the whore, without a heart.

And we meet her in, verses one to nine, don't we? I wonder if you could, imagine a more, devastating call, to ministry, than the words, the Lord speaks, to Hosea here.

Hosea, take all of your dreams, of romance, and tenderness, and family life, and banish them forever. You're not going to marry, the woman, you always dreamed of.

[12 : 31] I want you to take, the kind of bride, I chose. So off went Hosea, and found, a woman who he knew, could only ever bring him, pain, and disappointment.

And to properly feel, the pathos, of Hosea's story, we need to understand, right from the start, that Gomer is not, one of those shady women, who turns out, to have, a heart of gold.

You see, there are countless, other versions, of this story, that we love to tell ourselves, aren't there? Stories of courtesans, and call girls, redeemed by romance. Many of you, will have watched, one modern version, the film, Pretty Woman.

And like all, our versions, of this story, that film has, an underlying message. There's a rich lover, and a poor prostitute. And if the lover, can just see past, her brash exterior, and hard circumstances, well, he'll fall in love, with what lies underneath.

And so all Julia Roberts, character has to do, was tone down, the makeup a little, and soften her language, and her true beauty, would be revealed.

[13 : 51] But you see, the gospel version, of this story, is not nearly, such a sweet pill, to swallow. The Gomer, of verse two, is no pretty woman. The point is, that she is ugly, on the inside.

Her heart itself, was predisposed, to cheat, and betray, and wander off. Her love, is an ugly, sort of love.

And yet, the amazing thing, isn't really, how cold hearted, Gomer was. It's that this, is the sort of bride, God chose, for himself. It's not that he was, hoodwinked, that he fell, for a heart of gold.

No, when it came, to the Lord's love, this is, precisely, what he always, dreamed of. He, dreamed, of taking an ugly, sin-tainted people, and making them, his own.

God knew exactly, what he was getting, with Israel. That becomes, pretty clear, by chapter three. But of course, that doesn't mean, that cheap love, is something, God would settle for.

[15 : 04] His grace, was meant, to melt, Israel's hearts, to change them. But by Hosea's day, after centuries, of love, and privilege, Israel was, just the same.

And so, Hosea is told, to find a bride, whose, cheap love, just like theirs, is evident, right from the start. And through that, painful marriage, God, would show Israel, the fruit, of their ugly hearts.

He'd take, Goma's three children, the fruit of her love, and make their names, part of the message. And so, first comes, a baby boy, whose name, doesn't quite hit us, in the way, it must have hit Hosea.

Call him, Jezreel, says God. It was the place, where, Israel's King Jehu, came to power, through blood, and violence. We've got to use, our imaginations a bit here, I think.

My family, are proud Campbells. And I know, that if I ever had a son, my grandfather, would be chuffed to bits. But what if I were, to call that boy, Glenn Coe?

[16 : 17] Or if a little boy, in Germany, was given the name, Belsen. So that every time, the register was taken, people were reminded, of a dark stain, in their history.

Jezreel reminded Israel, that God sees, and God doesn't forget. In fact, his name is a kind of, double pun, that Hosea will play with, over these chapters.

Firstly, it sounds, almost identical, to the name, of the nation. The boy in Hebrew, is called, Yisrael. And they are called, Yisrael.

Israel. And it's meaning, is full of resonance too. Yisrael means, God plants, or God sows. And Yisrael, were the nation, God planted, his special people.

And now, he's about to scatter them again. Sow them to the wind. So this little boy, doesn't just represent, her kings.

[17 : 24] He represents, the lot of them. The nation as a whole, we'll see soon, have become just as, cutthroat, as their rulers. And so God will call, the nation to account.

Both her kings, verse four, and her defenses, verse five, will be thrown down. Well thankfully, babies two and three, have much simpler names, but, they must have been, far more difficult, for Hosea to speak.

First comes a little girl, called, Lo Rechamah. Your footnotes have it that way. No mercy, in the Bibles we've got here. But we need to feel, what a strange thing it is, to hold, a little child in your arms, and utter those words.

You see, mercy, is the word used, time and again, in the Old Testament, to talk of the way, God held little, baby Israel, in his arms.

When he's pictured, as a father, or a nursing mother. It's not really, a legal word. It's a type of love. A love, showing pity, or compassion, for something, utterly helpless.

[18 : 41] But whatever's, happened in the relationship, between God and Israel, has been so, catastrophic, that when he looks, at them now, even his natural, fatherly instinct, to pity his people, has been tarnished.

And with child number three, it's about to get even worse. But in between, comes a slightly, unexpected little verse, shoehorned into, Hosea's story. Israel, I'm done with you, but I will have mercy, on the house of Judah, verse seven, and I will, save them.

Not by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen, but by Yahweh, their God. Now, before we rush on, to baby number three, that, odd little detour, makes us stop, and ask a fairly, important question.

What is the point, of this book of Hosea? You see, Hosea lived, in the northern kingdom, of Israel. And all the problems, he describes here, are Israelite problems.

And so, the standard line, is that Hosea wrote, to and for, his own people. But that every so often, he makes these little, sideways applications, to the southern kingdom, of Judah.

[20 : 04] If you like, he's clicked the forward button, on an email, and flicked his message on, to Israel's neighbor. The problem is, these little sideways glances, sometimes seem a little, too pointed for that.

In verse seven, it's as if Hosea, is rubbing Judah's nose, in Israel's mistakes. Judah, you too are small, and weak, and helpless.

And if you, hope to find, loving protection, then don't look, in the places Israel looked. You won't find mercy, in your bows, and your swords.

God broke Israel's. You won't find it, through horses, or horsemen, they turned on Israel, in the end. So unless you want, to go Israel's way, you need to recognize, that only, Yahweh, can be, the covenant father, you need.

Now let's ask ourselves this. Does that verse seven, sound like a little aside, an FYI? Or could it actually be, the heart of Hosea's message?

[21 : 17] The more you stare, at these little sideways glances, to Judah, the sharper, I think, they start to look. And then you, ask yourselves, why in verse one, Hosea chose, to date his book, by four kings, of Judah, and only mentions, one of his own.

The truth is, you see, that by the time, Jeroboam died, Israel was already, beginning to implode. Hosea lived through, six more, chaotic reigns, in quick succession.

And frankly, much of his message, to his own people, Israel, is pretty straightforward, in this book. It's too late, he says. Divorce is coming. And any hope, will lie beyond exile.

But the message, to Judah in the south, is a little bit different. And although it doesn't seem, as prominent, I wonder if it's really them, this book is written for, all along.

He wants God's people, in Judah, to learn from Israel. And ultimately, Hosea's hope, lies in a king, from Judah. One who doesn't, recognize any border.

[22 : 31] So perhaps a better way, to think about this book, than as an email, to Israel, with the odd verse, casually forwarded on, is something like this. It's a copy, a blind copy, that we've been included in.

If you're one of those people, who forwards emails endlessly, you ought to know, that those emails, are destined for the bin. Most of us don't read them, I hope my mother's not listening. But if

someone includes you, in an urgent message, as a blind copy, well that is a different thing, altogether isn't it?

That little BCC button, immediately adds intrigue. intrigue. Because you know, that even where it's not obvious, on the surface, you are included, in the writer's minds, all along.

And I think that as, Christian readers of this book, that helps us a lot. We're sitting on the other side, of this exile, on the cross, aren't we? The whoredom, and judgment of this book, is primarily, something that as Christians, we've been rescued from.

But like Judah, like God's people at all times, and in all places, whoredom is something, that still lingers inside us.

[23 : 50] Which is why God, in his providence, has copied us in, on this message too. Like Judah, we can read these words, to Israel, and know that in a similar way, they're written for us.

Here, and now, it's a warning to us. Which brings us at last, to Goma's baby, number three. And the name, which the Lord gives, this little boy, must have just confirmed, all Hosea's fears.

You might have noticed, that the first time round, verse three, Goma bore him, a son. The text there, at least implied, that the child, belonged to Hosea.

But this time, he looks at the little boy, in his arms, and says, not mine. Not my people. And if your heart, breaks with Hosea, there's just as much pathos, in the way, God explains the name.

For you, Israel, are not my people. And I am not your God. The birth, of this little boy, you see, spells, the end of the marriage.

[25 : 05] Not just for Hosea, and Goma, but for God, and Israel. Right, through the Bible, God, describes his covenant, with the same beautiful little formula, you shall be mine, and I shall be yours.

It's God's marriage vow. But year after year, of Israel's cold hearts, filthy bedsheets, have made a joke of that promise, haven't they?

And so now, he doesn't just reverse it. God takes his covenant name, away from Israel. These words are phrased, in a much more personal way, than normal.

You are not my people, and I am not, I am, to you. I am not your I am, any longer.

Friends, what a terrible thing it would be, for the Lord Jesus, to look at our church, and say, I am not yours.

[26 : 11] You've trusted in your bows, and your horsemen, your name, and your reputation, but not in me. You've loved your careers, and your comforts, but not me.

Verses one to nine warn us, that God will not settle, for a lukewarm bride, who cheapens his grace. And if the story ended there, we'd expect this to be a book, with a pretty simple message.

God is done, with their ugly love, and judgment is coming. But it's only half the story, isn't it?

Certainly, the message of this book, is that God, will not settle, for a people, turning tricks.

Certainly, Hosea wants to convict them, about their ugly hearts. But even God's judgment, in this book, is driven, by a greater, redeeming purpose.

Because God, at least, meant, his marriage vows. He won't leave them, rolling about, in the filthy sheets, of other gods.

[27 : 24] But he also, won't settle, for a people, languishing, in the hell of exile. What God wants, what he's wanted, all along, is a relationship, a real one.

And so, that is where Hosea's introduction ends, by showing us, what God, is determined, to make, of Israel. Still. From verse 10, it's as if we move, from cheap grace, to changing grace.

And God's purposes, take the center stage. So instead of a whore, without a heart, we're showing a bride, without a blemish. Now how that transformation, takes place, we'll have to wait, until next week, and chapter 2.

But for now at least, God makes his intentions, clear. First, it's as if he retakes, his own marriage vows. In verse 10, God promises, everything he ever promised, to Abraham.

All those years ago, wonderful promises, a people, no one can number. A place, where they'll once again, know his blessing, even after exile. God's presence, alongside them, not simply, as their judge, but as their father.

[28 : 43] In the very place, where God, renounced them in judgment. One day, he'll call them sons. And in verse 11, Hosea sees a great, gathering of the peoples.

A gathering of exiles, and aliens, not, back to the land, notice, but from, the land. A gathering, from all the earth.

Might be a better translation. Because that was God's promise, wasn't it? That through Abraham, all the families of the earth, would be blessed.

And so when Peter and Paul, quote from these verses, they knew that Hosea, wasn't just talking about them, but about you and me too. From Assyria, and from Babylon, and from Bath streets, God's Israel, would be united at last, under one true head, and king.

The king, whose cross, and resurrection, would bring this exile, to an end. The king, who would gather his people, out of darkness, from all over the world, so that those who are once, not a people at all, could be called sons, of the living God.

[30 : 06] That was God's wedding vow, to Israel. And unlike her, he meant it. And so to Jezreel, that place so spoiled, by bloodshed, he promises a great day, of joy, verse 11.

A day God plants, his children, back in the land, once and for all. And to not my people, verse 1 of chapter 3, he says, you will be mine, forever.

And for little helpless, no mercy. There's a new name too. A name promising help, and compassion, and a father's love.

Now it's not that God has just, waved a magic wand, and made all of the anger go away. What we'll see in chapter 2, is much richer than that. Sometimes, sometimes, even God's judgment, can be a tool of his grace.

To change this bride, God's wrath, and his mercy, would work hand in hand. But what these bookends, to Hosea's story show us, is why God bothers, is why God bothers, to keep his promises, to people like this, at all.

[31 : 26] And to explain that, Hosea is called, to act in just the same way, to take back, his own loveless wife. Go again, 3 verse 1, and love, a woman who's loved, by another man.

And then God tells Hosea, the purpose, of everything he's been through. He's to love Gomer, to show, how the Lord loves, the children of Israel.

Verse 1, take back the harlot, even as, the Lord loves them. And takes them back, so they turn away from him. Why is God, prepared to keep these promises, and have this people back?

Because that is the way, he loves. In fact, it's why he chose her, in the first place, to transform, that heartless whore, into his spotless bride.

He loves, with a costly sort of love. A love, that changes, and redeems, the unlovable. Which is why Hosea, not only forgives Gomer, but pays, to take this woman back.

[32 : 39] He buys, his own wife, from the pimps, verse 2, with his own silver. Hers the sin, his the shame.

So that from, start to end, Hosea's whole, life, has been one long, parable of the cross. But of course, a love like that, is going to demand, change.

He doesn't take her back, to fall into the same, cheap grace. He takes her back, verse 3, to be the bride, Hosea must have longed for, all these years. Faithful, and true.

Just as he promises, to be to her. And of course, that is just what the Lord, longs for his people to be, isn't it? That's what all those years, without his love, verse 4, were intended to achieve.

A people, who turn around, and seek him. Who know, what a wonderful thing it is, to belong to God's king, verse 5. And if you're reading this book, as a Christian, then, verse 5 describes you, doesn't it?

[33 : 52] We're reading these words, from the other side, of history to Israel. We've seen, both this exile, and the cross. Which means that the change, God was looking for in Israel, should be even more obvious, to you and me.

Perhaps some of us here, this evening, still feel, thirsty and ashamed, like Gomer. We know that we haven't loved, our maker with the love, he deserves.

And friends, if that is you, I can promise, that his arms, are always open, to welcome you home. In fact, this room is full, of people just like that.

And we'll all tell you, the same story. That this God, you see, took us in, and washed us clean. And the way to him, is simply what the Bible, calls repentance.

Or as Hosea puts it, turning around, seeking his rule, seeking Jesus, your king. Most of us, though, will read, knowing that all this, is what we've been forgiven.

[35 : 05] We've been rescued, from the ugly love, and dirty hearts, and dreadful curse, of this book. Which means, that of all people, that overwhelming feeling, of verse 5, must be true of us.

We are those people, of the last days, who've seen, God's goodness, with our own eyes. We've stood in awe, haven't we? Of his ability, to love us, in all our ugliness.

So seeing God's, purposes here, reminds us, that he loved us, to change us. Love like that, makes us thankful, but also, fearful, verse 5.

Not because he's a tyrant, but fearful, because his love, is a holy love, and we know, how easily, we slip back, into whoredom.

How could we, so, quickly cheat, on a God like this? So what a comfort, it is friends, to see, what this God, has promised, to make of us.

[36 : 18] He won't settle, for anything less, than, all of our heart, for all of time. God loves, with a fierce love.

A love that does, whatever it takes, however much it costs, to make us, a faithful bride, for his son.

Let's pray. Father God, it is such a help, for us, to see what it is, that you intend us to be.

We're amazed, that you would want, us, with hearts like ours, to belong, to your son. And so, we long, to be the spotless bride, that he deserves.

We pray, that your goodness, would bind, our wandering hearts, to Christ, in love, and fear, and real repentance.