

How to Woo a Harlot

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[0 : 00] Well, let's read God's word then. We're reading Hosea chapter 2 this week, verses 2 to 23. You'll find that on page 751 in the Blue Church Bibles.

Last week, we looked at the beginning and the end of Hosea's introduction, the heartbreaking story of his marriage and his children. And now we read God's plea to Israel, Hosea's wife.

Hosea 2, verse 2. Plead with your mother. Plead or contend against her. For she is not my wife, and I am not her husband.

That she put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts. Lest I strip her naked, and make her as on the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness, and make her like a parched land, and kill her with thirst.

Upon her children also I will have no mercy, because they are children of whoredom. For their mother has played the whore. She who conceived them has acted shamefully.

[1 : 22] For she said, I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink. Therefore I will hedge her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her, so that she cannot find her paths.

She shall pursue her lovers, but not overtake them. She shall seek them, but shall not find them.

Then she shall say, I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better for me than now.

And she did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine and the oil, who lavished on her silver and gold, which they used for barl.

Therefore I will take back my grain in its time, and my wine in its season, and I will take away my wool and my flax, which were to cover her nakedness.

Now I will uncover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers, and no one shall rescue her out of my hand. And I will put an end to all her mirth, her feasts, her new moons, her Sabbath, and all her appointed feasts.

[2 : 38] And I will lay waste her vines and fig trees, of which she said, these are my wages, my hire, which my lovers have given me.

I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall devour them. And I will punish her for the feast days of the Baals, when she offered burnt offerings to them, and adorned herself with ring and jewelry, and went after other lovers, and forgot me, declares the Lord.

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her back into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards, and make the valley of Achor, the valley of trouble, a door of hope.

And there she shall answer me, as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me my husband, and no longer will you call me my Baal, for I will remove the name of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more.

And I will make for them a covenant on that day, with the beast of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land.

[4 : 07] And I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness, and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy.

I will betroth you to me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord. And in that day, I will answer, declares the Lord, answer their cries.

I will answer the heavens, as they plead for clouds, and answer the earth with rain. And the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil. And they shall answer Jezreel, God's planting Israel, when I sow her for myself in the land.

And I will have mercy on no mercy. And I will say to not my people, you are my people. And he shall say, you are my God.

This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us tonight. Well, do please turn back to Hosea chapter 2, page 751 in the Blue Bibles, just after the big prophet Daniel.

[5 : 29] And as you rummage for it, let's pray for our father's help. Let's pray. Lord God, we read these words about our fellow human beings, whose hearts had grown so utterly blind, and cold to your love.

And we know that there, but for your grace, go we. So open up our eyes, Father, and soften our hearts tonight to the work of your Holy Spirit.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. How far would you go in order to win back the heart of a whore?

Last week, we began to look at this book of Hosea, and we discovered that that is precisely what the Lord God has determined to do.

The introduction to this book began and ended by showing us his purposes for Israel, his bride. And he showed us that through the story of Hosea's own adulterous wife, Goma.

[6 : 38] She began as a heartless whore, cold and cheating and unresponsive to Hosea's love.

But by chapter three, he welcomed that woman back, redeemed her, in fact, at his own cost to be his spotless bride, faithful and true.

What we didn't see, though, last week, is how on earth that transformation would take place. How in the world does the whore without a heart become a bride without blemish?

Well, that's what chapter two of this story explains. Our title tonight is How to Woo a Harlot. Notice that this section is laid out on our page as poetry.

It's a different style of writing to the rest of Hosea's introduction. And verse two tells us that it's God's plea to Israel or Goma, the mother.

[7 : 47] So as we read his plea, we'll learn what it would take for God to make his people see sense, to open their eyes. The focus this evening is on matters of the heart It doesn't fully flesh out what Israel's harlotry looked like.

That waits until the introduction is over. Instead, he exposes what goes on in the heart when people turn to idols. It's a plea where God exposes her heart and bears his own heart.

So let's look at how the Lord deals with his adulterous bride. There are really three stages in this plea and each time we learn something about what we're like or what God is like.

How to woo a harlot? Well, firstly, God shows her a mirror. That word plea in verse two might make us think that God is just wringing his hands here in desperation.

But the word is much, much stronger than that. contend against your mother might be a little better.

I've just come back from holiday in the US and I have to say that if your thing is appalling reality television in the United States you are spoiled for choice.

[9 : 10] And right at the bottom of the barrel is a program called Intervention. It's a show about people living through all sorts of destructive lifestyles.

It shows you the damage their behavior does to their health and their relationships and then you watch as their close friends sit them down for a few home truths.

Normally, that's unexpected. The victim arrives home to find the whole family sitting in their living room and one of them says in that delightfully American way, we need to have an intervention.

Well, that's what that word plead really means. In chapter four, it's translated as a quarrel or a controversy. God is showing Israel a few home truths.

The New Living Translation paraphrases verses two and three in a pretty vivid way. Tell her to remove the prostitute's makeup from her face and those clothes that expose her breasts.

[10 : 15] Otherwise, I will strip her naked as the day she was born. It's showing her what she looks like, isn't it? Just like last week, the story of Hosea's wife, this time God is driving home the fact that there's something ugly about the way Israel loves.

But this time, as she looks in the mirror, there's something more we need to notice staring back at her. Yes, what shocks us, just like last week, is that vivid picture of whoredom.

But the focus now isn't so much on the ugliness of her behavior, it's on the ugliness of her motives.

Three times in chapter two, we're shown what goes on in someone's heart when they turn away from the true God to trust in something else.

We're shown their motives. What lay behind Israel's idolatry? Well, the truth is, she just didn't think that God could give her what she needed.

Israel thought of God as an impotent lover. Listen to verse five. I'll run after other lovers, she said, the ones who give me my bread and my water and all those things I need.

[11:44] Israel thought of the Lord as an impotent lover, who simply couldn't take care of her. Either he wasn't kind enough or he wasn't powerful enough. So you see, Israel just did not know this God at all, did she?

In fact, that's the central problem throughout this book. She'd forgotten what the Lord is really like. And what is so heartbreaking about that is that the Lord had already shown himself to be the most generous and kind lover of all.

She didn't really know the one who'd adopted her in love and provided for her every step of the way. And so instead of turning to him, she sold herself, rented out her body to little statues and demons trying to earn the very thing that God wanted to give her so badly.

She didn't know, verse 8, that it was I who gave her the grain and the wine and the oil. It was I who lavished on her the silver and gold. And so she took my gracious gifts and gave them as little trinkets to Baal.

It's a pathetic picture, isn't it? Just look at God's sheer indignation in verse 13. She tarts herself up with rings and jewels and goes out looking for the Baal.

[13:19] She stands on the street corners hoping desperately that a generous God will pass by. And she forgot all about me, says the Lord.

She simply doesn't know the God who loved her and cared for her. Yes, Hosea's Israel is often pictured as a harlot, but just as often she's simply shown as blind and irrational and forgetful, a senseless dove, a nation with Alzheimer's disease.

Israel is God's casual lover. She's the people who drifted so far from the Bible that they forgot their God so that when they were rich because he'd showered them with good things, she gave all the praise to her pimps and curb crawling gods.

And when she was poor and the Lord of the universe stood with his arms wide open to help, she walked straight past him, to crawl into bed with something that is no lover at all.

How do you woo a harlot? Well, firstly, God shows them a mirror. He shows them just how blind and horribly forgetful they've been.

[14:51] Idolatry, you see, is the utterly senseless act of refusing God's goodness. goodness. And if that is something that human beings were tempted to do in the ancient world, I suspect it's something that comes even more naturally today to you and me.

It is so very tempting for you and me to believe that our God is, quite frankly, an impotent lover, that he's worth keeping in the background, but not really able to give us the things we need, the things we want most.

So yes, as a Christian, I'll go through the motions of praying and giving thanks to the Lord, just as on paper at least, Israel kept the feasts and Sabbaths and had God tucked away in the back pockets.

But how seriously do I believe that every good thing I have comes as his loving gift? God how would you tell to look at me that God the Lord was my giver of everything?

Of course, it's not that today I bow down to an idol and give that the thanks for what I have. No, in the 21st century, we are so blind that we don't even recognize a divine hand at all.

[16:19] So instead I'll just function as if my money was something I earned through my own hard graft, mine to use as I want.

And when someone I love is unwell, well I'll pray to Yahweh, just as Israel would. But functionally, it's science I trust to rescue him.

It's the doctors who are in control. And in countless other ways, I'll view God's world in just the same way as the atheist might.

It is so very easy for you and me to believe that God is an impotent lover, too cold or too weak or too distant to really trust.

Well, God does not let us get away with such an irrational belief. But when we human beings fall so far into blindness and ingratitude, it sometimes takes harsh love to open our eyes.

[17:29] And so secondly, to woo this harlot, God holds back his kindness. He shows her a mirror and then he holds back his love.

Sometimes the only way we learn how good something is, is when it's taken away from us. Isn't that true? often we love people the most when they're gone. It's just a strange part of how we work, isn't

it?

And so in verses 1 to 13, what God threatens to do is take back every single one of those loving gifts. Now I guess what might have worried her was the loss of those things she seemed so preoccupied with, her precious grain and wine and clothing, verse 9, the vines and fig trees and beautiful things God had filled his promised land with and she had praised these other lovers for. But actually, the most dreadful thing God can take away is not the stuff he gives us. All those things really just came with the package.

They were the trimmings, the blessings of a relationship with such a good, and loving God. And what they had done was reject him.

[18 : 52] That's what we're saying, isn't it? When we live as if our life and happiness comes from somewhere else. And so in response, the most dreadful punishment the Lord can hand out is to take away himself, to hold back a relationship.

Now there's a place in the Bible that shows us what a life without God is like. And that place is the wilderness, the desert. It's where God found Israel in the first place, isn't it?

Naked and alone. It's where she wandered helplessly before he brought her into a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, verse 3, the wilderness is where they have to return if they don't want a real relationship.

Plead that she put away her whoring, lest I strip her naked as the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness. Make her like a parched land and kill her with thirst.

It's a picture there of exile, isn't it? Banished from God's land and his presence, thrown out of the garden all over again. You see, one of the things that happens very quickly when we grow distant from the Lord is that we forget he doesn't owe us anything.

[20 : 20] That's what grace means, isn't it? Grace is when God gives us something he doesn't owe us, something undeserved. And these were gifts which God gave to someone who had nothing.

Look at verse 9, for example. Without the Lord, she was already naked and exposed, and he came along and bought precious wool and flax to cover over her shame.

And so, to show us all that kindness that we've taken for granted, he simply has to take away those things which he never owed to us to begin with.

And sometimes only then do we see what a tragic delusion it is to live as creatures who don't have any need for our creator. Just look what happens to Israel when God takes himself away from her. He boxes her in, verse 6, it's a reference to those foreign armies he's about to send, and in an instant she is thrown into confusion. She chases desperately for other lovers to come to her help, verse 7, but she can't find them.

[21 : 35] No one can deliver. One day every earthly thing we trust will let us down, whether it's that irrational trust in a powerless God or the irrational confidence in a powerless doctor who's done all he can.

and only then does Israel realize what a good thing she had under the Lord's love, under his care. Then she shall say, I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now. Now the people who write books are often very pious about that little repentance in verse 7. They complain that her motives there aren't really good enough, that she's not really sorry, she just wants what's best for her.

But the wonderful thing is I'm not sure the Lord in his grace is quite so sanctimonious. Often repentance begins with a little bit of realism, doesn't it?

And by holding back his kindness, God's goal was to make her see sense. The words there in verse 7 are classic Hosea words for repentance, seek and return.

[22 : 52] That was all God wanted for his bride, wasn't it? It was how the story ended, remember, in chapter 3. She would seek him again and return to his goodness. So perhaps one of the kindest things the Lord ever does is to give every human being a taste of a life without him.

I wonder if you've ever thought of how kind God is to allow us just a few years to live under his curse in a fallen world.

We get a whole lifetime, don't we, banished from Eden to seek and return to him before that wilderness becomes permanent.

we live in a world that screams out to us that things are wrong, that things will be better for us in the arms of a loving God.

And what a tragic and foolish thing it would be to give the thanks for that life to something that is no God, to chance, or to Allah, or to fate.

[24 : 08] even in God's anger, even his anger in this world is a patient and merciful thing. It ought to open our eyes.

And yet still there, he's not done with his harlot. So far, this has been a quite harsh and severe plea, hasn't it? He's shown her a mirror, he's held back his kindness, but finally, he does the strangest thing of all.

From verse 14 onwards, God bears his own heart. Having exposed her motives in chasing after other gods, now, the Lord shows us his motive in all this terrible judgment.

And it is the last thing we might expect. Therefore, or in that way, through that judgment, verse 14, I will allure her.

Sweep her off her feet, and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. Literally, speak to her heart. And there, in the wilderness, the place of judgment, I will give her those vineyards she wanted so badly.

[25 : 25] And there, in the wilderness, verse 15, I'll make the valley of Achor into a door of hope.

And there, she will finally answer my call, just as in those early days of our romance, when I rescued her from slavery in Egypt.

Now, unless you know the way this God works, that must be one of the most incomprehensible passages in the whole Bible. Because it seems so contradictory, doesn't it?

Is God talking about love or about wrath? Which is it? Well, let me fill you in on a little bit of Bible trivia. If the valley of Achor doesn't ring bells, it was a place of terrible judgment.

Israel was fresh from crossing into the promised land. We're talking the book of Joshua. They just tasted God's grace and his amazing generosity.

And then a man named Achan forgot all about it. Like Israel, he acted as if this Lord wasn't really able to give him what he needed.

[26 : 35] And so he took it for himself. He stole some clothes and some silver and some gold, things that once belonged to the pagan neighbors. And God's anger burned so fiercely against Israel that day that they renamed the valley Achor, the place of trouble.

And so what God is saying in verse 15 is something very peculiar, isn't it? He's saying it's the valley of pain, the place of wrath and of judgment that would open up a door for Israel to come home.

The wilderness where God's anger would burn against his people is also the place where his love burns the brightest. God's love.

God's love. God's love. God's love. God's love. God's love. Israel believes what all too often we believe, that God is an impotent lover.

The truth though is that God exercises his love and his power in a very different way to us. even at his most angry, God's power and God's love are still working side by side to achieve his will.

[28 : 02] And that will was for a relationship, wasn't it? A spotless bride. But for her to come home, for that door of hope to open up, her sin had to be punished.

And so before this exile could ever truly come to an end, the lover himself would have to lie in the place of judgment. And having taken all her trouble and all the harlot's shame, he would cry out, it is finished.

Come home. Friends, we live in an age of human history where many, many people are still out in the wilderness.

They still refuse the Lord's goodness and give his glory to worthless things and distance themselves from his love. But we also live in the age of an open door.

God has already opened up that way home, hasn't he? And just look at what it's like on the other side of that door of hope. verse 16 onwards, give us a beautiful little glimpse.

[29 : 22] It's a picture of perfect peace in the arms of love. Everything that's cursed and broken in this world, put to rights. Everything that threatened Israel, taken away.

Nature's at peace, verse 18. I'll make for them a covenant with the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens and the creeping things of the ground. Cecil the lion and crazy American dentists can live side by side.

Nature's at peace, man is at peace. I'll abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land and make you lie down in safety. No Syrian army, no Islamic state, no abusive husbands or cruel employers.

And most wonderful of all, God is at peace. And the marriage is put back together three times. It's that passionate. God says the same thing.

I will betroth you to me forever in righteousness, in faithful love. And never again will you make the same mistakes because this time, verse 20, you shall know me.

[30 : 37] You'll love me. You'll trust me. me. And just as the passage started with the wilderness, with drought and famine, it ends with rain and wine and abundant blessing.

The exile is over. Israel, Jezreel, is planted back where she belongs, verse 22. All of that is what lies on the other side of that door opened up by the cross.

And so like Israel, we're asked which one will have? The wilderness or the marriage? Exile or the cross?

Judgment became hope the day that God the Father looked upon the one he loved and said, no mercy.

He turned his face away from his own son, abandoned him, so that to you and me, wandering in the wilderness, he could say the words of verse 23, you are my people.

[31 : 52] Friends, those words are far too costly to take lightly, aren't they? And they are far too precious to refuse.

Let's pray. Father God, we confess that we belong with Israel out in the wilderness.

Nothing in our hearts has a place in your company. And yet you have shown yourself to be the most generous lover of all, forsaking your own son to call us in from the cold.

help us father, now that you've opened that one way back into your loving care, to walk in it with love and thankfulness all our days to the glory of your son.

Amen. Amen.