

To My Son, Whom I Love

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- [0 : 00] Now we've got two readings tonight, so please do find Matthew chapter 2 and stick a finger in that, page 808 in the Blue Church Bibles. Matthew chapter 2.
- And once you've found that, turn back to the book of Hosea chapter 11, page 757. We're just reading the first 11 verses tonight. Verse 12 really belongs with the next chapter.
- And you'll see that one or two times tonight, our church Bibles give us a little footnote in the text. That's because in those places, the Hebrew seems a little peculiar at first, and the translations have tried to smooth it out a little.
- But mostly, we'll be going with the more literal footnotes this evening. So don't let that surprise you. So then, Hosea chapter 11 and verse 1.
- I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of a man, with the bands of love.
- [1 : 38] And I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them. They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me.
- The sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates, and devour them because of their own counsels. My people are bent on turning away from me.
- And though they call out to the Most High, he shall not raise them up at all. How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
- How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admer? How can I treat you like Zeboim? My heart recoils within me.
- My compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger. I will not return to destroy Ephraim.
- [2 : 46] For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst. And I will not come again into the city. They shall go after the Lord.
- He will roar like a lion. When he roars, his sons shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds out of Egypt.
- And like doves from the land of Assyria. And I will return them to their homes, declares the Lord. And Matthew chapter 2, verse 13.
- Now when the wise men had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, Rise, take the child, the Lord Jesus, and his mother and flee to Egypt.
- And remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him. And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt.
- [3 : 58] And remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. Out of Egypt I called my son.
- Amen. And may God bless to us this is words. Well, have a seat. And please do have Hosea chapter 11 in front of you. Page 757.

My guess is that somewhere in most homes, there's an old box or a messy drawer stuffed with bits of paper that we can't quite bring ourselves to throw away.

The odd postcard from our parents. Letters from a school friend perhaps. Photos from the time you fell in love. Do you know the box I mean?

Well, I think that that box is where Hosea chapter 11 belonged for its first few generations of readers. I wonder if you can picture one of them.

[5 : 05] Just a few short years after Hosea's death. One of the survivors. An exile. Working as a slave. Somewhere in the Assyrian Empire. That's who Hosea has in mind by now, isn't it?

And one day as he's looking wistfully through that box of memories, one unopened envelope catches his eye somewhere near the bottom.

Written on the outside in beautiful, neat handwriting are just a few words to my son, whom I love.

He opens up the letter and begins to read. Dear son, I've written so many of these letters now that you must be losing count.

And yes, I know most of them have gone straight in the bin. But I know that one day you'll read this one and when that day comes, I want you to know that I'm still waiting for you.

[6 : 13] I want you to know that all my anger was born out of love. I want you to know that I never gave up on you. I want you to know how much it cost to write these words.

And then I want you to come home. You'll be a very different person by then, but not me. I will never be too angry to have you back.

I'll always be your father. Well, that unopened letter is Hosea 11. You'll notice the chapter begins with Israel's past, the exodus from Egypt and God's first rejected love for his son.

But actually, this is not a passage about history. It's a passage about Israel's future. At the end, it's come full circle, hasn't it? The chapter began with the exodus and it ends, verses 10 and 11, with a new exodus.

One day, God will call his sons out of slavery once again. And in the middle, verses 5 to 7, we're firmly in Israel's presence.

[7 : 28] Not Exodus, but the exile, waiting just around the corner. God's judgment. And strangely, it's to those people this love letter was written.

Hosea's own generation just about to suffer the full force of God's anger. That exiled Israelite, banished and alone somewhere in Assyria.

Because there are things that they will need to know about what God is like and what God has planned if they're ever going to make sense of their punishment. And those are things that we need to know as well if we're ever tempted to worry that perhaps God has given up on us.

Or if, like Israel, we're so used to our privilege and his tenderness and grace that we just roll our eyes like a child and grow tired of acknowledging it.

So we're going to look this evening at Israel's past and her future. And finally, come back to her present and learn three things about what God is like and how it shapes the way he treats his people.

[8 : 48] Firstly then, in verses one to seven, we learn something very important about God from Israel's past. Here's point number one. The father's heart of grace called a son.

When Israel was a child, I loved him. And out of Egypt, I called my son. You see, God sees his people like a father.

That's not some New Testament idea. It's just who he is. Remember those words to Pharaoh back in Exodus chapter four. Israel is my firstborn son and I say to you, let my people go.

Being a father means that his instinct is to love and protect and rescue. So what we have here is yet another picture of his grace lavished and grace abused.

But the accent here is on why God lavished that love and stuck by this people. God loved them because he's a father.

[9 : 56] Because right down to his heart, he's overflowing in gracious concern for others. Now, God's love isn't a kind of involuntary spasm.

It means more than emotion. It's a covenant word. It means God chose to love that little boy that no one else took any notice of.

It means loyalty. He was patient and kind and stuck by his child through thick and thin. That's the sort of love Israel squandered.

God sometimes when you talk to an older Christian about their children, you just notice a little shadow flicker across the face as you mention one of the names.

A grown son, perhaps. And the smile fades just for a second. And you can almost hear that, can't you, in verse 2 as God remembers his little boy.

[11 : 00] And as he talks, just the hint of a tear begins to well up in his eye. The more I called him, the more he ran away.

I did so much for little Israel. But nothing was ever good enough. He always wanted more. Always seemed ashamed of me. I taught him how to walk.

I carried him in my arms when he couldn't keep going. And when he fell, I'd pick him up and wipe away the tears. But he didn't even know that it was I who healed him.

God's reminiscing, isn't he, about those wilderness years. But you see, Israel is a spoiled teenager by now. What have mum and dad ever done for me?

Always so demanding, always bothering me about something. Of course, it's not true, is it? I led them so gently, says God, verse 4.

[12 : 07] Not like a slave or an ox, like a son. I led them with cords of a man. Do you see the point of that footnote there?

It's not like God dragged him through childhood, kicking and screaming. No, he gave him such dignity. I bent down to ease the ropes on his jaws.

I used to stoop to my knees and feed him with my own hands. Of course, a teenager never remembers that, do they? They don't remember all the spoons he held to their mouth or all the Weetabix he scraped off the floor, all the mercy and all the manner and all the patience.

At the moment, one of my little girls is learning to ride a bike and I think it's become a bit of a Saturday morning spectacle on our streets. Come and look, Janet, say the neighbors. It's that tall English bloke who's running like a girl again, looking like a complete wally.

Because you do, don't you? You're kind of bent double, holding onto the saddle, trying to keep the bike straight, trying to run, keep up speed. You look like a complete plonker. But that's the sort of thing you'd do for a child you love.

[13 : 22] And of course, you have flashbacks to when your own dad taught you how to ride. When I was older, my dad used to run along behind me, holding onto a rope. And when I was ready, he let go.

And I think that's the sort of picture there in verse four. I led them with cords of a man. I think he's probably talking about Moses, the man God sent running behind the bike, holding onto the rope, all the way through Israel's childhood.

Well, we'll come back to him later on. But of course, none of that love and care meant much to Israel, did it? Well, what about you?

Can you see yourself in that little child? I can. maybe you've grown up in a Christian home and a loving church, but the thought of all that privilege just makes you yawn.

Perhaps you can't wait to leave it all behind. Or perhaps it's just that no matter how many times God calls you, you find yourself drifting further and further away from him, not really bothered.

[14 : 44] And that puts everything we've read so far in Hosea into context, doesn't it? God kept on calling this child because right down to his heart, he's a loving father.

And yet, that child is the child we've been reading about. Those casual lovers of his, not even bothered to get to know him. that cold, adulterous wife, those slippery, shallow, duplicitous people, that's the son I did all this for, says God.

And it makes sense of the anger in verses 5 to 7, doesn't it? Isn't his anger so deserved? Now, every parent in this room has lost it at some point, haven't they?

Because that child knows how to push every button. But God isn't like us human parents. It wasn't that he just lashed out because his temper snapped.

he gave his son chance after chance after chance. And that patience and grace and love just made it all the more deserving when this spoilt son refused to listen.

[16 : 09] And so eventually there is an estrangement. My people are bent on turning away and the time comes to let them go. Isn't that a terrible thought?

One day, verse 7, one day that child couldn't call out to his father anymore because the gulf between him and them had just grown too wide.

They couldn't cross it by going to church or saying their prayers or using the right words. Once the relationship was gone, all of that meant nothing.

But even here, as God pronounces the exile and his real fury at Israel, there's a hint of a greater fatherly purpose, isn't there?

Just notice that in verse 5. All along, Hosea has been talking about this coming exile as a return to Egypt. He's pictured it as a reversal of the exodus, as an undoing of God's call.

[17 : 18] But Egypt isn't where this story will end. Yes, spiritually, they're going back to the desert, but physically, it won't be Egypt.

This time, Assyria will be their king, verse 5, not Pharaoh. Even now, God hasn't quite washed his hands of them.

And that brings us to the second thing I want us to see tonight, because for all his righteous fury, God never stops being a father. And so Hosea sees that what happened in Israel's past is the grounds to hope for her future.

The father's heart of grace called a son, and God's heart hasn't changed. So secondly, in verses 8 to 11, Hosea promises something more.

the father's unchanging heart will call many sons. Just notice how deliberately the end of this passage echoes the beginning.

[18 : 25] He uses all the same words. He calls them out of Egypt, verse 11. The Hebrew is just the same there as verse 1. And when he calls, verse 10, it's his sons who come to him, not children, it's the same word again.

A whole new exodus. And yet, if anything, what God is promising here is something even greater. This time, it isn't just one son, Israel.

It's his sons who come following. This time, God doesn't simply call. He roars like a lion. And that roar is heard not just in Egypt, but to the ends of the earth.

Did you notice that? Verse 10, it's not from the east they come, where Assyria is. It's not the south where Egypt lies. No, they come from the west, the sea, from all the globe.

And there's one more change, isn't there, this time? When Israel was a child, God said, I loved him, and I called him, but the more I called, verse 2, the more he went away.

[19 : 36] Well, not this time. when he roars his sons, verse 10, they'll come, they'll follow after him. They're a changed people, aren't they?

In the past, they didn't fear the Lord, we saw that last week, but now they come trembling. They've learnt what this God is like, good and loving, but also holy.

He's no tame lion. So why do God's people get yet another show of grace, even after all they've done to spite and reject him?

Well, the reason Hosea gives is that God never stops being a father. It's just who he is, and he can't treat his children like any old people, even if that's what they deserve.

how can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over? How can I make you like Adma and Zeboim?

[20 : 46] Now, time for a Bible knowledge test, so wake up and put your hands up if, like me, you don't have a clue where Adma and Zeboim are. Well, Bob File knows, that's no surprise, is it?

But for the rest of you, don't worry, because that's the point, I think. Hosea has picked two of the most obscure places in the Old Testament, almost as if he's daring us to try and find them.

The answer is that these were two little neighbors of Sodom and Gomorrah, which in God's anger, he wiped off the map alongside them.

And that's what Israel deserve, isn't it? To vanish into total annihilating obscurity. But God can't bring himself to do it.

His heart is torn in two, verse eight, because however wicked Israel are, they're not just any old people, they're his children.

[21 : 51] They're the ones he made a promise to in his undeserved, gracious love. Now that means that for their own sakes, God has to keep his distance now.

Verse nine uses that return word, it keeps popping up, doesn't it? I will not return to destroy Ephraim, because unless they return to him in repentance, he can't come down to them, because he's God and not man.

What they had was the holy God living right among them. But a holy God in their midst, well, without a relationship, that wouldn't be safe.

That's what happened, isn't it, back in Sodom. The angel of the Lord came down into the city, but it wasn't safe. And that's what he's saying there at the end of verse nine.

See the footnotes? In my mercy, I won't come down into the city, because I am a holy God. And if I do that, if I stay with you, I destroy you.

[23 : 04] So until you humble yourselves and turn back to me, I have to keep my distance from that son, but not forever.

God won't let them off, but he also won't let them go. Because you don't give up on a child, do you? And of course, the Lord's using human language here.

He's talking about his emotions in ways we can understand, but we mustn't dare blunt what he's saying. God is a father through and through, and if he's adopted you in love, then there will never come a day that he gives up on you.

he'll never run out of a father's mercy. Of course, he's holy. He won't let you off, but he will never be too angry for you to humble yourself and come home.

Now, that day was a long way off for Hosea's readers. In fact, it still hasn't come, has it? That northern kingdom, Israel, never found their way home from exile. To this day, they're wandering among the nations, just as Hosea warned back in chapter 10.

[24 : 25] But one day, he wants them to open that box and pick up the letter and see what Hosea saw in the father's heart.

Why did Hosea have hope for the future? Well, because of what God had done in the past. Verse 1, wasn't just history. It tells us what God is like.

The father's heart of grace called a son. And because of that, Hosea knew that verse 11 must be true as well. The father's unchanging heart will call many sons.

Which brings us to our final point. And God's message to every lost child, reading his letter. The father's only son is calling now.

How do you know when it's safe to come home? We still live somewhere in the middle of this passage, don't we? There are people loved by God, but scattered across this world, banished from the father under his wrath.

[25 : 40] death. And Hosea understood that when it was time to come home, they just wouldn't be able to do it on their own. That return from exile would happen under a king who would lead and represent his people.

Just turn back to Hosea chapter 1, would you? Because here's where he pictures that day that God gathers his children from across the world. Hosea chapter 1, verse 10.

In the place where it was said to them, verse 10, you are not my people, it shall be said to them, sons 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, one king, and they shall go up from the land.

They'll come home. You see that second Exodus would happen just like the first. How did God rescue his people from Egypt?

[26 : 47] Well, back to chapter 11, verse 4, he led them with the cords of a man. That time it was Moses, their one head. And when that second rescue comes, it'll be just the same.

They'd be led by the loving cords of a king. Hosea saw it clear as day, didn't he? In fact, there's a hint that he has that king in mind.

Even here in verse 11, many people have noticed how Hosea seems to borrow his pictures here from the book of Numbers. We don't need to turn there. But that roaring lion, it sounds a lot like the description of Israel being led out of Egypt, that you get in Numbers chapter 24, led out of Egypt under a lion-like king.

And if that's what Hosea is alluding back to, well then he's making a very strong statement about Israel's king, isn't he? Hosea calls that lion king the Lord God.

But of course, one day we would learn another name for him, and so Matthew simply calls him Jesus Christ. Isn't it striking in the quotes we read in Matthew 2, just how carefully Matthew's been reading his Bible?

[28 : 12] He understands, doesn't he, that by quoting Hosea 11 verse 1, the prophet had in mind not just Israel's past, but the rescue God had planned for her future.

Matthew's quoting in the context of verse 11, isn't he? And he understands that every time Hosea pictures that rescue, that second Exodus, he pictures it taking place under one head, one king.

And so when Matthew hears about a young king, a son of David, escaping from Egypt, well, he knows that new Exodus must have begun.

He knows it's time to come home. So that's Matthew's message, isn't it, to every banished son, that Hosea's king has come already to lead his exiles back to their father.

And to all who received him, he gave the right to be called children of God. God so loved the world that he sent his only son to make sons of you and me, a king to stand in our place and take the burning anger God wrestles with here in Hosea.

[29 : 38] One son to bring many sons to glory. Friends, that last wonderful gathering of children, it hasn't yet finished, but it has begun.

Right now, God is in the business of rescuing, adopting, healing. right now, no matter how angry he might be with you or what you might deserve, he's ready to have you home under his son, his king.

Because right to his heart, he is a gracious, loving father. And fathers don't give up on their children.

Well, there are several hundred of us in this room tonight, aren't there? So I guess that in here, there'll be every kind of son. There'll be the ones who just can't believe that he picked them up and soothed the scrapes on their knees and taught them to walk.

There'll be the ones who are so familiar with that story that they roll their eyes and take for granted the kind of father they've got.

[30 : 59] And then they'll be the ones looking in through the windows, wondering if there's a place for them in the father's house, wondering how he might treat them if they walk through the door.

Many types of son, but just one response. the lion has roared. The father's calling. Now is the time to come home.

Let's pray. Lord God, there is nothing more reassuring than to learn that at the center of all reality is a father with a heart like yours, holy, but spilling over in love, in grace.

We don't know why you chose us to be your sons. We don't know why you'd stick by us. But we are so thankful that in your mercy and grace, that is just what you do.

So forgive us, Lord, for all the ways we shrug our shoulders at your kindness and keep us in loving fear of our father, through Jesus Christ, your son and king.

[32 : 24] Amen. Amen.