

Ferocious love, for foolish lovers

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Date: 23 August 2015

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to the Bible now, and we've been looking at the book of Hosea together over the past few weeks. And tonight come to chapters 5 to 7. I think that's on page 753 in the Blue Church Bibles.

So do turn there, Hosea chapter 5, beginning at verse 8. Let's read.

Let's read.

Let's read. Let's read.

Let us return to Yahweh.

[2 : 27] Let's read. Let's read. Let's read. Let's read. Let's read. Let's read.

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[3 : 27] Let's read. Let's read. Ephraim. Ephraim's whoredom is there. Ephraim is defiled. For you also, O Judah, a harvest is appointed.

Whenever I would restore the fortunes of my people, whenever I would heal Israel, the iniquity of Ephraim is revealed, and the evil deeds of Samaria, for they deal falsely, the thief breaks in and the bandits raid outside, and they do not consider that I remember all their evil.

Now their deeds surround me. They're before my face. By their evil, they make the king glad, and the princes by their treachery. They are all adulterers.

They're like a heated oven, whose baker ceases to stir the fire from the kneading of the dough until it's leavened. On the day of our king, the princes became sick with the heat of wine.

He stretched out his hand with the mockers, for with hearts like an oven, they approached their intrigue. All night, their anger smoulders.

[4 : 36] In the morning, it blazes like a burning fire. All of them are hot as an oven, and they devour their rulers. All their kings have fallen, and none of them calls upon me.

Ephraim mixes himself with the peoples. Ephraim is a cake, not turned. Strangers devour his strength, and he knows it not.

Grey hairs are sprinkled upon him, and he knows it not. The pride of Israel testifies to his face. Yet, they do not return to the Lord their God, nor seek him for all this.

Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense, calling to Egypt, going to Assyria. As they go, I will spread over them my nets.

I will bring them down like the birds of the heavens. I will discipline them according to the report made to their congregation. Woe to them, for they have strayed from me.

- [5 : 42] Destruction to them, for they have rebelled against me. I would redeem them. But they speak lies against me.
- They do not cry to me from the heart. But they wail upon their beds, for grain and wine they gash themselves. They rebel against me. Although I trained and strengthened their arms, yet they devise evil against me.
- They return, but not upward. They're like a treacherous bow. Their princes shall fall by the sword because of the insolence of their tongues.
- And this shall be their derision in the land of Egypt. Amen. This is God's word to us tonight. A word full of the foolishness and hardness of human hearts.
- Well, do please have your Bibles open again at Hosea chapter 5. And as you turn there, let me ask you to dredge up an awkward thought.
- [6 : 50] What is it like, do you think, to be somebody close to you? How do they really find you? I think most pastors tend to be fairly peculiar personalities when you get up close.
- And although I try very hard to pretend I'm the exception, I have a feeling my wife would say different. Close relationships have a way of forcing a little self-awareness on us, don't they?
- I wonder how many patient pastors' wives there are out there with one exasperated thoughts on their minds. I wish she could just understand what it was like to love a person like him.
- Well, thankfully, my wife is far too polite for that, but not Hosea. Unless you are fast asleep when we read chapters 5 to 7, you'll have noticed that it was a blizzard of similes.
- God is throwing a verbal kitchen sink at Israel by now. It's an exasperated attempt to make them see what it's like to love a people like them, like us.
- [8 : 02] Gray hairs are sprinkled all over your head. Chapter 7, verse 9. And you don't even know it. There's a word from the Lord for me tonight. Or what about this one from chapter 6?
- Love is like a morning cloud. Here today, gone tomorrow. Worthless. You're like a stupid, bird-brained pigeon.
- Chapter 7, 11. Hobbling about from person to person. You can't make up your mind who you really care about. And in the first half of the passage, the pictures are even more unsettling.
- Because there, it's God describing himself. And in ways that we're not really used to thinking of him. I'm like a moth eating away at your possessions.
- Chapter 5, verse 12. I'm like festering rot. Like a young lion. Bent on tearing you apart.
- [9 : 03] If only you could see what it's like to love a people like you. You see, the God pictured in these chapters would have his people back in an instant.
- If only they'd see sense. But Israel has a very big problem which somehow God has to make them understand. They share in a problem which all humanity has.
- And that is the habitual self-destruction of sinning against God's love. There's a God who aches to have us home.
- And yet humanity is addicted to ways of life which reject him. And make it impossible for him to come close. So Hosea chapters 5 to 7 is God's exasperated attempt to make Israel see sense.
- To show them how twisted and self-destructive that is. We're going to look at this passage in two halves tonight. One that forces us to see uncomfortable things about God.
- [10 : 13] And the other about ourselves. The first half is about God's ferocious love. And the second, his foolish lovers. So first then, ferocious love.

That's what he shows us in chapter 5, verse 8 through to 6, verse 3. The awful consequences of frustrating God's loving plan to be with his people.

His love, Hosea warns us, is ferocious enough to kill if that's what it comes to. The thing that's pictured right through this first half is a kind of national death.

Israel wakes up one morning to the sound of air raid sirens in three different cities. Skibeah, Ramah, and Bethel. Suddenly we're in a war zone. Ephraim shall become destruction, verse 9.

A desolation. Ephraim, by the way, is what the prophets often call Israel. The northern kingdom. It's just the name of her largest tribe. And so Hosea opens this new scene by putting us in Ephraim and under attack.

[11 : 22] But the big mystery here is who on earth is invading. You wonder if it could be the Assyrians, the big power of the day. They were the ones you tried to make allies of, verse 13.

But it's turned out to be a pretty hostile alliance. You wonder if the attackers might be your own brothers from Judah. Those three towns he mentioned are all right on the southern border.

In fact, they draw a straight line marching from Jerusalem, the southern capital. And wouldn't it be just like them, verse 10, to take advantage of the chaos by snatching back a bit of territory?

Well, what Hosea tells us is not which army is coming. He tells us who sent them. I will pour out my wrath like water, says God.

From the slow decay of a moth to the sudden mauling of a lion. God has been meting out his covenant curse on his people Israel.

[12 : 28] All of this is curse language. It's what God warned them of in Deuteronomy. If they ever betrayed his love. Cursed be anyone, God had said, who worships a thing made by human hands.

And there they were in Bethel. Or Beth-Avon, as his heir calls it, house of evil. Worshipping a golden calf. Cursed be anyone, God said, who misleads a blind man on the road.

And wasn't that Israel's pastors last week? Cursed be anyone, God had said, who moves his neighbor's landmark. But there's Judah, verse 10, squabbling over bits of the promised land.

And so God's curse, when it comes, is certainly ferocious. I myself will tear them and carry them off. And none shall rescue them.

But why call that ferocious love? Well, because as we've seen already in this book, even God's anger towards his people is bound up with his patience and mercy.

[13 : 41] And it's verse 15 which explains that. I will return again to my place, the lion's den, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face.

And in their distress, earnestly seek me. Notice those two Hosea words again. We've seen them every week. Return and seek.

But this time it's God doing the returning, the repenting. God repents of his love. To make Israel repent of her lovelessness.

To make her see sense. And so in verses 1 to 3, Hosea shows Israel how they ought to respond. When they feel the terrible anger of a loving God.

Come, let us return to the Lord. For he has torn us. That he can heal us, verse 1. And amid all the curse and the gloom, Hosea holds out a beautiful little picture of what life would be like.

[14 : 48] If only they knew and loved and were right with the Lord. Life in God's world, life under his smile would be a beautiful thing, verse 3.

Like spring rain in the desert. If only they'd see sense. And so God's discipline is ferocious enough to kill.

If that's what it comes to. Because only death in God's loving plan could pave the way to new life. It's verse 2 which shows Israel the way back to life in God's presence.

And it's verse 2 which shows us the full ferocity of God's love. Because it talks about Israel's death and resurrection in a way that I think binds her forgiveness inextricably.

To the death and resurrection of her Messiah. After two days he will revive us. And on the third day he will raise us up that we may live before his face.

[15 : 54] On that third day when the Lord God raised his son from the dead. He promised to raise his people too. In God's love he disciplined Israel.

But the full ferocity of his wrath he spent on his son. What more than that could he possibly have done for his people?

And what insanity is it? Hazer wants to ask. To keep running away from him. Well that's the question the second half of this passage begins with.

What on earth am I to do with you? Verse 4. Because for all the ferocity of his anger. And for all the joy that life before his face could be.

Israel just did not seem capable of making a heartfelt response. And so the rest of chapters 6 and 7 turn to God's sheer exasperation.

[16 : 55] At their constant rejection of his love. Now is when Hosea turns his creativity onto them. And tries to open their eyes to what it's really like to love them.

And from chapter 6 verse 4 onwards. We have simile after simile. Describing foolish lovers. Foolish lovers.

Foolish lovers. Now just take a moment to brace yourselves. Because before we're allowed for coffee. I think we have 7 of these pictures to get through. Hosea is going to chuck them at us. Thick and fast.

I think that means I get about 2 minutes for each picture. So let's hope the clock at the back is working. Hopefully that is long enough to recognize something of ourselves in these little pictures.

I think the first and the last picture acts as a kind of headline and conclusion. And then the 5 little comparisons in between.

[17 : 54] Build on the image Hosea has been painting. First the headline then. Picture number 1. And it comes in chapter 6 verses 4 to 6. God looks at Israel. His supposed lovers.

And says, You're superficial. As superficial as the mist. Picture 1. Your love is like a morning cloud.

Verse 4. Hear one moment and go on the next. It means nothing at all. You sing the praise songs and your hearts are full of passion. You take communion and your hearts are full of sorrow.

But then you go home. And it all evaporates like the dew. And that's not repentance is it? It's superficial emotion. What I want isn't your sacrifices and religion.

All I've ever wanted, verse 6. Is a people who know me. People who show mercy and real love to each other. Because they know something about my love.

[18 : 56] I think it's this first picture that stings the most. What can I do with you Israel? You're as superficial as the mist. And then the 5 similes in the middle.

All build up that picture of what false love looked like. You might notice that before the conclusion. All these 5 pictures are bookended with one exasperated thought.

Whenever I try to forgive them. Chapter 7. 1. They do it all over again. Anyone with small kids knows that frustration, don't they?

I would have them back in an instant, says God. And make everything right. But their sin is right there in my face, verse 2. Do you see how personal he makes it?

Back in chapter 6, verse 2. He longed for us to live before his face. He longed for them to seek his face. 5.15. To seek him. But instead, that's where we shove our hatred and betrayal.

[19 : 59] Right in his face. Reject his grace. And if you look on to chapter 7.13. Just before the conclusion. It's the same idea.

I long to redeem them, verse 13. Long to forgive. But they speak lies against me. Twist my character and reject my kindness.

So let's look quickly at those 5 pictures in the middle. The way God sees Israel throwing his love back in his face. Picture 2 begins in chapter 6, verse 7.

And works its way down to about chapter 7, verse 2. It's a brood of bandits. You're treacherous, says God. As treacherous as bandits.

Like Adam, they betrayed the covenant. They dealt facelessly with me. It's a word that means something like deceit. Right from the very beginning, human beings have pretended to honor God.

[20 : 59] But cheated behind his back. Twisted his words like the devil in the garden. It's not that those priests in verse 9 were actually murdering people.

But they were certainly misrepresenting God. And the result was death. A kind of spiritual homicide. Pilgrims would trek to the great cathedrals at places like Shechem.

And lose their lives. You're treacherous as bandits. Next comes the burning oven. It's the picture in verses 3 to 7. You're ravenous, says God.

As ravenous as burning embers. It's really our appetites under attack here. The lust for sex and drink and power. Your hearts smolder away like an oven.

Once it gets going, the baker doesn't even need to stoke it up. All by itself, those embers consume what they want. Part of the problem with our appetites is what he says in verse 2.

[22 : 04] We just don't believe God really sees and remembers what we get up to. We just don't know him properly. When you and I crave certain behaviors like an addict, there's a belief issue underlying that.

Adultery or porn or gossip. Those aren't just self-destructive behaviors. They come from a self-destructive belief. The addiction to imagining God as something other than he really is.

Now the addicts here were mainly Israel's kings and rulers. And it was power that they craved. If you want to see how ugly human ambition becomes, when that's all we live for, just look at Israel's last years.

They devour their rulers, verse 7. And none of them call upon me. Hosea lived through six kings in 30 years.

And four of them murdered their way to the throne. And that ambition lingers in the human heart, doesn't it? Just waiting to be fanned into flames.

[23 : 17] Ravenous as burning embers. Picture four comes in, verse 8. You're compromised, he says.

As compromised as a burnt cake. So mixed up with the world that you're no use to anyone, verse 8. Half baked. Like a pancake that's burnt on one side and raw on the other.

Neither a light to the Gentiles, nor just ignorant pagans. Just wishy-washy. Useless. Compromised. And what's worse, verse 9, you can't even see it.

You're delusional. Picture five. As delusional as a man in a midlife crisis. Gray hairs sprouting everywhere. But he's so vain that he hasn't even noticed.

You see, Israel thought that she was impressing all those neighbors of hers, the world she cozied up to. What she couldn't see was how they sapped away her strengths.

[24 : 21] Sometimes when a church gets past its prime, we end up doing the sort of spiritual equivalent of dad dancing. You know that awkward dance that a man in his midlife crisis does, the kids just bury their heads in shame.

We go on and on as a church about our wonderful calling and how we're engaging with the world. And don't realize that actually we're just copying the world, blending in with them.

And the world out there that we're trying so hard to imitate just laughs at us. You're delusional. Picture number six.

You're fickle, verse 11. Fickle as a senseless dove. You hobble over to Egypt hoping for a bit of bread. And of course, Egypt does what little boys love to do to pigeons.

He takes a big kick, puts you in chains. So you flap off in a panic. And then two minutes later, do exactly the same thing. Hobble over to Assyria, hoping that he'll be different.

[25 : 23] But of course, Assyria turned out to be slavery all over again. And if only you'd stop flapping about, says God, and stick with me, verse 13.

You'd find what you need. But you can't make up your minds. You're fickle. So what else can I do with you, Israel?

What else can I do but show you that ferocious love, drag you down in my net? What choice do I have? When the chance comes for God to draw near, what do you do, verse 13?

You misrepresent my character. You speak lies against me, twist and turn away. You don't know me well enough to cry out from the heart, verse 14.

So instead you try to blackmail me, like a pagan god, wailing on your beds, gashing yourselves for attention. Endless prayers, endless masses, endless quiet times.

[26 : 28] But that is not real love. That's not what I want. You've twisted me in your minds. You see, idolatry is often much more subtle than the worship of a statue.

Israel believed that they were praying to the one true God, their rescuer. Yes, they used those little golden calves, but they thought of those as representing him.

The problem is that we human beings are very, very quick to imagine God our own way and not the way he tells us that he really is.

And the moment we do that, we start distorting his character. Whenever you hear a person saying, for me, God must be like this.

Well, then you're witnessing the birth of an idol, a God who's pleased by human things and not the sort of love he really looks for.

[27 : 33] And that's what you and I do again and again. We try to get along with God in a way that suits us. We distort him in our minds. And so Hosea sums it all up with his final picture.

Your hearts are twisted, he says, verse 16. You're as twisted as a crooked bow. Yes, you repent. You return again and again and again.

But not to me. Your hearts are angled away from me. You're addicted to little rebellions against my love. You're twisted.

Twisted in your heart. Six very awkward pictures. And I wonder if you could hear that question nagging away as we read. Now can you see, Hosea asks me, what it's like to love a person like you.

Superficial. Treacherous. Ravenous for my own gain. Compromised, delusional, fickle. Twisted away from God in my heart.

[28 : 47] Those weren't just Israel's problems, were they? Those were Adam's problems, our problems. God stands there with open arms like the father to the prodigal son.

But we're addicted to that crazy, self-destructive idea that our way of doing things works better. Well, we've covered a lot of ground in not very much time.

So perhaps you give me five minutes or so before we close to try and think some of it through a little bit. I think Hosea's great gift is helping us see things the way that God sees them.

And there are two things in particular he helps us see straight here. First, the obvious one. He helps us see our sin the way it really is.

Whether it's the way we treat each other or the way we fail to recognize the truth about God and put our confidence in human things.

[29 : 48] All of that is an affront to God's mercy and love. It's something we throw in his face that puts distance between him and us. And if the thing that's changed between Israel's time and our day is the cross, well, I think that renders our flaky love even more inexcusable.

Hosea looks forward, didn't he, to the resurrection of Jesus as the end of God's anger. But if we're the prodigals, the ones God welcomes back in his son, well, what more could he possibly do for us?

To the extent that our love looks anything like theirs, Hosea shows us that it's a horrible, ugly thing. But secondly, I think this passage is a huge help in showing us God's anger in this world as it truly is.

And this one is worth us thinking through a little bit more carefully. God's judgment on Adam, just like his judgment here on Israel, did not all come at once. Yes, in the end, there's death, eternal, unrelenting death.

But first came a world that screams warnings at us about God's anger. And sometimes that suffering in this world is something we Christians can feel very defensive about.

[31 : 22] It doesn't seem fair, does it? So we try to excuse it. But I think Hosea helps us understand that as part of God's extraordinary compassion towards a lost and rebellious humanity.

And that compassion, that ferocious love does not stop when you become a Christian. If there's anything Hosea convinces us of, it's that our hearts are still twisted.

Isn't that right? Our nature is still enslaved to wrong loves, like that crooked bow. And so we still need God's loving discipline, don't we?

His ferocious love. Well, on the whole, the Bible doesn't encourage us to draw wooden lines between the bad things we do and bad things that happen to us.

But I suspect we're quite slow to recognize how God changes us through the normal, everyday sorrows of life in a fallen world.

[32 : 31] Remember, all of that, all that sickness and sorrow is evidence of God's anger towards humankind. So why do we forgiven Christians still have to face it?

I wonder if you've ever asked, how can it be right that a believer in Jesus Christ still has to face death? Does that not present a huge problem to our understanding of the gospel?

Death is the penalty we face for sin. And yet as a Christian, my punishment for sin was taken already at the cross. So isn't the death of a Christian manifestly unjust?

Well, Hosea chapter 7 helps me understand some very uncomfortable things about the state of my forgiven heart, my fallen nature.

And that twistedness, that addiction to falsehood is something that in this body I will never be free of. But in God's ferocious love, he has not yet given up on this enslaved body.

[33 : 49] Right until the end, God's curse on this world is shaping and training his children to fit them for the next world. Right until the end, God hounds human beings with his ferocious but compassionate discipline.

For some of us, those signs of his curse and anger in this world are a gracious warning. Wake up and turn around while there's still time.

Trust in Christ. But even in Christ, where God's anger is spent, his curse on this world is left to do God's patient and loving work on our hearts.

Hosea helps us see God's anger in this world for what it truly is. Not as a reason to doubt God's goodness. But as the reason that he is far better than we could ever dare hope.

The anger on display in this world tells us that God is full of grace and patient compassion for the lost. And it tells us of his extraordinary persistence with those fickle lovers of his like you and me.

[35 : 18] Well, let's pray. Lord God, forgive us, we pray, for our cheap and fickle love. Father, we are so prone to believing foolish things about you.

Contenting ourselves with superficial repentance. An empty religion. So help us, Father, to press on to know you better.

We ask that in your grace, we would respond quickly to your loving correction. And know the joy of life with you.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.