

# An Unconventional Love Story

Hosea: Learning to Love Again

Hosea 1-3

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We begin a new series this morning in the prophet Hosea. Chris Holding has done a lot of work on this series. He's actually preaching this morning in the Chinese Congregation. And his work has really helped me to understand Hosea. He wrote a blog post last week on the book. If you've not had a chance to read that post, I'd encourage you to go to our website this afternoon and take a look at it.

I'm going to begin by reading the very familiar story of Hosea and Gomer in chapters 1 and 3. Throughout the sermon, I'll refer to the prophecy in chapter 2, but I want to begin with just the story.

## **Hosea 1:1-9; 3:1-5<sup>1</sup>**

*<sup>1:1</sup>The word of the LORD that came to Hosea, the son of Beeri, 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.*

*<sup>2</sup>When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD." <sup>3</sup>So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.*

*<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>And on that day I will break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel."*

*<sup>6</sup>She conceived again and bore 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. <sup>7</sup>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."*

*<sup>8</sup>When she had weaned No Mercy, she conceived and bore a son. <sup>9</sup>And the LORD said, "Call his name Not My People, for you are not my people, and I am not your God."*

*<sup>3:1</sup>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." <sup>2</sup>So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley. <sup>3</sup>And I said to her, "You must dwell as mine for many days. You shall not play the whore, or belong to another man; so will I also be to you." <sup>4</sup>For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods. <sup>5</sup>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.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

### *The Power of Story*

Most of you are familiar with these verses we just read about the prophet Hosea and his scandalous marriage to Gomer the prostitute. Did you know that this familiar story is only fourteen verses (the verses we just read)? But the book of Hosea is fourteen chapters full of prophecy and poetry—prophecy and poetry that warn and threaten judgment and predict salvation. My guess is many of you are not as familiar with this longer portion of Hosea.

Why does Hosea begin with a story? It's because God wants us to remember the message of the book of Hosea. And God knows what we all know—stories are powerful.

There's a lot of information we need to learn in the book of Hosea. Fourteen chapters worth of information. But God wants us to have more than information. God wants us to experience transformation. That's why he begins with a love story. And that's why Hosea sticks with us.

Stories go beyond simply relaying facts and data. Stories emotionalize information. "They give color and depth. They allow people to connect with the message in a deeper way, a more meaningful way. And when emotion is bonded with information it can lead to greater transformation."<sup>2</sup>

The prophetic message of Hosea is all about God's love for his people and his desire for his people to love him in return. But God's people don't naturally love him in return. We tend to run after other gods, we run after idols. But God pursued us in our sin. And now God calls us to learn to love him again. He calls us to abandon our idols and give ourselves wholly to him. That's the message of Hosea. But that message is somewhat abstract. It can be mere information. So, God has packaged this message in a story—the love story of Hosea and Gomer—to teach us a lesson about God's love for us and our love for him.

### *An Unconventional Love Story*

How many of you here like romantic comedies? My daughters certainly do. And I love to make fun of them when they're watching a romantic comedy. But it's amazing how many times I get sucked into the movie when I'm back in the family room making fun of them.

Why do we like romantic comedies? They're so predictable. They all begin and end the same. They all have a man and a woman who fall in love. They all have a conflict where the couple breaks up. And they all have a kiss and make up section at the end.

So why do we watch this predictable dance in countless romantic comedies? It's because of the stuff in the middle. We know the relationship will be restored. But we don't know *how* the relationship will be restored. What will the man do to win back his love? That's where the romance comes in. And that's why we sit down to watch another one.

The story of Hosea is predictable as well. It begins with a relationship. Then it involves a breakup. But eventually there's a reunion. So in a sense it's a conventional love story. But the stuff in the middle, the way Hosea goes after Gomer, is unique. The stuff in the middle makes this an unconventional love story.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Guber

So to organize our time this morning, I want to begin with the problem in the story. Then I want to talk about the resolution of the story. But I'm going to wait to deal with the unconventional stuff in the middle of the story until the end of my sermon, so we can experience the surprise of this story.

## **THE PROBLEM (1:1-9)**

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The problem in this story comes out in chapter 1, verses 1-9. The story begins with a ruptured relationship. Let's look at verses 2-3 again: "When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, 'Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, 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."

I said that the unconventional part of this love story comes in the middle. But if you think about it, this first part of the story is pretty unconventional as well. It wasn't normal for a prophet to marry a prostitute. But God commands Hosea to marry a wife of whoredom and to have children of whoredom. Then in verses 4-9 we see the names of those children. Names like "No Mercy" and "Not My People." I know there are some bizarre baby names out there these days, but I don't recall anyone naming their kid "No Mercy." And as Chis Holding says in his sermon, these weren't in the top ten baby names of ancient Israel either. Clearly this is a dysfunctional family right from the start.

Hosea's marriage and family would've shocked Israel. People would've been talking. Those of you who have been at First Free for a while know that Maggie used to have pink hair. That caused people to talk. I've also had some people ask me why my kids don't wear shoes. Or why I don't wear shoes in the office. That's not the way a pastor's supposed to dress. Those are pretty minor offenses though. But Hosea took the whole pastor's wife stigma and pastor's kid stigma to a whole new level when he married a prostitute and named his kid "No Mercy."

Why did God call Hosea to start a dysfunctional family? It was to symbolize the great dysfunction in the family of God. God wanted to get Israel's attention. Hosea's family was a picture of the relationship between God and Israel.

God had established a relationship with Israel at Sinai. He entered into covenant with them. He loved them so much that he saved them out of Egypt. And at Sinai he called them to love him in return. He called them into an exclusive relationship, like a marriage relationship between one man and one woman. He called them to forsake all others and keep only to him as long as they lived. And he promised that if they loved him with all of their heart and mind and strength that he would love them in return. If they would be faithful to him alone, he would be faithful to them.

But Israel went after other lovers. They worshipped other gods, the pagan gods of the nations around them. They were not faithful to God. And God warned that if they were not faithful to him that he would discipline them. He promised he would kick them out of the Promised Land.

So the story of Hosea and Gomer was meant to get Israel's attention. He's saying, "You think Hosea and Gomer's family is messed up. Take a look in the mirror! You're doing the same thing in your relationship with me! You've been unfaithful. And now you're going to be disciplined."

Gomer is a sexually promiscuous woman in the same way that Israel is a spiritually promiscuous people. Gomer goes after different lovers and receives payment for her services. In ancient Israel, women were highly dependent upon their husbands to provide for them financially. But Gomer had

no husband; so she gave her body away to all these different men, and their payments provided for her needs.<sup>3</sup> But when Hosea took her as his wife, he was saying, “I will provide for you.”

But Gomer wasn’t satisfied with Hosea’s provision. She continues to run around with other men after her marriage to Hosea. The text doesn’t tell us this explicitly. But we know it’s the case from chapter 2. And at the beginning of chapter 3, the LORD commands Hosea to “Go again, [and] love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress.”

This is exactly what Israel did in their relationship with God. God had redeemed Israel out of Egypt and promised to take care of them if they remained faithful to him. I love the way Psalm 81:10 puts it. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.” But Israel wasn’t content to allow God to satisfy their needs. They rejected God’s love and turned to other gods.

Israel worshiped the Baals. The Baals were fertility gods. They thought that if they worshiped these gods, if they brought them sacrifices and did their rituals, then they would bring prosperity to their land. The rains would come, the crops would grow, and the people would have everything they needed.

But just like Gomer, Israel had no need to seek out these other lovers. They already had a husband who would provide everything they needed! God was more than able to take care of them. Like we sang earlier, “I will glory in my Redeemer. My life he bought, my love he owns. I have no longings for another. I’m satisfied in him alone.”

## THE RESOLUTION (3:1-5)

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So the story begins with a ruptured relationship. And the story ends with a restored relationship. Look again at chapter 3, verses 1-2. “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 a lethech of barley.”

At the end of the story, Hosea goes and buys Gomer back. We don’t know exactly what happened, but Gomer’s situation had gotten so bad that she was in slavery to her lovers. And Hosea redeems Gomer from slavery.

This part of the story also applied to Israel. Even though Israel had a ruptured relationship with God, even though Israel would have to go into exile away from the land, God promised that he would redeem them. That’s how much he loved them! And this not only applied to Gomer. This also applied to their children. Look at chapter 2, verse 23. “...and I will 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.’”

Amos saved the happy ending for the end of his book, but Hosea gives it away in the beginning of the book. That’s because to understand Hosea’s message, you have to know the beginning and the end.

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<sup>3</sup>Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, The New American Commentary

## THE TURNING POINT (2:5-8)

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But this is all predictable. So far, this is conventional. The unconventional part is *how* we get from rupture to restoration. So, how *do* we get from “No Mercy” to mercy, from “Not My People” to my people? How do we get from rupture to restoration? The turning point of this story comes in the very middle.

Hosea 1-3 uses a chiasmic, or concentric, structure. It’s an A, B, C, B, A structure.<sup>4</sup> This structure puts the emphasis in the middle of the passage. And in the middle of the passage we take a break from the story and move into poetry and prophecy.

This is how it works: The narrative frames the three chapters. In chapter 1, verses 1-9 we have the story of Hosea and Gomer. That is parallel with the story of Hosea and Gomer in chapter 3, verses 1-5. Next we have two promises of restoration. The first is in chapter 1, verses 10-11. The next is in chapter 2, verses 14-23. In the middle we have a prediction of punishment or discipline, in verses 1-13.<sup>5</sup> This is where the turning point of the story is found. This is where the unconventional part of the story is found.

The turning point of the story shows us that restoration comes through discipline.

God disciplined Israel because they deserved it. They broke covenant with him. They’re going after other lovers. So he sent them into exile; he sent them into the wilderness.

But it’s not only out of God’s wrath that he’s punishing them. His end game is much bigger than that. He’s disciplining them so they will return to him. As verse 14 says, “Behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her.” That sounds very romantic. But think about it for a minute. I doubt many of the ladies here would think the wilderness is romantic. Who wants to go tent camping in the desert for their honeymoon?

The wilderness is God’s discipline on Israel. And it’s through discipline that he brings restoration. That’s the unconventional part of this story. He doesn’t woo Israel back to him through a candlelight dinner. He woos her back by taking her to the woodshed. Very unconventional romance!

But how exactly does God accomplish restoration through discipline? That comes out in verses 5-8.

### Hosea 2:5-8

*For their mother has played the whore;  
she who conceived them has acted shamefully.  
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.’*

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<sup>4</sup> Garrett; cf. C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books*, 112.

<sup>5</sup> A. Narrative of Hosea and Gomer (1:1-9)

B. Restoration Promised (1:10-11)

C. Punishment Predicted (2:1-13)

B. Restoration Promised (2:14-23)

A. Narrative of Hosea and Gomer (3:1-5)

*<sup>6</sup>Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns,  
and I will build a wall against her,  
so that she cannot find her paths.*

*<sup>7</sup>She shall pursue her lovers  
but not overtake them,  
and 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.'*

*<sup>8</sup>And she did not know  
that it was I who gave her  
the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and who lavished on her silver and gold,  
which they used for Baal.*

The way God restores Israel through discipline is by taking everything away from her; everything she got from her other lovers. He takes away her food, clothing, jewels, and money. He strips all away until her land is as bare as a desert. Only then will she return to her first husband. Only then will Israel return to God!

Like a spoiled child who loves his toys more than his parents, Israel needs to have its treasured possessions taken away so they will remember who provided them. It was never the Baals who provided for Israel. It was God. Restoration will come through discipline.

Look at chapter 3, verses 4-5 again: “For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods. 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.”

Israel’s kings didn’t lead them to follow God. So, he’ll take away their king. Israel’s priests didn’t lead them to worship God. So he’ll take away their whole religious system. And only when their other lovers prove to be worthless will they remember their first husband and return to him.

There’s a lot to learn in this passage about how to love God. But the most important lesson in Hosea 1-3 is about God’s love for us. God loves his people so much that he’s willing to take away all they love. That’s my sermon in a sentence.

God could’ve let Israel stay in their sin. He could’ve let them continue to worship false gods and never enjoy fellowship with him. But he loved them so much that he was willing to give them a wake-up call. God’s plan to bring restoration through discipline is the key to understanding the book of Hosea. It’s a book about God’s love—a love that’s perfect but not always pleasant. It’s a book about how far God will go to bring his people back to him.

### ***While We Were Still Sinners***

God promised that Israel would return to their God and to David their king. That promise wasn’t fulfilled until Jesus Christ came. Christ was the king from the line of David. And it’s only by turning to Jesus that we can turn back to God.

In Christ, God took drastic measures to save his people. He sent Jesus to the cross. And it was on the cross that God's love is fully displayed. It was costly and painful. But it made a way for us to be restored to God.

As Chris says in his sermon, starting a relationship with God isn't like meeting a stranger; it's more like returning home to the person who's loved us all along. All of us have rejected God. All of us have turned to other lovers to meet our needs. "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8).

If you want to know the love of God, you need to place your faith in Jesus Christ. And if you want to love God, then you have to allow God to take away all of the other things you love. The Bible calls that repentance. It's painful, but to follow Jesus we have to leave everything else behind.

To be in a love relationship with God is like marriage. The church is the bride of Christ. And marriage is exclusive. When you enter into a relationship with Christ, you are saying "yes" to Jesus and "no" to everyone and everything else. We forsake all others and vow to keep only to him as long as we live. If you are not yet a Christian, I invite you this morning to turn from your sin and turn to Christ in faith. If you are a Christian this morning, I want to ask a question of you. Do you have another lover that is primarily filling your needs? Is it your job, a relationship, your family, money, success, security, respect, sex? If you have something you love more than God, are you willing to let go of it and return to him?

Do we glory in our redeemer, First Free? Our life he bought. Our love he owns. We should have no longing for another. We should be satisfied in him alone!