

God Loves the Unfaithful (1)

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[0 : 00] Please turn back with me to Hosea chapter 1. Hosea chapter 1, where we learn God loves the unfaithful. God loves the unfaithful.

One of the things which makes the gospel's account of Jesus so amazing is the kind of people that He seems to favor. Not the righteous, but the unrighteous. Not the faithful, but the unfaithful.

It goes against the grain of human religion to learn that Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. And those He came to serve weren't the cream of human society, but its dregs. God did not demonstrate His love to the righteous, but to sinners. The message of the New Testament is this, God loves the unfaithful. And that's good news because it means God can love even me.

If this is the message of the New Testament, that God loves the unfaithful, what is the message of the Old Testament? Sometimes we mistakenly think it's the opposite, that God only loves the faithful.

But a closer reading reveals the message that the Old Testament is the same as the New Testament. God sets His love upon those who deserve it the least. God loves the unfaithful.

[1 : 37] Do we know this? I mean, really know this. But God loves us just as we are. Nowhere is the message of the Old Testament proclaimed so powerfully as it is in the book of Hosea. On the surface of things, Hosea makes very grim reading. It's the story of Israel's unfaithfulness and God's judgment upon them. But go deeper, and Hosea makes glorious reading.

For ultimately, it is the Old Testament declaration of God's love for the unfaithful. God is setting His love upon those who deserve it the least.

Over the course of four Sunday evenings this summertime, I want us to explore the message of Hosea, the message of God's love for the unfaithful. And this evening from Hosea 1, I want us to see three things together. First, unfaithfulness explained, verses 1 through 3.

Secondly, unfaithfulness exposed, verses 4 through 9. And lastly, unfaithfulness exceeded, verses 10 through 11. My aim is that we'll gain a new appreciation and perhaps even an experience afresh the good news that God loves unfaithful people. He loves even me.

First of all then, from verses 1 through 3, unfaithfulness explained. Unfaithfulness explained. By the way, if you want to find the book of Hosea, the easiest way to do it is look for Daniel.

[3 : 26] It's the book immediately afterwards. Unfaithfulness explained. Hosea was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel. He was active nearly 100 years after the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

What made him a prophet was that, as we read in verse 1, the word of the Lord came to him, and then in verse 2, the Lord began to speak through Hosea. God spoke to Hosea and God spoke through Hosea. Both elements were involved in being a prophet in the Old Testament.

But sometimes the way in which God spoke through an Old Testament prophet consisted not just in words, but also in actions. God uses theater to make his point. He always accompanied the action with words, as he does in Hosea, but he uses the actions to drive home the words. For example, Ezekiel famously ate a scroll, and Jeremiah placed bricks in a stone kiln. Both were reinforcing the words God had spoken through them with theatrical actions. And Hosea's theater is the most famous of all, for God commands him, saying, Go marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife, this land, Israel, is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord. Literally, it reads like this,

Go marry an unfaithful woman and have children of unfaithfulness with her, for like an unfaithful wife, this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord. The theater is that Hosea must marry an unfaithful woman and have children of unfaithfulness with her. The explanation is, this land, Israel, is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord. So here we have God speaking to Hosea and calling him to do something unspeakably painful. Commit himself to a woman who doesn't know how to be faithful to him.

A woman who has had already countless lovers, and he knows will go on to have countless more. Go marry, God commands Hosea. Go be faithful to a partner who will not be faithful to you.

[6 : 05] Go love her who will not love you. You know, Hosea must class as one of the heroes of biblical faith because without a word of complaint, he goes and does what God commands, and he marries this woman called Gomer. The explanation is clear. Like an unfaithful wife, this land, is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord. Gomer here is a symbol of the northern kingdom of Israel, a nation filled with all kinds of religious unfaithfulness. Hosea is a symbol of the God who was committed in steadfast love to his unfaithful people. By this stage in its history, Israel had almost entirely turned away from God. There were far more altars to the Canaanite god Baal than there were to the Lord. By and large, the nation was economically prosperous, but it was spiritually dead. Idolatry in the worship of foreign gods was in. The worship of God was definitely out. So, this then is the explanation of unfaithfulness to God.

The relationship between God and his people was not contractual, as in two parties sign a business agreement and then one reneges on that agreement. Nor was it even friendship, as in how friends, sometimes without fault on either side just drift apart. The relationship between God and his people in the Old Testament is a marriage. That's how it's described by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 5, 25 through 27. Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

In other words, unfaithfulness to God is no small thing. Unfaithfulness is no less serious than adultery in a marriage. Be it reputation, or career, or comfort, or happiness, or family, or possessions, or anything else, putting anything before God in our lives is no less serious than adultery in a marriage between us and God. And what makes it even more serious for we who live after the cross and resurrection is that Christ has died for us. We've seen him shed his blood on the cross to wash us from all our sins. This is unfaithfulness to God explained. The darkness and disgustingness of our sin and spiritual idolatry is spiritual idolatry as Christians. It is no less tragic than a faithful and loving Hosea marrying a faithless and adulterous Gomer. God tells us the way it is, and the way it is is that breaking faith with God is as sordid and disgusting as breaking faith with our husband or wife and joining ourselves with someone else. God says it. Hosea acts it out. Next time we're tempted to sin, thinking that somehow there is greater pleasure in sin, that in faithfulness to God, let's remember Hosea's explanation of sin.

It is dark. It is disgusting. Secondly, from verse 4 through 9, we've seen from verse 1 through 3, unfaithfulness explained, unfaithfulness exposed from verse 4 through verse 9.

Hosea's marriage to Gomer is only the first thing God calls him to do. The second is that he must have children with her. Their union in marriage must produce offspring, so-called children of unfaithfulness.

[10 : 20] And the marriage produces three children, two sons and a daughter. God names them Jezreel, Loruhamah, and Loami. And these names are more divine theater. God's using actions to reinforce His message, reinforcing to Israel the grievousness and the seriousness of their unfaithfulness to Him.

Now, these three names all mean something, of course. You can see that in the footnotes of your Bible. But what they mean in essence is this. First of all, the first name from verse 4 to 5, if we're unfaithful to God, our strength shall be our weakness. Second from verses, verse 7, if we're unfaithful to God and show no compassion, we'll be shown no compassion.

And thirdly, if we're unfaithful to God from verses 8 and 9, we have no idea of what we're leaving behind. So, the first name means, our strength shall be our weakness. Well, it doesn't mean that, of course, it means she has not received mercy. Sorry, Jezreel rather. But in essence, it means, our strength shall be our weakness. Jezreel refers to a region of Israel which was the source of its prosperity. The ground was fertile and crops grew in abundance. At this stage in Israel, it was fairly prosperous and prosperous and much of its prosperity found its source in the fruitfulness of the valley of Jezreel. Jezreel and it lay behind the economic strength of Israel. But something else had happened in Jezreel, for there a great massacre had taken place when the present king had murdered the previous king and piled up the heads of his 70 sons against the gates of the principal town of that region.

So, the strength of Jezreel was not merely economic, it was also political. It represented the strength of the present king of Israel. And in these verses, God says, He will destroy Jezreel.

He will break the bow of Israel. He will break the bow of Israel. That the nation will no longer be able to depend upon its economic, political, and royal power. These aspects of power the valley represents.

[13 : 03] The strength of Israel shall become its weakness, for God shall destroy it. In the same way, whatever we left God for shall become our weakness. We may have left God behind in order to pursue a career. That career, though on the surface may seem ever so successful, shall be our weakness.

We may have turned our backs on God to pursue a relationship. That relationship, be it ever so pleasurable, shall be our weakness. And faithfulness to God will turn our strengths, our Jezreels, those things we left God for, into our weaknesses.

The second name, Loruhamah, means in basic, show no mercy and will be shown no mercy.

Show no mercy and will be shown no mercy. By virtue of the fruitfulness of the valley of Jezreel, Israel was wealthy. It was a prosperous nation. But the wealth wasn't shared equally among all the people.

The prophet Amos, who ministered a few years before Hosea, railed against the way in which the rich in Israel oppressed the poor. Justice was denied to the poor, bought by the rich. Israel was a nation marked by inequality. The rich would never have dreamed of showing compassion, mercy to the poor.

[14 : 50] Not only was Israel an unfair nation, it was a loveless and harsh nation in which to live if you were poor. My brother has a phrase he uses to speak of injustices which seem to go unpunished. He always says to me, God doesn't pay His debts with money. God doesn't pay His debts with money.

God will pay back those injustices, but it won't be with things we can see. Jesus says, if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Israel might have been doing well economically and politically, but because of its social injustice and lack of compassion being shown to the have-nots, God pronounces upon it, I will no longer have mercy upon the house of Israel.

If we as Christians can be unfaithful to God, then what else and who else are we prepared to break faith with? And if we can be unfaithful to God, favoring rather the gods of reputation and wealth and respectability, how sure are we that we were ever Christians in the first place?

That our profession of faith was sincere in the first place? That our sins really have ever been forgiven? That we really did ever trust in Jesus? The risk is far greater than the reward for the unfaithful. The third name, lo-ami, which you find in verses 8 and 9, basically means we have no idea what we're leaving behind. We have no idea what we're leaving behind. It means not my people.

Remember the greatest promise God ever gave His people? He said to them, I will be your God and you shall be my people. It was that covenant commitment to them which had brought them out of Egypt 500 years before Hosea, led them to the desert, guiding, protecting, and providing for them in the way. It was that covenant commitment from God which had brought them into this promised land and had blessed them with prosperity and fruitfulness. But now God turns the table and says, you who once were my people shall no longer be my people. You see, the people of Israel thought they could do better without God. Now they're going to learn the truth. It is God who has made them what they are. They owe everything to God and without Him they are lost, insecure, and defenseless.

[17 : 44] Do they not realize how much they're leaving behind? For when God removes His protecting, guiding, and providing hand, they'll be back in the wilderness again.

You know, perhaps we think to ourselves we'll gain far more by leaving our faith in Christ than ever we'll lose. We think our pleasures without Christ shall exceed the sacrifices we make for Christ.

How wrong we are. When, for whatever reason, we turn away from the Lord, we have no idea what we're leaving behind. And you know, maybe it won't cost us in this life. Maybe we'll succeed in all our plans and we'll become everything we want to be and have everything we want to have. But on the day we in death meet our Maker, we'll realize what we left behind for the sake of money, pleasure, career, or whatever else we were unfaithful to Him for. The names of these children make dark reading.

We might wish that the first chapter of Isaiah could be a wee bit more upbeat. But, you know, this is how serious unfaithfulness to God is. This is how seriously the consequence of unfaithfulness is.

Weakness, judgment, loss, however great the allure of the idols of this society, money, career, pleasure might appear to be, let's take into account how much more it will cost us to abandon God and be unfaithful to Him. And we'll quickly realize that nothing this world can give us is worth the loss of Christ. Nothing. Thomas Cranmer was the great English 16th Reformer of the English Church, the English equivalent of John Knox. The Catholic Queen Mary sentenced him to execution. But in the day shortly before his execution, Cranmer signed a letter recanting his Protestant faith and was spared.

[20 : 00] Soon after, realizing how much his unfaithfulness to God was costing him, Cranmer changed his mind. Once again, he was sentenced to death to burn at the stake. But this time, rather than recant his faith, as the fire under him was lit, he plunged his hand, that hand he had used to sign the recanting letter he had previously submitted, he plunged it into the fire and shouted, that unworthy hand. Cranmer died as he lived, a faithful witness to the grace of Christ.

Whatever it is our idol may be, whatever it is we replace God on the throne of our hearts with, be it happiness, be it happiness, the American dream, pleasure, money, relationship, whatever.

Let's by faith plunge it into the fire and shout, that unworthy career, that unworthy relationship, that unworthy pleasure. Because however much to the contrary it might feel, everything else in life is a loss compared to the surpassing excellence of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. Unfaithfulness exposed. Well then, thirdly and lastly, and briefly, from verse 10 through 11, unfaithfulness exceeded. Unfaithfulness exceeded. The message of the previous point, unfaithfulness exposed together with the rest of the book of Isaiah is that because of that unfaithfulness, God is going to judge the nation of Israel. The years to come are going to be painful, as an invading army will plunder their wealth, destroy the valley of Jezreel, and destroy their cities. Israel is going to learn the hard way what it means to leave God behind. And we know from historical record, you can check it out in the British Library in London, that Israel was destroyed by the Assyrian army and its capital city of Samaria, was burned to the ground.

But none of this means that God stopped loving Israel's peoples, or that His purposes for them were at an end. His love goes deeper than His judgment, it always does, and beyond the bad there is only the good. The problem for us as we read verses 10 and 11 is that as far as we know, none of these promises were historically fulfilled in Israel. In 722 BC, Israel ceased to exist as a nation. So the promises God makes in these verses cannot apply to them. We've got to find another fulfillment to these promises, and this is what we find exactly in the story, in the New Testament story of Jesus and His church. Because as with all the other Old Testament prophets, the ultimate fulfillment of their prophecies stretches beyond the boundaries of the Old Testament and beyond the boundaries of Israel. God loves unfaithful Israel to the extent that He provides for them a new and greater way of salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, put to death by the Gentile

Romans. The unfaithfulness. The unfaithfulness of Israel is exceeded by the love of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ, a faithfulness that stretches to the very ends of the earth. God loves the unfaithful to the extent that He sent His one and only Son to die in their place on the cross, to give Himself as a ransom for their sin. As Paul would later say, where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.

[24 : 10] Now, in these verses, we very briefly see four promises God gives not just to faithless Israel, but to all who will come, unfaithful as they are, in repentance and faith to Him.

The first is this, fresh blessing, fresh blessing. God promises, saying, yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea which can't be measured or numbered. This promise is an echo of that He gave to Abraham, the foundational promise of the Old Testament. The Assyrian invasion of Israel devastated the population of Israel devastated the population of that nation. But the gospel of Jesus Christ shall build a church which cannot be numbered, made up of people from every nation and tribe and color and language. What began with the unfaithfulness of Israel shall end with a vast multitude gathered before the throne of God, washed clean in the blood of Christ, and filled with joy.

Second promise, new relationship, new relationship. 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. The judgment of God upon the unfaithful people of Israel was summed up in the name of Israel's Son, Lo-Ami, not my people.

Hosea's children are themselves called children of unfaithfulness in verse 3. But such shall be the impact of the gospel of Jesus Christ, such shall be the excessive love of God outpoured through the cross, that they who were once not His people shall be called not just children of faithfulness, but children of the living God. The transformation and relationship shall be complete. Jew or Gentile, they were once addicted to the worship of idols, of putting other things before God, but now their relationship with God shall come first. Their attachment to foreign gods shall be forever broken, and they shall be Christ's forevermore, living in Him, through Him, and for Him.

Third promise, living devotion. Living devotion. And the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head. At the time of Hosea's ministry, Israel and Judah were two distinct nations, but it was always the dream that they'd one day reunite as they had under the kingship of David and Solomon. And this never happened in history.

[26 : 56] But time and again in the prophets, they look forward to a day when the two shall come together, and this is fulfilled, we believe, in the New Testament church. Notice how at the beginning of verse 11 we have this promise of reunification under one king, one head. Jesus, Lord and head of the church, Lord and head of the church, as we read in Ephesians 5.23.

In other words, the devotion of the people of God shall be directed not toward an idol, or toward a city, or toward a statue, or toward a nation, but it shall be toward the living Christ, and it's in Him we shall be one.

And then the last promise is deep fruitfulness, deep fruitfulness. They shall go up from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel. As we learned earlier, due to its fertility, the valley of Jezreel was the source of Israel's prosperity. For however great the prosperity of Israel, the prosperity of the church shall be so much greater, flourishing, will be rich, not in terms of finance, policy, political clout, or military strength, but in terms of the spiritual treasures of the gospel. And such spiritual treasures shall result in the complete transformation of the people of God, such that whereas once we lived and breathed for the idols we served, we'll now be fruitful in the service of Christ.

We began this evening by reminding ourselves that during His earthly ministry, Jesus seemed to favor the unworthy, the unfaithful, and we proved that God also loves the unfaithful. He loved the unfaithful people of Israel in Hosea's day, no matter how disgustingly grievous their spiritual adultery, unfaithfulness explained. He warned them of the consequences of their unfaithfulness and called them to dependence, unfaithfulness exposed. But now we learn from verses 10 and 11 why God loves the unfaithful so much. Why does God love the unfaithful? It's because it gives Him the opportunity to display and demonstrate the greatness and glory of His saving grace in the gospel.

Unfaithfulness exceeded. It gives Him the opportunity to display and demonstrate the greatness and glory of His saving grace in the gospel.

[29 : 44] Hosea loved an unfaithful Gomer, and God loved us to the extent that He gave His faithful Son for us.

Surely that's the best news. Hosea might make grim reading, but it surely makes all the more glorious reading because it means this. Even in our unfaithfulness to God, perhaps especially in our unfaithfulness to God, God loves us. And you know, for the sake of His own glory, He wants to show the greatness and majesty of His saving grace to us, in us, for us, and through us.

Now, that's no reason that any of us should be unfaithful to God. But it is a reason that every one of us, whoever we are, should take all our unfaithfulnesses to Him, and in faith pray these words, Lord, You know I don't love You as I should, but I know that You love me, and forevermore I'll live for You and praise You for Your love for the unfaithful.

Let us pray. Lord, we thank You that the ultimate fulfillment of all these promises in Hosea is the covenant commitment of Christ to His people. As He stretched out His arms on the cross, embracing an unfaithful people, a people of unfaithfulness who would continue to be unfaithful to Him. We think of the apostle Peter, and how even on the night of Jesus' betrayal, Peter denied Him three times, yet Jesus still loved Him. And we think of ourselves here this evening, every one of us, perhaps, unfaithful in our own ways. Some of us have been believers for many, many years, and yet we're still unfaithful to You. And some of us, perhaps, wouldn't profess yet to be believers in Christ, and we know we're unfaithful to You. And some of us, perhaps, are believers, but we've wandered away from You because we've got questions we can't find answers to, or we want to live in such a way that we want to be free from the restrictions of Your Word. Lord, whatever it is that's causing us to stray from You, help us to realize that we have no idea of the pleasures in Christ we're leaving behind, that if we refuse to show mercy to others, or even to ourselves, or to You, we will not be shown mercy.

Rather, O Lord, show us the beauty of Christ, and display the greatness and glory of Your sovereign grace in us. For Jesus' sake, amen.