'God's Relentless Love for his Wayward Son'

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Date: 01 November 2026

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[0:00] As I mentioned, we're continuing our series through the prophet Hosea, and we're coming to! the final chapters. But let me start with a bit of show and tell. One of my favorite,! Sorry, one of my daughter's favorite Teddies, I don't have favorite daughters, just in this. Is this guy called Big Ted. He survived 15 years in perfect health and then the dog came.

And poor Big Ted has now lost his nose, which broke my daughter's heart. In fact, her face looked like a bit like this little guy's face. That's what I was like.
And yet amazingly, she still loves the dog incredibly. And that is a bit like our passage today. That's what we see with God and Israel, where Israel are not like the dog, but like a son who breaks their father's heart. And yet amazingly, God still loves them.
As something that perhaps parents can relate to, though, on a much smaller scale. But it begins with the father's heart that loves them and calls them and is then broken by them.
So point one, verse one. When Israel was a child, I loved him. And out of Egypt, I called my son. Now, there's a bit of background to this. When God says the nation of Israel was a child, he's talking about its infancy when they were a young nation. And he loved them ultimately by choosing them, not because there was anything special about them. In fact, in Deuteronomy, Moses reminds them that the Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other people's for you were the fewest of all people. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to his ancestors. And he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, which was Egypt. Here you see, to set his affection and love them means he chose them, even though there's nothing special about them.
[2:18] Indeed, and that's what we'll see for us, actually. Indeed, for Israel, though, they were the fewest of all people. And because God loved them, he not only chose them, but then he called them or saved them from Egypt out of that land of slavery to be his people. And not just his people, but verse one says, his son, which was an incredible privilege. For it meant the God of the universe became their father.

Which is extraordinary when you think about it. And they become nothing less than God's treasured possession. Like a parent's only child. To enjoy all the blessings that came with it.
But to slightly misquote Spider-Man, if you've seen that movie, with great privilege comes great responsibility. The responsibility to reflect God's holy character to the world. So that the world might see how good God is and then come to God to enjoy life with God too. You see, to call them doesn't just mean he saved them from Egypt, but also for a purpose, for a calling in life, if you like.
As God said to Israel back in Exodus, when he did call them out of Egypt, he said, you yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Now, if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations, you will be my treasured possession, his son. Although the whole earth is mine, you will also be a kingdom of priests.
A priest is someone who stands between God and people. And the way the whole of Israel were to do this was by being a holy nation. A holy nation that reflects God's holy character to the world.
[4:08] That people might see how good God is and come to him to enjoy life with him too. This is what God called his son Israel to do. But in our passage, verse two, the more they were called to be this, the more they went away from him. And they sacrificed to Baals and they burned incense to images.

You see, the more God called them through the prophets to be that holy nation, the more they went away from God to be a, well, an unholy nation. In other words, they forsook their calling in order to chase after other gods and follow evil practices instead, all of which broke God's heart.

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And part of the reason they did this was because they had taken God's blessings for granted, yes, but also had forgotten all God had done for them. Like a rebellious teenager who forgets all that the parents have done for them when they were little. And God says in verse three, it was I who taught Ephraim, that's Israel, to walk when they were little, taking them by the arms, but they did not realize that it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them, I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek and I bent down to feed them. He, God kind of laments as he recalls his fatherly care for them, which they've completely forgotten.
His care, which, you know, taught them to walk, took them in his arms and led them by the arms. A bit like this father, you know, helping his son to walk by holding his arms, if you like. It's a picture of God's tender, loving care as he forgave them and saved them from Egypt and led them through the wilderness. As verse four puts it, he led them with cords of human kindness and ties of love. [6:06] Through the wilderness, feeding them and bringing them to their promised land to enjoy life with him. In fact, verse three kind of summarizes it by saying, I healed them. That is, healed them from a life of slavery in Egypt for a life of blessing with him. And yet verse three also says, they did not realize or literally know it was I who did this. Now at one level, they did know it was God who did this.

After all, we just saw back in Exodus, God himself say to Israel, you yourself saw what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagle's wings. And so at one level, they did know.
So in verse three here, where it says they did not realize or did not know, it means they acted like they did not know. In other words, they completely forgot to the point where they no longer knew or realized, if you like.
You know, like kids who completely forget all their parents have done for them. And when you remind them, they're shocked as though they never realized that. You did all that? I'm not speaking from experience at all.
In need, instead of selective hearing, it's selective remembering. And we see an example of this in Israel's history too. Just after God saved Israel from slavery in Egypt, it took a whole three days before they forgot all he'd done and begun to grumble against him. Do you remember? A whole three days before they acted like he'd never done anything for them. The point is God loved and chose them.
[7:49] He called and saved them. He led and fed them so they could enjoy life with him as his privileged son. And so for them to forget all he's done for them and forsake their calling to worship other gods instead, what was a gross act of ungratefulness that broke God's heart? But I wonder if we can sometimes do the same. You know, if we can forget all that God has done for us, such that we too ungratefully forsake our calling and break his heart. We see this in the New Testament, like the letter of Ephesians, where it talks about all God has done for us. Again, in love, he predestined or chose us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, such that we now have the privilege of calling the God of the universe father too. And this means enjoying new spiritual life with God now, being part of his family like we are here this morning, with the blessings of peace and hope, along with purpose and help in this life, plus an inheritance to look forward to, which is the world to come. You see, sonship is not a gender thing. It's a privilege thing. For in the ancient world, it was the firstborn sons. They were the ones who received the inheritance. And so being sons, along with Jesus, the son, means we are co-heirs with Christ.

Heirs who will inherit the world to come with Christ. Remember what Jesus said? The meek will inherit the earth. And this comes with a perfect body to enjoy the perfect world for all eternity. I mean, how much money and energy do people put into their bodies today? Also, they can stay younger and live longer. And yet God has secured it all for us at the cost of his own son's blood. For as Ephesians goes on to say, in Christ, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins. Not because there was anything special about us either. We were undeserving. And so it's all by the riches of God's grace. And unlike Israel, he's even given us more. He's given us his spirit, which is like a down payment, guaranteeing that inheritance to come in the world, to come until God has redeemed all those he's chosen to be his sons, along with us, his treasured possessions. You see, God has so loved us and called us to be sons with Christ the Son, which is an incredible privilege. But again, our privilege also comes with responsibility. Having talked about all that God has done in the first few chapters of
Ephesians, Paul then says, I urge you, therefore, in light of all God's done, in light of our privileged position, to live a life worthy of that calling we've received. A life that pleases God. And like Israel,

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we're meant to do reflects God's holy character to our world, so that they might see how good our God is and come to believe in Jesus too. Yet like Israel, we can forget all of that, can't we? We can forget all that God has done for us and so ungratefully forsake the calling he's given us in order to chase after the gods of this world and live the world's way, which actually breaks God's heart. Ephesians 4 30 just says, do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. We can grieve, we can break God's heart.
And so have we forgotten all that God has done for us in Jesus, such that we ungratefully forsake our calling to live a holy life? Are we, in other words, breaking God's heart?
And if we have, then we need to remember afresh all that God has done for us through Jesus, that we might repent and then gratefully live a life worthy of our calling.
[12:03] Unlike Israel, who refuses to repent. Point two, verse five. In Hosea, God continues to say, will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?

And so a sword will flash in their cities. It will devour their false prophets and put an end to their plans. My people are determined to turn from me. Even though they call me God most high, I will by no means exalt them. Now the question in verse five has the implied answer of sadly, yes, because they refuse to repent, they will return to slavery. I think that's what Egypt represents here. Remember, Egypt was the land of slavery, but this slavery will actually literally be in the country of Assyria. Assyria will rule over them. That's what happened in history. And in the process, verse six, there would be death and destruction. That's what a sword flashing in the cities refers to. You know, the Assyrian army laying waste, which meant death for many, including the false prophets.
And death kind of puts an end to anyone's plans, doesn't it? All because verse seven, they were determined to turn from God. That is, refused to repent. And so any calling out to God most high was not sincere. No, no, like we saw a few weeks ago, it was insincere. And so God can by no means exalt or rescue them. Not because God's unable, but because they refuse to let him do so. It's kind of like Israel is drowning in the ocean and then God, the lifesaver comes to save them, but they're so determined to swim away from the lifesaver, refuse to be rescued by him.
[13:54] And if you refuse the only one who can save you, then will you be saved? No. And so what's the only alternative left? Well, sadly, death. And sadly, there are many in our city who are determined to swim away from God, aren't they? Who refuse to repent. Perhaps, you know, some personally.

But sadly, this will mean slavery for them too, not in Assyria, but a place much worse, hell. And eternal slavery. And it will mean death too, not physical death in this life, but ongoing spiritual death in the next. And so do we realize this?
And so continue to pray for those we know that God might soften their hearts and stop them refusing to repent. Do we realize this so that we might even gently try and persuade them with our lives, you know, making Christ attractive and with our gentle words that they might be saved.
For like Israel, a refusal to repent will sadly mean slavery and death, which God does not want. Some people think that God loves to judge, but the truth is, it's the opposite. God's heart relentlessly loves and longs to save. Point three, verse eight. He goes on to say, how can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admar? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me. All my compassion is aroused. With this verse, we peer into the very heart of God. And can you see how deep the father's love is, even for his rebellious son, Israel. How he doesn't want to give them up to judgment, even though they really deserve it.
[16:00] Perhaps like a parent who knows they must punish their child, but doesn't really want to. Or perhaps unlike a parent who is so angry that they really do want to punish the child, but God doesn't want to. It kind of reminds me of that verse in Ezekiel, where God says, as surely as I live, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. So he says, turn, turn from your evil ways. Why will you die, people of Israel?

God wants people to be saved. In fact, even in Isaiah, when Israel's judgment is announced, Isaiah calls it God's strange work, God's alien task, because it's not what his heart naturally desires.
And so also here, you know, Hosea, his heart overflows with compassion. He really doesn't want to judge them, even though they refuse to repent. Do you see how good our God is? How it's worth following him in life and trying to persuade others to find life with him too?
Of course, because Israel does refuse to repent, then God must judge. He can't simply sweep their sin under the carpet because, well, that's not justice, is it? And so he must judge them, even though

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he doesn't want to. But because he doesn't want to, he decides he'll limit their judgment and he won't destroy them completely. And we see this with the mention of Admar and Zeboiim. Those were towns next to Sodom and Gomorrah. And do you remember what Sodom and Gomorrah, what happened to them?
They were destroyed completely, weren't they? And so God is saying, how can I give you up completely or hand you over to be destroyed completely like Admar and Zeboiim? For my heart is full of compassion.
[18:05] And so verse 9, I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. There will be judgment, but he's not going to do it again or completely. For I am God and not a man, the Holy One among you. I will not come against their cities. God is not a man who breaks the covenant as Israel did. He is the Holy One who keeps his covenant. And so he won't destroy them completely, even though he has every reason to. Yes, they will still go off to slavery and exile in Assyria, but it won't be complete or forever. Rather, verse 10, a time will come where they will follow the Lord.

They will repent finally. And then he will roar like a lion. And when he roars, his children will come trembling from the West. They will come from slavery, trembling like sparrows from Assyria in exile, fluttering like doves. And I will settle them in their homes, declares the Lord. At the end of chapter five, God was like a lion who attacked them in judgment that they might earnestly repent. And when they finally did in exile, he again acts like a lion, but this time to roar and recall them home, where they'd return with a newfound humility or trembling towards him. And he would resettle them in their homes to start again, all because he's not a man who breaks the covenant. He's the Holy One who keeps his covenant, his word, his promise, which is a great reassurance for us. For it means he will keep his covenant to us, doesn't it? His promise that all who believe in Jesus will be brought home to heaven and then the new creation, and he will not let us go until he has done so.
Last Sunday, I was at St. John's for their Thanksgiving Sunday, and one person gave thanks for this very thing. She stood up and confessed that earlier in life, she had wandered away from God, but then thanked God that he did not let her go. They were her words.
But he brought her back to himself and to her church home in Blackburn. This is the reassurance we have, because this is the God we have who keeps his promises, a God who will bring us home to heaven and then the new creation.
And so do we rejoice in this, continue to give thanks for this, like that lady did last Sunday? Of course, this chapter, though, is full of God's relentless love for his wayward son, Israel, who failed to fulfill their calling.
[20:55] That's the big idea. And God's love and the son that Israel should have been, of course, are most clearly seen in Jesus.

As we heard in our second reading, just as Israel was called out of Egypt to be God's son and reflect God's character, you know, that the world might come and enjoy life with God too. So Jesus was called out of Egypt as God's true son, who did reflect God's character and then even died so that we in the world could come and have life with him.
Jesus is the perfect son that Israel should have been. And Jesus reveals God's relentless love for us, doesn't he? For at the cross, God so loved us that he gave his one and only son.
Even for us who are undeserving. As you know, I have an only son. And while I might sometimes be tempted to give him up for you all, I wouldn't. But God did.
As the words of our next song say, how deep the father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure, that he should give his only son to make us who are wretches, his treasured son's possession.
[22:14] This is the big point of the chapter. And so the big application for us is, will we be like Israel who forgot God's love and failed to live as God's sons? Or will we remember God's relentless love for us?

That despite all our sin and all the times we've turned from him, he still loves us, still leads us in life and will never let us go until he's brought us home. Do we remember his deep love for us?
And in response, like Christ, live a life worthy of the calling we've received as fellow sons. Let's pray for God's help to do so. Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much for your relentless love towards us in Christ.
That has even made us your privileged sons with an inheritance to come. We pray that in response, you would help us, unlike Israel, to live a life worthy of the calling we've received as fellow sons with Christ.

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That the world might see how good you are and come and have life with you too. We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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