

High Infidelity

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[0 : 0 0] Now you can be seated and you may like to open the Bibles at page 730 to Hosea chapter 2 and we're continuing our sermon series that I began last week on this Old Testament prophet, a six-week sermon series on some of the chapters of the book of Hosea and let's pray.

O Lord our God, speak to us from your word, teach us about your love, about our need for repentance, give us understanding and give us willing hearts to obey you and love you. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

There are few places sadder, I think, than the family court and thankfully only rarely have I had to go to a family court but to see couples fighting against each other, often over fairly trivial or tawdry matters, airing their dirty linen, so to speak, is a very sad experience and a far cry, of course, from here comes the bride and the brightness and happiness of no doubt, what a wedding day sometime before that. What we saw last week and we continue to see in the book of Hosea is that God uses the analogy of marriage to portray his relationship with Israel and he uses a model for that in the marriage of Hosea, his prophet, to a woman called Goma who was, as we saw last week, a whore or a prostitute.

It's a shocking analogy and a shocking imagery but God is using that shock technique or tactic to shame his people and to draw them back to himself.

That imagery continues today and it begins in what we could imagine to be a family court. God is in court with his faithless Israel and he begins by saying, plead with your mother, plead.

[2 : 0 8] We can imagine God in court and urging his children who are there to plead with their mother. Now, the analogy, of course, you can't draw every point of the analogy.

So, we can't say, well, these are the children who are pleading against their mother, Israel, and who are these children? But the point is that it's using this picture language to shock and shame Israel and to bring them back to God.

What it shows us is that even here, after centuries of Israel's rebellion and rejection and apostasy and idolatry, that even still, God is pleading that Israel may come back to him.

That's astonishing, really. And indeed, the whole tactic of calling Israel like a prostitute or a whore and using the marriage of Hosea to illustrate that is still a tactic to draw Israel back to himself.

Plead with your mother, plead, he says, for she is not my wife and I am not her husband. What God is saying there is that, in reality, the marriage has ended because they've gone off or she's gone off after other gods.

[3 : 2 7] The marriage ended long ago in practice or de facto, we might say. And yet God is still pleading, the end of verse 2 says, that she put away her whoring from her face and her adultery from between her breasts.

The physical imagery there of face and breasts is that she's probably adorned with makeup and jewelry and necklaces hanging down her chest and so on, playing the whore, the harlot, dressing up for relationships.

Of course, the imagery is applying to spiritual life. And the fact that Israel has been cavorting and flirting with other gods all through its history.

And it's using that imagery of jewelry and makeup to show how she's been desperate to go after these other gods. And he's pleading for her to repent, to turn back to him, that she puts aside all of that behavior and comes back to God.

The threat is ironic in verse 3. Or I will strip her naked. Of course, the imagery of prostitution is that she's jumping into bed with all these other gods, presumably naked.

[4 : 45] And now God will strip her naked and shame her, publicly humiliate her because of this idolatry and apostasy. He will expose her as in the day she was born and make her like a wilderness and turn her into a parched land and kill her with thirst.

There's no real day on which Israel, the nation, was born. But if anything, it's at Mount Sinai in the wilderness as they came out from Egypt and slavery and headed towards the promised land.

Although even there they committed idolatry, of course, when they made a golden calf in the book of Exodus. But what God is doing here is to shame her and humiliate her, to take her out of the land into exile.

That's the veiled threat in that verse. So out of the land of promise, they will go into exile. Something that does happen within 20 or 30 years of these words being spoken.

Of course, if you go to a family court, the ones who really suffer are usually the children. And that's perhaps what fits in the next verse. Upon her children also I'll have no pity.

[5 : 56] Remember the name of one of the children of Hosea last week. No pity because they are children of Hortum. God's not punishing innocent children here.

If anything, the children are continuing the practices of their mother. As I say, the imagery breaks down. We can't really distinguish who is Israel and who are the children of Israel.

Although, if anything, we might say, well, the leaders are particularly to blame and they're leading the people astray. And the next generation is continuing the same sins as the previous one. Well, there we get a pointer to the spiritual problem.

Which is really what this imagery is about. Who are the lovers? But the gods of the pagans. The Canaanite gods. The Canaanite gods.

Called Baals or lords. Fertility gods. The Canaanite religions were all about fertility. About engaging sometimes in sexual prostitution.

[7 : 12] Literally with temple prostitutes in the Canaanite places of worship. So that you would induce the gods to produce rain or crops or animals or children. But notice what is being quoted here.

Israel is going off to pagan gods. Saying, they are the ones who are giving me my food and my water and so on. They are the fertility gods.

They're providing the crops and the rain. Of course, the truth is different from their claims here. That was always going to be a danger for Israel.

Before they entered the land. Before they entered the land. Before they entered the land. Some 800 or so years earlier. Sorry, 700 years or so earlier. Before they entered the land.

The warnings of Moses in Deuteronomy, for example. Were, don't go after other idols. Don't be tempted and ensnared by them. Don't fall into their trap. It is I, Yahweh, the God of Israel.

[8 : 12] Who is the real provider in the land. And yet, the warnings fell on deaf ears. The other warning that comes before they enter the land is, Don't, when you get into the land, think that your own power and ability and ingenuity and strength have gotten you all this wealth.

Not at all. It is God. And yet again, it's another warning that falls later on deaf ears. The allure of Canaanite gods was real and strong and lasted through the centuries.

We might think, how could they fall into such stupidity? But Canaanite religion was an easy religion. It had low moral standards. It was tempting and seductive.

And they fell into the trap time and again. So what will God do? Three times in the verses that follow, the verse begins, Therefore, as a result of their sins, their idolatry and apostasy, their spiritual adultery, God will act.

Firstly, in verse 8, Therefore, I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths.

[9 : 26] It's almost a little bit like the sin of Adam and Eve. The thorns that will grow up and keeping them outside the garden so they can't go back in. The hint is of going into exile, keeping them out of the land, away from the pagan shrines.

She will pursue her lovers, but not overtake them, in the sense of not catch up with them, or not meet them. That's explained in the next half of verse 7.

She will seek them, but not find them. And then she'll say, I'll go and return to my first husband, for it was better with me then than now. Do you see what God's going to do?

He's going to frustrate and thwart their idolatrous desires by destroying the nation and taking it into exile away from the land.

And in that deprivation, God's aim is that they'll be like the prodigal son that Jesus spoke about in the parable, and realize they were better off with their first, in this case, with their first husband.

[10 : 31] And the prodigal son, it's better off with his father. That is, God will take away and dry up their wine and oil and bread and food and so on, so that they might come back to God himself.

The implication is of droughts and famines, things that God had said would come, if Israel disobeys God in the land. But things that have happened already, and yet not actually brought repentance.

But now I think it's the climax of that threat, with taking them out of the land. The tragedy of Israel's sin is this. The very good things that God had promised to give and gave, they are attributing to non-gods, to idols made of human hands.

And actually not, they are blind to the true giver. How like our world, when so often we speak about Mother Nature, and not God.

We talk about the God El Nino, whoever he is. The gods of climate change. We fail to return thanks, to the real provider God. And in the midst of our worst ever drought, how infrequently we get to our knees, as a nation, as a church, as an individual, and pray to God for rain.

[11 : 52] How often we think proudly, that we have attained all that we need, that it's our strength and hard work, that has got us our houses, and stocked fridges, and pantries, and so on.

And how shallow our thanks to God, because he is the great provider. The second, therefore, comes in verse 9. What will God do?

Therefore, I will take back my grain in its time. Notice this begins a sequence of I wills, in the verses that follow. I will do this.

God says, I'm doing this, not the Canaanite gods, who you think are the ones who provide, it is I who am doing all of this. And I'll take back my grain, my wine.

You attribute it to the pagan gods, but it's mine. I've given it to you. So I'm taking it back. That is, I'm producing drought and famine. I'm taking you out of the land.

[12 : 49] I'll take away my wool and my flax, which were to cover her nakedness. God is bringing them to his knees, so that they may return to him. And I'll uncover her shame, he says in verse 10, in the sight of her lovers.

That is, by taking them into exile, he'll humiliate them. The other nations will mock them. He will shame his people. And no one shall rescue her out of my hand.

I'll put an end to her mirth, her festivals, new moons and Sabbaths, and all her appointed festivals. Some of these may well have been the Sabbaths and proper festivals that the Old Testament commanded.

But most of them had become corrupted by pagan influence. Many of the key festivals of the Old Testament had a harvest component to it, of giving thanks to God for the wheat harvest, the barley harvest, the summer fruit harvest, in the festivals of Passover weeks and tabernacles.

And God is saying, and implying here, that they've corrupted those festivals by acknowledging the Baals. Some of them were outright pagans and others were just what's called syncretistic, where they mix up the worship of God with the worship of the pagan gods.

[14 : 08] And God's saying, I'll end all of that by taking them out of the land. They'll go into exile. He'll lay waste her vines and fig trees in verse 12.

That again is a threat of exile. That all these vines and fig trees, which they were saying, these are my pay, which my lovers have given me, that is the Baals have given us this fruit, they'll be laid waste.

Overgrown in a forest, wild animals shall devour them, the end of verse 12 says, because there'll be no one there to care for them, because the people of Israel will go into exile. I'll punish her for the festival days of the Baals.

Not just the syncretism, but also the outright worship of pagan gods. When she offered incense to them and decked herself with ring and jewellery and went after her lovers and forgot me, says the Lord.

How easy it is for us as well to ignore or forget the providential hand of God. We see here the strength of God's feeling when the people whom He loves forget Him and worship, in effect, some other God.

[15 : 24] Of course, we most likely don't set up pillars that we bow down to and say, this is the Baal God of fertility. We're so much more sophisticated. But we worship our scientific control, our personal control.

We ignore the gifts of God Himself. And yet, how much God loves us still and desires our return to Him. Well, we may think it's all over.

In some sense, we might expect that the end of verse 13 is a justifiable end. Exile and no more existence of Israel, the nation. Verse 14 is the third, therefore, and it's the most striking, most surprising of all of them.

Therefore, I will now allure her. That is, judgment is real and judgment is coming. The exile is coming and it's inevitable.

And it happens within 20 or 30 years for this northern kingdom of Israel when the Assyrians conquer them in 722 BC. But it's not the end. And that's the most astonishing thing about God.

[16 : 35] That despite the persistent, deep, pagan sins of the people and the offense to God that it causes, it's not the end.

He keeps coming back and pleading with his people and bringing them to return to him. And so here, I will now allure her.

I'll bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. The wilderness was the place before they entered the land after leaving Egypt under Moses. And now, in a sense, the exile is like the pattern of that.

Back to the wilderness, back out of the land to bring them back to God. And from there, verse 15 says, I will give her her vineyards.

I'll make the valley of Achor, a place of trouble, literally, and a place of sin in the book of Joshua when the people first enter the land. Now, he says, I'll make it a door of hope.

[17 : 33] That is, the new entry back into the land will be greater than before, more hopeful than before. Then, there, rather, she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

Well, Israel, when it came out of Egypt, was not perfect. Committed idolatry and a golden calf incident at the very place Mount Sinai. And all through the wilderness experience, mumbled and grumbled against God, but in one sense, that's the high point of their history, even.

Very sad. But the future will be better. This anticipation of the future is not immediate. This statement of surprising alluring of Israel is not an alternative to the judgment that was just threatened.

But rather, the picture is that at some time in the future, after this judgment, God is not done with his people and will lure them to bring them back.

Verse 16 begins, on that day. An expression that is quite frequent in the prophets and usually refers to a day in the future, a climactic day of history when God will act to fulfill all his purposes.

[18 : 54] On that day. Three times in the verses that follow. Verses 16, 18 and 21. On that day. Speaking of something quite distant in the future from the perspective of Hosea the prophet.

On that day. You will call me my husband and no longer will you call me my Baal. For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth and they shall be mentioned by name no more.

The future is good because God will act to change Israel. On that day our relationship will be right. You won't be cavorting with other gods because I will remove their name from your mouth.

Not simply that they don't speak about him but the idea being that they're taken out of their life altogether. Their whole will and desire will be purified and corrected by this action of God in the future.

An action they don't deserve. You see whenever the Bible looks to a good future for the people of God what lies behind its possibility is that God himself acts in his people to change them to change their hearts or mouths as it is here in verse 16 and 17.

[20 : 17] Israel will be changed on that day by God and that is the consistent hope of the Old Testament. throughout it. The result will be that Israel will be faithful and they will call God my husband.

On that day occurs again in verse 18 I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, birds and creeping things and abolish the bow, the sword and war from the land.

I'll make you lie down in safety. peace and safety both from animals and other humans, an end to warfare, a statement of peace.

It will last forever, we read here as well. I will take you for my wife forever, not for a short time before she goes off to another and commits adultery like a whore, but now the relationship is permanent, forever, because God has acted in their hearts as we saw in verse 16 and 17.

And a bit like God giving a dowry gift, a betrothal gift to his wife to be, God gives five things in verse 19.

[21 : 42] I will take you for my wife in or with by way of a gift perhaps, righteousness, justice, steadfast love, mercy and faithfulness.

five betrothal gifts, five things that God will change in the heart of his people so that they will be righteous.

That is a word that's often used to do with vindication, salvation, deliverance and justice. Often it's pair in the prophets, something that is fair and equitable.

Israel at this point is the opposite of those things. Amos, a contemporary of Hosea, bemoaned the fact that Israel was neither righteous or just and prayed that righteousness and justice should flow down like strings.

Hosea is saying the same thing in different ways, that on that day, a day that is coming, there will be righteousness and justice provided by God for the people.

[22 : 50] He will change them, that is. The third thing of this gift is steadfast love, a word that denotes love that is long suffering and enduring, a love that lasts through thick and thin, a love that is for better, for worse, in sickness or in health, for richer, for poorer.

it's a word that later in this same book, God demands of his people when he says, I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice.

God himself is the demonstrator of steadfast love as he is of righteousness and justice and the other parts of these gifts. And God will enable Israel to respond with the same steadfast love or loyalty.

likewise with mercy, the same word we saw last week, pity or compassion. It's actually a slightly warmer term but comes out of the same word. He will make Israel to be a people of mercy, the recipients of compassion and pity.

And then fifthly, in verse 20, faithfulness. No longer faithless and flirting with the other gods, but faithful to Yahweh as he is to them.

[24 : 09] Five points of gift, five ways in which God will change Israel because unless he changes them, they will never be righteous, just, loving, merciful or faithful.

And the result of those five, you shall know the Lord. A summary of God's aim through the Bible, that you shall know the Lord, relational and intimate in its connotation.

on that day. Thirdly, comes in verse 21. On that day, I will answer, says the Lord, I will answer the heavens, they shall answer the earth, the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel.

It's poetic language, but what it's saying is, I am the one who produces the abundance of crops, not the Baals. So I will address the heavens who produce rain on the earth that brings crops out of the earth, is in effect what that verse is poetically saying.

He'll do it abundantly. True fertility comes from God. He's the provider, not ourselves and not other gods, and not mother nature and not science. The end of verse 22 says, and they shall answer Jezreel.

[25 : 29] Jezreel was the name of the first son of Hosea, we saw last week. A strange name because a hundred years before it was the place of a bloody massacre. But Jezreel and the valley of Jezreel will be changed.

The name literally means God sows, as in sows crops, and that's what it will become again. And even to this day the valley of Jezreel is very rich with soil that produces crops and has fields and trees and so on.

And that's what God will do. He is the one who provides, not the other gods. And so in effect the three names of Hosea's children, which are quite shocking and outrageous, will actually change in a way.

Jezreel no longer bloody sacrifice but a place of abundance. And then in verse 23, pity on lo-ruhama, that is no pity, and for the one called lo-ami, no, not my people, becomes my people.

That is the relationship is restored on that day, in the future, when God will act in the hearts and in the mouths of his people and change them.

[26 : 46] And they shall say, the end of verse 23, you are my God. Paralleling in effect the end of verse 20, you shall know the Lord.

What an astonishing promise this is. Remember just how utterly faithless and undeserving the people of God were.

God's favor. Sometimes we fool ourselves with our proud hearts and think that we somehow deserve God's favor. That somehow God owes us something.

That somehow our lot is not really good and God really should be pulling his finger out and doing something for us a bit better. But that's not grace.

That's not what God is like and it's not what we are like. And here we get a clear picture of that. A God who acts out of steadfast love for a people who are utterly loveless, faithless, immoral, unjust, idolatrous and adulterous.

[28 : 02] And God does not abandon them, but rather promises them a relationship that is permanent, that is intimate, perfect, and perfect.

On that day, a day that has come for us in the future for Hosea in the 8th century BC, but a day that has already come from our perspective.

And God keeps his promise. When Paul wrote to the church in Rome, he quotes from these words to say God has kept his promise to Hosea and the gospel going to the Gentiles, bringing Jews and Gentiles together into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ is indeed the day, on that day, that God anticipated in the time of Hosea.

Peter, another apostle, said much the same thing in his first letter, that now Jews and Gentiles gathered together through Jesus Christ are in fulfillment of this promise of Hosea.

you and I gathered here today are evidence of God keeping that promise, of God changing us by his powerful blood of his son on the cross and the giving of his spirit, making us, transforming us to be people who are indeed righteous, just, loving, merciful and faithful, who know God and call him our God.

[29 : 38] We don't do that perfectly yet, of course, but we're in the process of being transformed to that perfection. The day has dawned in the coming of Jesus Christ and high noon of that day is the day of his return.

As God in chapter 2 promised to woo back ancient Israel, so now he goes back to the model he established with Hosea, this prophet and his prostitute wife.

The Lord said to me, Hosea, again, go love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the Lord loves the people of Israel. Hosea is to go back to his adulteress wife, the wife that probably often has left him, and woo her back, just as God is wooing Israel back in these words.

He's to woo back his wife in a way that the Lord loves Israel, even though Israel turns to other gods and loves raisin cakes. That's a very sarcastic way of speaking about their pagan idolatry.

Raisin cakes were a sort of typical delicious food that you would eat at a pagan festival. it's mocking them for their triviality, that they've left God for simply a raisin cake.

- [31 : 09] There's nothing wrong with those cakes in themselves, but they became part and parcel and symbol of their pagan worship. So Hosea, yet obedient, bought her, bought back his wife, that is, the wife who's left him, for 15 shekels of silver, a homer of barley, and a measure of wine.

Quite a lot in fact. Some suggest that the total of those things that Hosea was able to scrape together may have been the amount roughly that you would buy back a slave.

That could well be true. It's unclear whether he's buying her back from slavery, or whether he's buying her back from a pimp, or whether he's buying her back paying off her debts.

In one sense it's an image that probably has no direct application, just that he's scraped up this money to buy her back. But it's a model of what God does for his people.

He buys them back, not with perishable things, but with imperishable, with the precious blood of his son. He buys them back to reform her.

- [32 : 25] So he says to his wife that he's brought back, you must remain as mine for many days, not again just for a short time before you go off in your adulterous affairs.

You shall not play the whore, that is, it's brought back for reform. You shall not have intercourse with a man, nor I with you.

a time of chastity and reform lies ahead for Hosea and his wife. But it models what God is on about with his people.

He buys them back not simply so they continue in their sinful and adulterous ways, but to transform them and reform them.

For Israel, that was to be righteous, just, loving, merciful and faithful. And in effect, that's what Hosea, with his wife, is training her to do.

- [33 : 25] The logic is drawn out again in verse four. For the Israelites shall remain many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Some of those things in themselves are good.

So to have a king was not a bad thing. God had given them kings. Sacrifices were part of the institution of the system of sacrifice God gave in early books in the Bible.

Likewise, the ephod marked the high priest. But what it's saying is that they'll be deprived of their leadership, deprived of their religious practices, in exile, presumably.

But all of those three good things are paired with three that are much more dubious. So the prince, perhaps a pagan prince or a prince over another nation, a pillar reflecting pagan worship and teraphim also reflecting pagan worship.

All of those will go taken away, deprived in order to reform. But afterward, the Israelites shall return and seek the Lord their God and David their king.

- [34 : 38] They shall come in war to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days. On that day, as it was described in chapter two. And that day has come when God's powerful grace has worked to bring people back to God and to David or at least the greater David.

The Lord Jesus descended from King David himself. There's a very moving picture of the love of God. Love to the loveless shown that they may lovely be.

Despite their high infidelity, God remains steadfast in his extraordinary love. Perhaps God is wooing you back to love him with all your heart.

Perhaps God is challenging you about flirting with other gods or about lukewarm love for the living God. For the love of Jesus above all woos us back to God not simply to continue in our ways but to reform us and make us lovely to change us to make us righteous just loving and merciful and faithful forever permanently so that we know God as our God and as our husband forever.

Let's pray. Let's pray. God we thank you for your extraordinary love which we do not deserve and in response to which we fall far short.

[36 : 31] thank you that your love loved us to the uttermost in Christ and changes us and is making us more like him and we long for the high noon of that day the latter day when he will return and we will stand robed in wedding garments in righteousness before him forever.

Amen.