

# The God Who Is Our Lover

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     Bow our heads and pray as we stand. Our Heavenly Father, our prayer now is that as we look at this difficult passage, that your word would be our rule and our guide, that your Holy Spirit himself would be our teacher, and your great glory our supreme concern.
- For we ask it in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Please sit down. Amen. Well, you will have noticed that we had this Bible reading after we sent the children out this morning.
- This is not, Ezekiel 16 is not a bedtime children's Bible story. It'll be helpful if you turn it up, page 702, 3 and 4 in the Old Testament.
- It's long and lurid and explicit and explosive and graphic. And it's an extended metaphor that takes us places we might rather not go.
- And I tell you that the English translation has made the passage much, much more polite than it is in the original, but it still pushes the boundaries of taste.
- [ 1 : 2 0 ]     I have a friend, Don Carson, who is a Baptist theologian and teacher, who has a mother-in-law who's Anglican, and he took her to a Baptist church one day where they dealt with a passage like this.
- And as they left the church, she asked him, is that passage found in the Anglican Bible? Well, now, Ezekiel is speaking to the people of God near the end of the Old Testament.
- And despite generations of love and faithfulness and grace and gifts from God, and generations of betrayal and idolatry and disobedience and defiance in return from Israel, God has evicted the people out of the land under the iron fist of Babylon, and they are now in exile.
- They are completely disempowered, disposed, defeated, traumatized and powerless. And the first thing they do is they say, God, why have you done this to us?
- The first thing they do is they blame God. God, you've let us down. You've not given us what we're entitled to. They are absolutely committed to the illusion of their own innocence, and they're suspicious of God, which is partly why this word from God is so shocking.
- [ 2 : 4 2 ]     The purpose is to explode those false assumptions of innocence that we carry about ourselves, to explain why things are the way they are, and in the midst of it, it gives us one of the most daring pictures of God in the Bible, the God who offers himself to us as a perfect loving husband who binds himself to us.
- And God dares to use the language of graphic sexual metaphor to describe the way he loves us, which is utterly wonderful and also very dangerous, as we're going to see.
- Because most of us have a pretty one-dimensional view of God. We have something about God we really like. It's usually a part of God that doesn't expect too much of us and doesn't mind what we do too much or interfere.
- But the point of this chapter is not shock value. It's not there to entertain us. It's to show us the real God, the God who is our lover.

And we're going to look at the three movements that Don read for us. It's the double grace of God, our lover, the double denial of betrayal, and then the double response. So firstly, we'll spend probably most time on this first point.

[ 3 : 54 ] The double grace of God, our lover, verses 1 to 14. Verses 1 to 14. Now there's only one tribe in the world that I know of that takes pride in having as its ancestors criminals.

And it's my own tribe of Australians. Most people prefer to have an elevated ancestry. And in verse 3, God begins with Israel by telling them that their origin, their ancestry, is pagan.

Israel loved to pride itself on the fact that they were better than the Philistines and the Canaanites. God says, no, you're a chip off the old block. You have pagan spiritual DNA.

And your parents were heartless and depraved because when you were born, they threw you away in an open field to die. This is where the story of God begins with his people.

God pictures his people as a helpless and hopeless baby, discarded, hated, abhorred, alone and unloved, messy, covered with afterbirth, thrown away in a field, something that unfortunately happened regularly in those days.

[ 5 : 04 ] And something we practice these days with great medical precision. But it's here that God acts with tremendous grace and kindness and compassion. And he does two things.

There are two acts of kindness. Each one speaks about God passing by. The first one in verse 6, This is something you just wouldn't do.

You don't come by a dying baby and take them in and give them life and responsibility and all the risk and cost that that chooses.

But God does. He chooses to get it personally involved and he says, by his word, out of sheer grace, live. And here's the point. There's nothing desirable. There's nothing special.

There's nothing particularly lovable about this child. But in his grace, God turns the field of death into a field of life. And this is not just Israel's story.

[ 6 : 10 ] This is our story as well. Because as human beings, before God, we are natively destitute of any spiritual life. We share the same spiritual DNA as the baby in the field.

We have the same need of the word of life. And God comes along and he does for us what no one else can do for us. Out of his grace and out of his love, he gives us life. That is the first action of his grace.

But then the second action of grace is in verses 8 to 10. Verse 8, So a second time God passes by and he comes across this feral child.

And not only does he reverse the circumstances of her birth, he now begins to wash her and anoint her with oil, and he clothes her, but far more. Out of the kindness and sheer grace of his heart, he establishes a new relationship with her.

Not just as a benefactor, but as a husband. This phrase, he spreads the corner of his garment over her, his wing literally over her.

[ 7 : 39 ] This is not charity of clothing the naked. This is an Old Testament symbol of marriage, of lifelong commitment as a partner. And if there's any doubt, God formalizes it in verse 8.

He says, I made a vow to you. I entered into covenant with you. You are mine as I am yours. Now, it's difficult for us to grasp today how remarkable that is.

This is the God of all the Bible, the God of creation, the sovereign Lord of history, who gives himself to us and desires that we give himself to us as a husband.

It's an audacious metaphor. Of course, we're not equals. Yet the God of all, our God, desires shared intimacy, the communion of mutual love and care, you know, the giving and receiving of affection.

This is the picture. He's more than a God pursues us. He's more than a God who takes pleasure in giving life. He is God who is our lover. And you can look at the details in verses 11 to 14.

[ 8 : 53 ] God doesn't just give us some things. He lavishes on his bride everything, the finest clothes. He brings it up to royal status so that her beauty will be the highest in all the world and reflect something of his glory to the world.

That's the second act of grace. Now, this has a whole slew of implications, but we only really have time for three. Let me mention three implications for this.

The first is this, that this metaphor puts marriage in its place. In the Bible, you've got to see the movement of metaphors, which direction they move.

Because whenever God uses a metaphor to reveal himself to us, the movement of the metaphor is not from us and our experience up to God. It's from the reality of who God is down to us.

So when God calls himself a father, for example, he's not like a human father. He is the real and perfect father. And every human father is a poor, weak, broken, sinful reflection of who God is.

[ 10 : 02 ] Which is very good news for any who have been abused by fathers. And good news for all of us who are struggling to be good fathers. Well, the Bible's view of marriage moves the same way.

It's not our experience of marriage read up to God. It's God's relationship with us read down. It's not that God's relationship with us is like our marriages, but the best human marriage is a very faint reflection of the relationship that God has with us.

And of course, that means marriage is not a social institution that we've made up and can fiddle around with. It's not something that we keep redefining to suit the shifting morals in our culture.

Marriage in the Bible view is covenant. It's something we enter into. It's something that God has created. And every human marriage is a weak, poor, broken, sinful reflection of the reality that God has with us.

And the very interesting thing about covenant is the covenant puts structure around all the love and feelings and creates a safe place, not just for sexuality, but for growth and suffering and life and death.

[ 11 : 17 ] I'm not saying marriage is overrated. I'm saying that our ultimate spouse and lover is God himself. He is the only one who can give us what we truly need.

Makes no difference if you're single or married, divorced or widowed. Our true marriage is where we and where we are ultimately loved is with Christ himself.

And if you're married now and you don't see that, you're going to kill your spouse trying to get out of them what only God can give you. That's the first implication.

The second implication is it not only puts marriage in its place, it puts gender in its place. Tim Keller is the Presbyterian minister of a church in New York having a remarkable ministry.

And whenever we talk about gender things and we get to passages on that, many of us are very prickly around this issue. But what Keller says is very helpful. He says that in the Bible, we as God's people are not just called the bride of Christ, we're also called sons of God.

[ 12 : 27 ] And in a culture where women did have inferior status, this has remarkable power, you see. To say to Christian women that you are sons of God means that you are completely equal with men who are Christians.

And to say to men who are believers that they are the bride of Christ makes them exactly equal with women as Christians as well. Yes, the Bible teaches gender differences, but it is against, in Keller's words, gender absolutism.

For God to reveal himself as husband and lover speaks both to men and to women and in the end relativises gender. And thirdly, it not only puts marriage and gender in its place, it puts sex in its place.

A number of commentators point out that the fact that God is willing to use sexually graphic language of his relationship with us is quite astounding, in part because of the very elevated view of sexuality that the Bible gives of sex in human marriage.

But what it means is this, that if God is our husband, that God has given to us a human gift, which is a taste of the joy and communion and oneness that is to come to us in reality when we come again to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

[ 13 : 52 ] That puts sex in its place. You see, despite almost every movie that comes out of wherever it comes out of, sex is not the ultimate place of meaning.

It's not going to give you that. It's not an idol to worship or give your life to. It cannot give us what God alone gives us. But since sex can echo the glory of God, if you have Christ, you have the real thing, even now.

But we must get back to chapter 16 because there's bad news coming. And the fact that God reveals himself as husband and lover in grace has devastating implications for our understanding of our own identity.

And we move from the double grace of God as lover to the double denial of betrayal, verses 15 to 34. And the but at verse 15 means a really big turn in the chapter.

Let me just remind you, verse 15, This is the first betrayal.

[ 15 : 08 ] It's a kind of an intentional amnesia. And it comes directly out of the fact that God is our husband. The very gifts and beauty that God had lavished on Israel, she takes away from God out of the marriage and lavishes them on other lovers.

God is describing his experience of his people when they turn away from him, when we give our hearts to his gifts instead of to him.

It's very important. Most of us have a pretty impersonal view of sin. We think of sin like speeding. You know, I went five kilometers over the limit or 30 kilometers over the limit. What's the big deal?

But since God has bound himself to us so entirely and wonderfully, when we make gods out of his gifts, it is the spiritual equivalent of adultery.

It's intensely personal to God. It's not just doing bad things. It's giving ourselves, giving our inner selves, to worship and love things which may be perfectly good in themselves, but are not God.

[ 16 : 23 ] In this case, in Israel, it meant joining the culture roundabout in all kinds of pagan worship. Let me read you these sad verses again. Verse 20. You took your sons and your daughters whom you'd born to me, to me, and these you sacrificed to them, to idols, to be devoured.

Were your whoring so small a matter, you slaughtered my children, to deliver them up as an offering to fire to them? Burning children as sacrifices to false gods was a custom already in the land when Israel came into the land out of Egypt.

And the idea was they worshipped this god Molech, who was the god of the underworld, and burning, it was a way of getting your kids ahead because by burning them alive, they received immortality, and as parents, you received longer life.

And instead of dealing with it as God said that they should deal with it, Israel compromised and made peace with it. They said everyone's doing it. What the pagans say makes sense.

They've got a reverence for nature and for life here and now. And they said that you should love Mother Nature more dearly and follow her more nearly day by day. But God is our husband.

[ 17 : 36 ] And if God is our husband, your children and my children are not first of all ours. They're first of all God's children. God says they're not to be offered to any, as food to any pagan idol, they're to be offered to me for love and for nourishment.

And we find this hard to hear because we think we're so much better. You know, we'd never put our children through the fire. But whenever we teach or model to our children that their significance and their meaning and their identity comes from financial success or sporting success or academic success, we are offering them to idols.

And Israel has this kind of intentional amnesia about God's grace. They're constantly and chronically pursuing other gods. And it always has devastating effects on the next generation.

But the second betrayal, verses 23 onwards, they really transferred their dependence from God to others. Not content to follow idols and love other things within the land.

They went outside the land and multiplied their unfaithfulness beyond the borders with Egypt, with Assyria and with Babylon. And you notice, it's not just whoring, sorry, it's not just adultery, it's prostitution and whoring.

[ 18 : 57 ] Verse 23. After all your wickedness, woe, woe to you, declares the Lord, you built yourself a vaulted chamber and made yourself a lofty place in every square. At the head of every street, you built your lofty place and made your beauty an abomination, offering yourself to any passerby and multiplying your whoring.

Yes, Jerusalem took the gifts that God had given her and opened herself to Egypt and to these other nations, luring these foreign guests to give her security, to give to her what she already had from God.

She looked to Egypt and to Assyria. And if you read through the book of Kings, you'll see how she flirted and lusted after other powers for security. You can hear the anguish in God's voice in verse 30.

He says, how sick is your heart, declares the Lord God. You see, the fact that God is our lover is both unspeakably wonderful and dangerous at the same time.

Because not only do we see what the heart of God is, but we see how horrendously ugly our own sin and ingratitude is. This gives us one of the best and simplest understandings of sin.

[ 20 : 11 ] Because sin is spiritual adultery. It's spiritual prostitution. Sometimes I have people say to me, what's the big deal about sin? Why doesn't God just get over it? Why can't we just move on?

Just keep your hand in chapter 16. Go back to chapter 6 for a moment. Chapter 6, verse 9. Speaking about those who are going to be taken into exile, he says, then those of you who escape will remember me among the nations where they are carried captive.

How I have been broken over their whoring heart that has departed from me and over their eyes that go whoring after their idols. This is how God experiences sin.

After all his grace and kindness and life, after binding us to himself in covenant, being faithful to us every minute of every day, when we give our hearts to other things, we flirt with them and we betray him personally.

And each of those betrayals comes with all the cruelty and lies that sexual betrayal does. You see, sin is not so much the bad things we do, it's giving our hearts to other things.

[ 21 : 34 ] It's not so much breaking God's laws, it's breaking God's heart. It's a hostile action towards God. And at its very heart, sin is spiritual adultery, whoring after other gods, exchanging the goodness and glory of God for something else, maybe something that he's given us.

And if there's anything in our lives that's taking a higher priority than God himself, it means we're in bed with an idol. We're turning from the only one who can give us security and grace.

And that requires, that brings about a double response from God. So we move from the double grace of God's love, from the double denial and betrayal to the double reality of response.

There is a two-sidedness to God's response. First, verse 35 to 43, judgment. These verses are hard to read, although the metaphor here comes very close to physical reality at that time.

Here's the principle. In judgment, God gives Israel and God gives all people exactly what they lust after. In the Bible, punishment always fits the crime exactly.

[ 22 : 51 ] Israel wanted other gods, God gives them to her. I quote from one of the great commentaries on this book, Jerusalem had bared her body to all passers-by.

Now God provides her with all the exposure she wants and more. If she wants to be a public spectacle, he offers his aid. Naked he had found her, naked he would leave her.

The hell that awaited her was not the creation of some demonic force or external power, it was of her own making. It's the reason that Israel's in exile and it is a warning to all of us if we flirt with sin.

But there is another response to God, almost the opposite and it's almost unbelievable that God offers restoration. Let's turn to the last few verses in the chapter, shall we?

verse 62. To the same people he says, I will establish my covenant with you and you shall know that I am the Lord, that you may remember and be confounded and never open your mouth again because of your shame when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord God.

[ 24 : 06 ] This is proof of what God said a couple of weeks back that he doesn't delight in the death of the sinner but rather that we turn from our wickedness and live. And this points forward to Christ and the willingness of God to put his life on the line.

When he says, I will atone for all your sins, all that you have done, it points to the death of Jesus Christ. When there's unfaithfulness between husband and wife, the only way that can ever be healed is if the person who's been wronged is willing to swallow and take the betrayal and pain into themselves and experience that pain.

And here God says that he will find a way to take the pain of our betrayal into himself. And of course, as we read the rest of the Bible, restoration costs the life of God's son.

But the fascinating thing here is that we experience shame after he has atoned for our sins. Not because God, you know, forgives us reluctantly.

I don't want you to get away with things too easily. He doesn't want to spoil the wedding party. It's not even because Israel was an honor-shame culture, although that moves a little bit closer to it.

[ 25 : 25 ] What's going on here is a spiritual realism. I know this is hard to believe because we think shame is just universally wretched and evil, but it's not.

When you lose the power to blush, you've become hard-hearted. When he atones for our sins, God remembers them no more.

But there's a growing sense and a growing depth to repentance that comes after forgiveness. There's a mature, maturing awareness of grace, I think, and a deeper sense of our own weakness and our sin.

It's not condemnation and it's not guilt. I need to be careful here. It's a spiritual sensitivity to God as our lover and a shifting confidence away from myself to him.

And there's nothing in me that warrants grace and that's what makes it grace and that's what's so hard to believe again and again and again. But as always with God, the reality is greater than the promise.

[ 26 : 31 ] The fulfillment, have you ever noticed that? Every fulfillment of God's promises in the New Testament is greater than the promise was. In the same way, in the death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit, God finds a way to take away both our guilt and our shame.

And in that, he gives us a taste of intimacy. The Holy Spirit sheds abroad in our hearts the love of God and he begins the process of transforming us through repentance and deeper faith.

until the day when he will present us as the bride of Christ to himself as a radiant bride without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, holy and blameless, ready to rejoice in the eternal consummation of the marriage feast.

This is what he undertakes to do. We're about to share in the Lord's Supper now and there's an echo in the Lord's Supper of the great marriage feast of the Lamb.

We come forward asking God to heal us of our amnesia, calling the marital status and his love for us, receiving his forgiveness and cleansing, giving to him all that we are and devoting ourselves to serve him.

[ 28 : 02 ] That's what we're going to do in just a moment. Let's kneel and pray.