

Straying Hearts

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[0 : 0 0] Gracious Father, as your word is open in front of us now, we ask that you would send your spirit so that we might meet with you. Father, we pray that the sins of your people past might come to their full acknowledgement in our hearts this morning and that we would be driven back to you, our great God.

And we ask it for your sake. Amen. So husbands, imagine the scenario that your wife is kidnapped on your honeymoon.

A note is left by the kidnappers. A \$500,000 payment is required to secure her release. You love your wife and you'll do whatever it takes to get her back.

\$500,000 is everything that you've got after you sell the house and the car, cash in the shares, sell the furniture and the clothes on eBay and empty the accounts.

You will be destitute, but at least you will have the love of your life back. The exchanges that take place on a beach at sunset, the time comes, the kidnappers arrive holding your wife.

[1 : 1 6] You are ordered to leave the suitcase in the middle of the beach and take 50 paces back. It's a tense moment as they walk slowly holding your wife towards you, towards the suitcase.

Each step seems to take forever. They finally arrive at the suitcase and now any moment they will pick up the suitcase and they will release your wife and she will run into your arms.

And then the biggest concern is how to pay for the hotel bill. As you nervously look forward to that embrace, your heart is shattered.

They release your wife. She bends down, picks up the suitcase, hands it to her captors and runs back to the cars with them. That's the shocking image of what we discovered last week in Hosea chapters 1 to 3.

It's a shocking image of how God's people, Israel, have treated him. They have grabbed the salvation that he offers with both hands and then run off with that and enjoyed it with other gods and idols and treasures and loves.

[2 : 3 6] In Hosea 1 to 3, the state of the relationship between God and his chosen people, Israel, was played out in the relationship between Hosea and Gomer in their marriage.

God gave an extraordinary command to his spokesman, Hosea. Chapter 1, verse 2. Go and take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord.

As we saw last week, it is quite literally the command to Hosea, go and get a wife of whore, that is go marry a whore, get children with the whore because the nation is a whore.

God had called Israel to himself to be his special people. He had powerfully rescued them from slavery in Egypt and made them his very own. He gave them the law that would govern their relationship and frame how his new bride would live with him.

He made vows and he committed himself to his special people. But there was nothing special about these people. They were just like any other people.

[3 : 48] But God mercifully chosen to be his bride, his special covenant people. But three words in chapter 2 sum up the actions and the attitude of Goma to Hosea and also Israel to their God.

Me, she forgot. Israel is guilty of turning her back on her divine husband and running after other lovers.

Hosea's marriage to Goma is a living parable designed to confront God's people with the full horror of how they have treated God.

But it's also a living parable to reveal how not just God's broken heart, but God's unbroken love for his people.

You see, God's love for his people has never been based on some naive assessment of their character. He called them to himself, even knowing that they were people of great faithlessness.

[4 : 55] And one of the big points of Hosea is that God exalts his mercy by not giving up on his haul. Chapters 1 to 3 contain the message of Hosea in a nutshell.

And as we launch into the rest of Hosea from today over the next three weeks, we'll notice that there isn't a single mention of Hosea and Goma again. We leave them behind, but we do not forget them.

We are meant to read the rest of Hosea through the lenses of the raw, heart-wrenching story of their marriage.

A story of consistent betrayal, of anger and judgment because of that betrayal, and of unbroken love despite the betrayal.

And so in chapter 4, we enter a new scene. It's a courtroom. The scene has changed, but the cast is the same. The divine husband and faithless bride.

[6 : 03] From a marriage in trouble in chapters 1 to 3, we have the divorce courts of chapter 4. There is silence in the courtroom as the indictment is read.

It's there in chapter 4, verse 1. At the end of it, there is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. That's the charge that God levels against his people.

It's a devastating charge. God had rescued these people from slavery in Egypt and graciously revealed his standards to them, his law. Jesus would later summarise those standards in Mark chapter 12 as love the Lord your God with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself.

And they said that they would obey it. They said they would be committed to their marriage vows. They said they were committed to the covenant, but they didn't do it. And that is the charge that God now levels against his people in chapter 4, verse 1.

It's not that they just kind of broke their commitment in a few details here and there, but absolutely and completely and utterly, nine times in two chapters, God calls their betrayal a spirit of prostitution.

[7 : 26] This is not just a one-night stand. This is not just a bit too much alcohol and a bit of forgetfulness. This is a heart entangled and entrenched with other loves.

They didn't love God or their neighbour. Quite the opposite. In fact, in verse 2, there is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery.

They broke all bounds. And bloodshed follows bloodshed. Basically, they just obliterated the Ten Commandments. That is the charge that's levelled against God's people.

There is no consistency of faithfulness or love or acknowledgement of God. And as God brings this charge against the nation as a whole, the clergy are sitting over to one side, fairly smugly at this point.

They're feeling a little self-righteous. They're thinking, well, yes, that's absolutely right, God. Those dreadful, dreadful people. They just have not obeyed you at all.

[8 : 34] We've been saying it for years in our sermons. Tax collectors and sinners, the lot of them. God looks straight at them and says, it's you, O priests, against who I bring this charge.

God's charge against them begins in verse 4 and goes right to the end of verse 14. That is the major section here. God is holding the clergy, the priests, the leaders of God's people, chiefly responsible for the state of God's people.

What have they done? The end of verse 6, because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests. Because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children.

You see, one of the tasks entrusted to the priest was the teaching of God's law, and they didn't do it. They rejected knowledge of God. They rejected God's word.

And when you cut yourself off from God speaking to you, you end up being ruled by any other voice. Where did they go for guidance and help and clarity apart from God's word?

[9 : 49] Verse 12. They consult a wooden idol and are answered by a stick of wood. If it wasn't so scandalous, it would be hilarious.

Let's just put the word of God here. Grab a stick, throw it on the ground. Which way does it point? Let's go that way. And instead of leading God's people, we have verse 7.

The more the priests increase, the more they sinned against me. What an incredible indictment. They exchange their glory, that is, the glory of their God, their divine lover, for something disgraceful.

They feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness. And it will be like people, like priests. That's summed the clergy up.

They were simply an echo of the nation and of the nations around in both word and deed. The rejection of God's word, immorality and idolatry.

[11 : 13] It is a gruesome list of spiritual decline into spiritual prostitution. Their failure to put God's word before the people, God's law, his covenant requirement meant that the people just drifted off.

Not taking their sins seriously. And into idolatry and debauchery. And so the heartbroken divine lover has read his case against his adulterous bride.

And now they must face the sentencing. Here it is in chapter 5, verse 1. Hear this, you priests. Pay attention, you Israelites. Listen, O royal household. This judgment is against you.

Notice there, everyone. Everyone is included in the judgment. And in a nutshell, there are two declarations of sentence against the people of God in chapter 5.

The first one is in verses 1 to 7. And in summary, it says God will withdraw from you. Verse 6. These words are particularly explicit. When they go with their flocks and their herds to seek the Lord, they will not find him.

[12 : 24] He has redrawn himself from them. They will go with their sheep, with their cows, with their doves, up to the temple to sacrifice before the Lord.

But God won't be there. This is one aspect of the solemn judgment pronounced.

The Bible talks about this judgment as being very solemn, very severe. See, when we turn our backs on God, we can't expect God to carry on as if nothing has happened.

God, we live a life of consistent sin, ignoring it, playing it down. We turn our backs on his word and what it says. We refuse to obey.

We look at it, but we don't obey it. And God withdraws. And it's quite possible that that might be where you are right now. You've been a confessing Christian for years.

[13 : 31] You've been attending church. You've been reciting creeds like we did just a moment ago. Involved in ministry. Maybe involved in miraculous and spectacular ministry. Putting money on the plate.

But the reality of your relationship with God is no longer there. You pray and it seems like no one is listening.

You've given up on the reading of the Bible now because it's just so long. It seems so long since God has ever spoken to you. Could it be that you've drifted?

Could it be that you are treasuring a sin in your heart rather than treasuring Jesus? And so if the first seven verses speak of a passive judgment with God, we draw, then verses 8 to 14 speak of an active judgment.

See it there in verse 8? Look at me with verse 14.

[14 : 44] Does your view of God cope with verses like that?

The Bible says things like our God is a consuming fire. And things like it's a terrible thing to fall into the hands of a living God. And one day he will come as he's promised in final judgment.

And none of us will have any grounds for confidence on that day. God's charge against Israel applies to us too.

We too have turned away from him and disobeyed his word. We don't love God as we should. We don't love our neighbour as we should. We deserve the sentence of God's we draw from us.

We deserve the sentence of God's active judgment against us. These are solemn, solemn chapters.

[15 : 51] But they end with one glimmer of hope in verse 15. Then I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt.

And they will seek my face in their misery. And they will earnestly seek me. There is the glimmer of hope. God leaves the door open for a return to him, for a union with him.

Even in judgment and anger, God remembers mercy. And the question that we left with at the end of chapter 5 is, will God's people respond?

Will they return to him? Will they come back to him? And it seems at the beginning of chapter 6 that they do. Come, they say. Let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces. But he will heal us.

He has injured us. But he will bind up our wounds. And after two days, he will revive us. On the third day, he will restore us. That we may live in his presence. Let us acknowledge the Lord.

[16 : 52] Let us press on to acknowledge him. It appears that they're finally woken up. The charges have been read.

The sentence has been pronounced. And they've been convicted of their sin. And they finally realized their deep unfaithfulness. That they are, in fact, Goma. And so they return to the Lord.

But that's not what verse 4 says. God sees straight through it. Your love is like the morning mist. Like the early dew that disappears.

Gone. It's a superficial return to God. A shallow love simply meant to appease God.

In chapter 7, we have God's assessment of his people through a whole variety of images. Verse 6 of chapter 7. There is a smoldering passion that's just waiting to burst out in decadence.

- [17 : 59] Verse 8. They are a half-baked cake. They are half-hearted. They are lukewarm. Verse 9. Verse 9 is a man unaware that his hair is peppered with grey.

A man who thinks that he's still in his prime. Hip and cool and young and strong. And the best is yet to come.

And yet he can't see the grey hair. He's a 40-something dress like he's a skater kid. They have no sense of reality.

Verse 11 is the image of a frantic dove. Flapping crazily. Flapping crazily. Bang, bang, bang against this window. Bang, bang, bang against that window. They've got no picture of Israel.

They are silly and senseless. Flapping around with no confirmed conviction. Changing its mind and its allegiance. Every shift of political whim.

- [19 : 04] And that is what they've done. That is what Israel has done here. They've heard the pronouncement. They've heard God's sentence. And they've gone, oh my.

We'd better pull our socks up and work a little harder here. We'd better burn some more sacrifices. Smouldering sinful hearts of deep unfaithfulness.

Lukewarm about God and half-baked righteousness. No grasp of the reality of their situation. The depths and the danger of their situation.

And they're frantically trying to do something about it to make God happy. And so, the shrines were packed.

The Bible colleges were filled. Sunday, attendance went up. Small groups multiplied. But remember the charge of chapter 4, verse 1.

- [20 : 06] There is no faithfulness. There is no love. No acknowledgement of God in the land. There is lots of religious activity. But they missed what God required.

See chapter 6, verse 6. See chapter 6, verse 6.

For I desire mercy, not sacrifice. An acknowledgement of God. Rather than burnt offerings.

Even though their religion and ritual were going full-tilled ahead. They had lost its heart. They had forgotten its centre.

And see the heart, where the heart of it all is. Second half of chapter 7, verse 7. None of them calls on me.

- [21 : 09] Down, verse 10. He does not return to the Lord his God or search for him. Down to verse 13. They have strayed from me.

Down to verse 15. They plotted evil against me. They missed God.

They didn't return to their divine lover. And so their religious activity is their spiritual prostitution.

They have the shell, but not the call. And let's be frank, friends. You'll find this everywhere amongst God people. Superficial religious observance.

It can be in the pomp of formal Anglicanism. Or the studied informality of the brethren. Or the ritual of the Roman Catholic Mass. Or the routine of the church prayer meeting.

- [22 : 18] Or the silence of the Quakers. Or the exuberance of the Charismatics. Even in reformed evangelical churches. Where we can be outwardly generous. Have good insights into the scriptures.

In our preaching and in our community groups. Where we can pray eloquent, theologically correct prayers. But no personal dealing with God.

We miss God. We can prepare a sermon. We can listen to a sermon. We can participate in a community group.

And have a ritualistic daily quiet time. And yet never meet with God for years. Our Lord God is not interested in religion without repentance.

He has no time for belief without behaviour. And no delight in ritual without righteous relationships. With him or with others. It's quite noticeable that Jesus picks up Hosea.

[23 : 32] And especially chapter 6 verse 6. In Matthew chapter 9. So flick over to Matthew chapter 9. It's the bit where Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector.

To come and follow him. A little later Jesus is having dinner. At Matthew's home. And they are joined by many tax collectors. And openly sinful people.

In society. Openly sinful people. Like prostitutes. And the religious elite saw all this taking place.

It's hard to fathom how they saw it taking place. With their noses raised so high. And disgust at what Jesus was doing. But they lowered their noses enough. To look down at them.

To ask Jesus' mates a question. Why does your teacher eat? We tax collectors and sinners. Jesus overheard the question. So he just jumps in.

[24 : 29] And answers. It is not the healthy who need a doctor. But the sick. And then he adds. Speaking to the religious elite.

The Pharisees. But go and learn. And learn. What this means. It's a little formula. Meant to rebuke. The teachers of God's people.

You see. These teachers of God's people. Had prided themselves. Of their knowledge. And understanding of the scriptures. And their conformity to the scriptures. But Jesus says to them.

In this rebuke. Go away. And look at the scriptures again. Because you've missed it. And then Jesus quotes. What they need to go and learn.

And conform to. It's Hosea 6. 6. I desire mercy. Not sacrifice. In saying that.

[25 : 25] Jesus aligns. The religious elite of his day. With the people. And the leaders of God's people. In Hosea's day. These. Who had turned away.

From the living God. God. These Pharisees. Had a great looking shell. But it was rotten. On the inside. But they thought.

They were okay with God. Self-deception. And judgmentalism. Were their great skills. Remember. The story. That Jesus told. About the Pharisee. And the tax collector.

They were at a temple. Where the Pharisee. Looks down his nose. At the tax collector. And God. Just God. I thank you. That I am not like that man. I thank you.

That I'm just so much better. I thank you. That I'm not a sinner. Like he is. I thank you. You could just imagine him saying.

[26 : 25] God. That person just so reminds me of Goma. I read her about her this morning. God. In my quiet time. In fact. Thank you that I'm not like Goma.

Like this tax collector. That's a great thing. Thank you. And they missed the point. That they were. They missed the point. That they were. The tax collectors.

And the sinners. Gathered around the table. With Jesus. They were people. Of deep. And enduring. Unfaithfulness. Like the rest of us. and the good news of Matthew 9 is that Jesus' love for us isn't based on some naive assessment of our character he says in Matthew chapter 9 I have not come to call the righteous but sinners now Jesus isn't saying that there are two kinds of people in the world those who are righteous and those who are not he is in fact saying there's only one group of people that is the unrighteous just sinners just gomers all of us but the difference is between those who know it those who don't between those who return to God for mercy and those who don't think they need to and so it turns out here in Matthew 9 that the people who think that they are worthy of Jesus attention are no more worthy than the socially repulsive people that they despised their sin like ours only ever looks good in the darkness of self-deception sin looks best when it is barely considered quickly indulged and never reflected on against the light of God's word but the work of the Holy Spirit drags it out into the open and exposes the true ugliness of it under the spotlight of God's word by thought reflection and prayer prayer the new testament teaches us to not just examine our hearts for sin when we first come to Christ but to continually labor to know the remaining corruption in our hearts my friends be absolutely certain of God's grace and acceptance of you in the Lord Jesus but be absolutely uncertain of your own heart our heart and its fruit need continual examination listen to God's word in Hosea here identify your sin consider it confess it and repent of it turn away from it do not make the mistake of God's people past who made little of it because their assessment of it was their own standards and not God's word when we diagnose our sin by our own standards then the remedy that we prescribe will be just a little bit more religious activity to appease God sin breaks God's heart but repentance gets his love back chapter 5 verse 15 is the glimmer of hope and chapter 5 verse 15 takes us back to chapter 3 verse 3 it's when Hosea says to his unfaithful wife

Goma he has gone as God said paid the price redeemed her and brought her back out of slavery taken her out of the arms of another lover brought her back home and then Goma Hosea says to her you are to live with me many days you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man and I will live with you the best translation of that last phrase I will live with you is in fact I will wait for you it's a beautiful statement Hosea has paid the price he's redeemed his unfaithful bride she's now back in the family home but Hosea not just other men but Hosea is not going to her to be intimate with her he's actually waiting for her to come to him she might share the same home but she does not share his bed full intimacy is yet to be restored the relationship between Hosea and Goma isn't going to be repaired by Goma going oh my goodness

I feel so guilty what I need to do is cook him his best meal his favourite meal I feel so guilty I need to keep the house clean I need to massage his feet and go and get the paper for him that is not what Hosea is looking for Hosea is waiting he has paid the price of redemption and now he is waiting for his bride to return to him to come to him waiting for the knock on the door for her to come in and say Hosea I am sorry I am so sorry return to the Lord your God for he is gracious and compassionate slow to anger and abounding in love for him