

Hosea 11:1-11

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[0 : 0 0] series in this great Old Testament book of Hosea. So let me invite you to turn there with me. It's page 757 in the Pew Bible, if you want to turn there, Hosea chapter 11. If you've been with us for the last number of weeks, you'll know that as we've studied Hosea 4 through 10, it's almost been like this dark storm cloud gathering and growing, revealing both the depth of our problem and also the righteous judgment of God. But finally, as we come to Hosea chapter 11 this morning, it's as if the clouds break and the sun shines through, telling us that after judgment, there indeed is hope. So Hosea chapter 11, as we turn to God's word, let me pray for us.

God, indeed, your love is greater far than saints and angels could tell. Lord, you tell us in your word that the angels long to look into the gospel where your love is revealed.

So Lord, this morning as we come to your word, would you by your spirit open up the eyes of our hearts to gaze with wonder at the majesty of your love. God, we ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Hosea chapter 11. When Israel was a child, I loved him. And out of Egypt, I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away. They kept sacrificing to the baals and burning offerings to idols.

It was I who taught Ephraim to walk. I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws. And I bent down to them and fed them. They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king because they've refused to return to me. The sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates, and devour them because of their own counsels. My people are bent on turning away from me, and though they call out to the Most High, he shall not raise them up at all. How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Adma? How can I treat you like Zeboim? My heart recoils within me.

[2 : 2 7] My compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger. I will not again destroy Ephraim, for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst. I will not come in wrath.

They shall go after the Lord. He will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Assyria and like doves from the land of Assyria, and I will return them to their homes, declares the Lord.

Well, friends, consider how powerful love is. Think of friendship. If you have a friend who truly loves you, it can have a profound impact on your life. To have such a friend, well, it can make a timid person brave and a bitter person soft, can it not? And we long for that kind of relationship, that kind of love, don't we? Or consider the perhaps even bigger impact of a loving parent.

To have a parent who truly loves you can change the course of your life. As a negative example, just think of how many therapist couches are filled every day because of unloving parents, right? The love of a parent can be like a sturdy mast on a ship, and with it, we can set out into the waters of life with confidence and courage. Or finally, think of the transforming power of a genuinely loving spouse. This is perhaps even more profound than that from a friend or from a parent. Think of it as spouse who can call forth the best in you, or who can speak just the right words when you need to hear it, or a spouse who will simply be present when you need them to be present. If you have that kind of love from a spouse, that can seem to make all the difference in the world. Margaret Thatcher, the former prime minister of England, once said this with respect to her husband in one of the autobiographies that she wrote. She said, being prime minister is a lonely job. In a sense, it ought to be. You cannot lead from the crowd, but with Dennis, that's her husband, but with Dennis there, I was never alone. What a man, what a husband, what a friend. Of course, regardless of what you think about Margaret

Thatcher's politics, it makes our point quite clearly, doesn't it? One wonders whether many of the great women and men of history would have achieved what they did without the love of their spouse sort of quietly behind them. Now, the point I want to make is this. If all this is true about the love of a friend, or a parent, or a spouse, if there's increasing power to be transformed and to be renewed as we move sort of into these higher levels of love from friendship to parental love to the love of a spouse, what must be the case if we move beyond these merely human loves and consider the love of God? After all, if the love of a friend can change you, if the love of a parent can send you forth with confidence, if the love of a spouse can hold you together in the midst of a chaotic world, what must be true about the love of God who created the worlds and created us?

[5 : 51] We just read in our chapter that God's love is a holy love. I am God and not a man, the holy one in your midst. What if we knew that kind of love? Now, maybe this morning friendships don't come easy for you, and maybe you had awful parents, and maybe you're not married. But if God would grant us a glimpse of his love, if we knew that we had his love, wouldn't we be radically changed?

Of course, we tend to trivialize God's love today. If anyone out there is actually talking about God, they'll usually say that he or she is a loving God, right? It's become such a commonplace that it's lost its power and its surprise to say that God is love. And at one level, it's so trivial, I suppose, that most people would probably think, of course God loves me. Why wouldn't God love me after all? Right? I'm a pretty lovable guy. And if God's love has become trivial, it's often because it's become sentimental. I think our idea of God's love is sort of a cocktail mix, one part Santa Claus, one part doting grandparent, and one part morning fog. There's not a lot of shape to it, but when it comes down to it, they will give you unqualified affirmation of whatever you want and whatever you choose. God loves me seems to equal God wouldn't change a thing about me or the road that I'm on. But it's kind of hard to hug the morning fog, isn't it?

Now, in the passage we just read, we have perhaps one of the greatest chapters about the love of God in the whole Old Testament. And it's anything but trivial and sentimental, isn't it? God tells us that his love for his people is like that between a father and a son. And that metaphor runs through the whole passage. In fact, the chapter almost reads like a story. In verses 1 through 7, we see the father's love adopting his son out of slavery in verse 1 and then loving and guiding him in verses 3 through 4, only to have that son rebel in verse 2 and fall back into ruin and slavery and captivity in verses 5 through 7. But then in the second half of the chapter, the father reaffirms his love, verses 8 and 9, and then majestically brings about the son's return in verses 10 and 11.

[8 : 29] Now, again, if you've been with us over the past few weeks, you know that Hosea has spent most of chapters 4 through 10 expounding in detail this rebellion and this ruin that is alluded to here in chapters 5 through 7. So today, so this morning, I want us to focus on what God has to tell us about his love. Because Hosea 11 has the power to help us break out of our sentimental and trivial grasp of it and hopefully to be gripped by it and surprised by it and maybe at times even offended by it.

But in the end, to be transformed by this love of God. So I want to take the chapter then in three parts. Look first at verses 1 through 4.

God says to his people, I took you out of slavery, out of Egypt, and made you my son. And then he gives us this incredibly tender image in verse 3, a father holding up his son's hands as the child takes his first steps. It's the quintessential parent-child moment, isn't it?

This child full of trust and excitement, determined, yet utterly dependent, as he puts one foot in front of the other, sort of wobbling back and forth, taking his first feeble steps, and the parent there hovering over them in love with joy and with pride, holding up the arms of the child.

Our son Jack never really learned how to crawl in his first year, so he went straight to this sort of parent-assisted walking. And once he got his first taste of mobility, it was like he wanted nothing else. He wanted to walk everywhere. He couldn't stand to be sort of the potted plant anymore in the middle of the living room. So needless to say, Beth and I had some pretty sore backs for a couple of months as we would always sort of walk him around wherever he wanted to go.

[10 : 28] But think about this. Isn't it incredible how personal and how intimate and how involved this image is of God's love? Here is no detached or cold deity. And God says, I didn't just teach you to walk, but I nursed you back to health. And then in verse 4, he describes himself like a gentle farmer.

I led you with cords of kindness and with bands of love, and I eased your yoke when you were sore, and I stooped down, and I fed you. What an image of gentleness and compassion.

Now, I realize that some of us may struggle with this whole idea of God as a father. Maybe you had a pretty crummy father, and maybe your father wasn't around for you to find out whether he was crummy or not.

But this is the kind of father God says he is. The kind who's strong enough to set you free from slavery, but gentle enough to stoop down and to lead you like a child by the arms and to nurse you back to health. Isn't that the kind of father that we all long for? Now, I get it that a lot of this can start to sound a bit sentimental, can't it? But then we have to realize that these metaphors of God's loving care are describing a period in the history of Israel that took place when they were wandering through the wilderness and when they were first sort of settled in the promised land. And if you remember back in the Old Testament, these weren't exactly hallmark moments, were they?

The people were complaining. They were disobeying. They thought about going back to Egypt. They were constantly rebelling. It was a rocky road. So in these first four verses, God is saying to Israel, I did all these wonderfully caring things for you, not those other gods that you're so prone to love. And yet, you still ran away from me and went to them. Now, here's the connection for us this morning. Friends, today, some of you are contemplating running away from God and turning your back on Him because, quite frankly, you're just not sure that He loves you. You're looking at your circumstances and thinking God can't be all that loving. Maybe you've had some bad parents and you're thinking, if God were such a good heavenly Father, why couldn't He have given me a better earthly one? Or maybe you're single this morning and you wish you were married and you're thinking, if God were such a good heavenly Father, couldn't He arrange me a marriage down here? Funny that when it comes to thinking about God, we're all about arranged marriages, aren't we?

[13:27] But those are serious concerns, aren't they? And what God is saying in verse 3 is, don't you know, don't you know that I have been this close and intimate and involved with you the whole time? I've been the loving Father holding your arms and nursing you in sickness and easing your yoke as you've been falling and as you've been sick and as you've been hungry and overworked.

I've been there. And God's love has been present in and through these things to bring you to a place of maturity, to bring you to a place of wisdom. God wants us to grow up. He doesn't want us to stay children forever. He wants us to come of age, as it were, spiritually. And the things that you're experiencing are part of that wise and loving process. Some of you are at spiritual adolescence, as it were, like Israel in verse 2, and you're ready to make a break because you don't know what God is showing you here about His fatherly love.

There's one more thing that this section of Hosea points us to. You know, in the Gospel of Matthew, in Matthew 2.15, Matthew says that Jesus Christ fulfilled the verse here in Hosea that says, out of Egypt I called my son. Now, what Matthew is saying is that Jesus came to be the true Israel and to live a fully human and righteous life on our behalf. And the writer of Hebrews says that in order to do that, Jesus was made perfect through suffering. Do you know what that means?

It means that Jesus underwent suffering in order to display the manifold depth of His perfection as a Son of God. To be demonstrated in all His beauty, Jesus went through suffering.

And you might say, well, that's easy. Jesus was God. Of course He could go through suffering. He was divine. But think of it this way. Helpful illustration in Paul Tripp's book called *Instrument in the Redeemer's Hands*. He says, imagine the world's strongest man bending a toothpick. It breaks right away, doesn't it? And the world's strongest man would only need to exert like 0.0001% of his strength to just snap that thing in half. Now, imagine that same person bending a thick iron bar.

[16:07] And it doesn't break. And because it doesn't break, it takes the full force of that man's strength. It experiences the utter extent of what he can give it. And you see, friends, that when Jesus came to earth, He experienced the full weight of this broken and sinful world. And He didn't break, you see. And because He didn't break, He felt the full impact of it.

Now, the point is this. Friends, He's done all of that for you. Not just so He can sympathize with our weaknesses, though what a great truth that is.

But in order to show you that God will use suffering to perfect us. Just as Jesus' perfection and beauty was demonstrated in suffering, so our perfection is worked out in suffering as well.

The tragedy is that some of you are ready to run away before you really reach the beauty and the wisdom that God wants to bring out. It's a bit like a stained glass window.

You're looking at your life and seeing a bunch of broken pieces and a bunch of mixed up colors. But you see, God is like a master craftsman, and He's working to arrange those pieces so that when the sun comes up, you will shine in all of the glory of a son or a daughter of God.

[17 : 46] God says, know that I healed you and took you up by the arms and taught you to walk. You can look back and know that God was with you and is with you in the season and the circumstances that you're in. So, if you're tempted to bolt and to run away, hold on and realize that His love is more wise and caring than any you have ever dealt with. It is a holy love.

This is the first thing that Hosea shows us about the love of God. The second we see in verses 8 and 9. As we turn to the second display of God's love, we see that tragically Israel rebelled and ended up back in captivity. You see, the tragedy is that as we seek freedom and satisfaction apart from our wise and caring father, we end up becoming slaves to oppressive and cruel masters. We run from His love and end up in the clutches of a taskmaster. And like a sword, we're told, all is devoured. And most tragically of all, in verse 7, the people, we're told, are bent on turning away. The prodigal, it seems, is incapable of coming to his senses and returning home. He's just that far gone. So, you see, after verse 7, it all sort of hangs in the balance.

Has Israel blown it once and for all? Will God disown them for good? Will He revoke His Son of the rights and privileges that He once granted to Him? Having sent His people into exile, is He going to utterly cut them off for good? And you know, He would be justified in doing so. The previous seven chapters of Hosea have been solidifying that fact. So, what will it be? Will this relationship end in the terrible silence of judgment and alienation? Well, as we see in verse 8, the answer is no.

[19 : 58] Verse 8 erupts with the cry of the anguished and passionate Father whose heart is in deep turmoil over His Son. How can I give you up? God cries. How can I hand you over? Adma and Zebuim that He mentions here were cities that were utterly destroyed in the Old Testament, overthrown, we're told, never to be rebuilt again. But here God says literally, my heart is overthrown within me.

Out of the depths of who God is, compassion rises up warm and tender. And verse 9 goes on to tell us where this mercy and compassion comes from. God will not come in wrath. Why? Not because the Son isn't that bad after all, but because God says, I'm God and not a man, the Holy One in their midst.

The intense passion that God feels over His children is a function of His holiness. Now, wait a second, you might be thinking. I thought God's holiness is what propelled Him to actually judge Israel, not to show compassion. How can God's love flow out of His holiness?

But remember what the Bible means by the word holy. Primarily, it means that God is set apart and distinct from all else. We might say that God is wholly other than His creation, or as He says here, that God is God and not a man. And you see, everything about God is holy.

God is holy in His being, and He's holy in His moral character, and He's holy in His justice, and He's holy in His love. Yes, even His love is set apart, distinct above and beyond our merely human love.

[21 : 57] Because after all, the human thing to do would be to judge and to give what the other deserves. The human thing to do here would be to cut them off and let them wallow in their captivity, to disown the rebellious son. God is saying, if you were in my shoes, you would hand them over and give them up. Your patience would run dry, and the well would run out.

Because after all, who would love like that? We've seen it demonstrated already in this book.

Hosea, loving Gomer, the prostitute, buying her back, keeping her as his wife. Or think of the text we read earlier in the service, the dishonored father scanning the horizon, waiting to break out into a run to welcome the prodigal son home. Unheard of love. And yet this is what God does.

And not begrudgingly. God doesn't say, well, I have to do this, so I guess I'll do it. But no. He erupts with deep emotion. This is no cold or bloodless deity simply calculating out the moves on the chessboard of His providence and sovereignty, but God burning with passion.

Now, of course, that might not trouble you, the idea that God burns with passion, but theologians have often been troubled over the question of whether God has emotions. This is what theologians do when they have free time. They wonder about these neat questions. Some fear that to ascribe emotion or passion to God means that God would have to be controlled by something outside of himself, right? I come home from work and, you know, I'm kind of in a bad mood and then something happens and I fly off the handle. I'm controlled by external influences. And that's a fair concern of Bible students and theologians. God would be less than God and all too human if he were blown and tossed by the events of this world. Would he not? But you see here, friends, this is

where we need to remember God's holiness, his utter distinction from us. In our text, we clearly see that the heart of God is intense with deep feeling for his people. In fact, our fickle emotions are just a pale shadow of the fire that burns within God himself. But unlike our emotions, God's passions are not a response to outside influences. God is not controlled by events outside of himself. He's not a ping pong ball being whacked back and forth by the events of the world. Rather, his passionate love comes raging forth from within his own self. It's self-originating passion. Now, this isn't just splitting theological hairs.

Because God's self-originating love has two very practical implications. The first is this. This means that God's love cannot reach its limit. It will not run out.

[25 : 23] Human love reaches a limit, doesn't it? Even some of the strongest loves we know, parental love or marital love, these expressions of human love are incredible in their passion and determination, are they not? But yet, they can falter and they can run out. And some of you have felt the sting of that this morning, I'm sure. But you see, friends, God's love is as deep as his own character, as profound and as limitless as his holiness. Can you fathom the depth of an infinite being?

Keep throwing the rope over the edge of the boat, friends, and it will never hit the bottom. The song we sang at the offering expressed it well, didn't it? Could we with ink the ocean fill?

And were the skies with parchment made? Were every stock on earth a quill and every man a scribe by trade? To write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry. Nor could the scroll contain the hold, though stretched from sky to sky. God's love flows from his own holy and divine nature, and thus, friends, it is endless.

But second, since God's love flows forth from his own holy nature, this means that it's not dependent on the loveliness of the loved. God's love is not dependent on the loveliness of the one he loves.

It's almost hard to imagine that, isn't it? Because nearly all of our love is completely dependent on the loveliness of the thing itself, isn't it? When we look another person in the eyes and say, I love you, we usually mean, I love all the things about you that are pleasing to me. Your humor, your smile, your fashion, whatever. Your great skill at math.

[27 : 36] But friends, that is not how God loves. It's not your desirable qualities that draw forth God's love for you. God isn't calculating your good and your bad attributes to sort of figure out whether he's going to be drawn to you and fall in love with you. Now, here's why you need to know this.

Because one day, friends, one day you'll get a glimpse of what's really going on in your heart. One day something will happen in your life, a circumstance, or maybe just a moment of profound insight. And you will see how morally unlovely you are.

And when you realize that, when you realize that there's nothing in you to commend you to God, and nothing to catch his eye or to win his favor, in that moment, when the sea opens up before you, then you will either despair of God's love for you, or you will recoil back and live in denial.

You'll either cower before God and run from him, or you'll shut down inside, and you'll grow hard. But you see, friends, if God's love comes from within his own self, if it flows out of his own holy character and not in response to your loveliness, well, then you have hope.

Then you don't need to despair, and you don't need to deny. And finally, maybe once, finally, you can come out of hiding.

[29 : 34] Because his love for you rests ultimately not on you, but on his own holy nature. And that, friends, is a comfort unlike anything you can ever know.

To know that you are loved because of how faithful he is, and not because of how worthy you are, that will set you free.

Free to be honest, with yourself. Free to be honest with others. Free to receive correction and change.

Free, finally, to come out of the shadows and into the light. And do you see how different this love of God is than a mere permissiveness or a mere affirmation that so passes for the idea of love today? God is not saying, I love you no matter what you do, but I love you in the face of what you do.

Despite of what you do, I still love you.

[30 : 44] And that is what it means to really love like God loves. To love the unlovely. Loving those without anything to commend themselves.

In fact, even loving your enemies as Jesus taught us. But where do we get the strength for that? We would have to live in a place of such fullness and strength, of such nearness to God in order to love like He loves.

In short, we would need to be brought home spiritually speaking. And that brings us to the third and final part of our chapter, verses 10 and 11.

In these verses, we're told that God will gather His people back from exile. But you see, verse 9 creates quite a dilemma, doesn't it? After all, how can the Holy One be in our midst and not come in wrath?

It's a bit of a paradox, is it not? We've seen that God's love is holy and will refrain from coming in wrath, but there's a big difference between refraining from anger and returning someone and welcoming someone home into your heart, is there not?

[32 : 02] But Hosea sees that between this refraining and this returning, God's love will act definitively in order to make it possible for the children to come home.

But Hosea doesn't see all the details. In fact, He can only communicate it with an image. God, He says, will roar like a lion.

What better of an image to capture the unfailing, covenantal love of God for His people than a lion's roar? Fierce and unmistakable, nothing like it in all of the created order.

If you get the weekly emails, you know that this is the image that we chose for this whole series in Hosea. This whole series of God's alluring love for His wayward people comes right down to hear the roar of the Father for His children like a lion.

And we're told that this roar is transformative. That those who were once bent on turning away, remember in verse 7, come flying home with the freedom of birds.

[33 : 26] And we're told that they'll tremble when they come. That is, this roar will spiritually melt you and remake you. It will shake you to your core.

And in the context, that's a good thing. Because after all, we're bent on turning away. And how do you fix bent things?

Imagine a bent piece of metal. Well, you could try to fix it by just kind of keep bending it the other way, couldn't you? But you know that that never quite works. It never gets the kink out. And the more you bend it, the weaker it gets.

But if you take that piece of metal and you melt it down, if you melt it down and you reforge it, then you've done it. And it's not until we've been trembled by God's roar that we'll really change.

Not until we've been melted and reforged spiritually in the fire of His love. So what is it? What is this roar that changes our hearts and brings the children home once and for all?

[34 : 38] When did God express His love with such ferocity that we couldn't help but come flying to Him like a bird on a wing? Friends, was it not ultimately on the cross when Jesus Christ, the Lion of Judah, died for all those who believe, the righteous for the unrighteous, unrighteous, to bring you to God?

If you think about it, a roar can be either an expression of power and authority or it could be an expression of anguish and pain.

Can it not? A lion can roar either to express triumphant victory or painful defeat. And the mystery of the cross, friends, is that we see both.

As the wrath of God is poured out in full force against human sin, the Son of God cries out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? A roar of pain and anguish and seeming defeat and yet, from the cross, He triumphantly declares, it's finished.

The roar of victory. And at the cross, the heart of God opens up for His people. There, the Holy One is in our midst, not coming in wrath, but receiving the wrath so that we can return to the Father, so that we can find our home in Him again.

[36 : 16] Friends, do you hear it this morning? Do you hear His love roaring from the cross for sinful humanity roaring for you?

The Apostle Paul says that the gospel is the power of God for those who believe. That when the cross is preached and believed, it will radically change us.

It will melt us down and reforge us into people who are brand new. And it does this because the cross finally shows us that God's holy love for us is not just the wise and providential love of a father teaching his children to walk in the wilderness or even the passionate and limitless love of a father in anguish for his lost children.

But the cross shows us that the holy love of God is the costly love of a father who would pay any price to bring his children home. And that love makes you tremble and you come flying home to God.

And when you do, suddenly you find that you too have the strength and the desire to love like God loves.

[37 : 38] There's a family resemblance between the father and the children. We too find ourselves engaged in the costly act of loving the unlovely.

Like Hosea, we love the unfaithful spouses and the rebellious sons and the undeserving and the ungrateful because that is what we all once were.

But he roared and he brought us home. Behold the love of God, friends. May we too tremble as we fly to him.

And may we go out to love the same. Let's pray. God, before a passage like this, we admit that we're truly humbled.

God, how could we scratch the surface? How could we even begin to uncover the depths of your love? Lord, a love that forged the world.

[38 : 47] a love that created us. A love that burns from all eternity in the triune nature of who you are, God, Father, Son, and Spirit.

Lord, at the end of the day, we realize that before your love, we simply must pause and stop and worship. God, thank you that your love is providential.

God, thank you that your love is passionate. And thank you, God, that your love is costly and transformative. Lord, may we cling more and more deeply to the cross so that we might go forth to love the unlovely as you have loved us.

God, we ask this in Christ's name. Amen. The music team is going to come forward and we're going to sing a final song together about this deep and mysterious and liberating and comforting love of God.

So use these words as a means of responding and worshiping God and His love and His holiness as we close. Please stand with us.

[40 : 06] Thank you.