Coming to know the heart of God

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[0:00] Please turn to the book of Hosea. So the book of Hosea is after the book of Daniel.

It's towards the latter part of the Old Testament. So after the book of Daniel, you'll get to the book of Hosea. Yeah, so it's really not that far away from the end of the Old Testament.
As we read this, over the next few weeks, we're going to be looking at the heart of God in the book of Hosea. Hence, Hosea really puts our attention there.
And if you want to read ahead, then that would be good. The letter is quite poetic. It is written by Hosea, who is a prophet.
But I'd like to begin at the beginning in Hosea chapter 1. And we'll read the first nine verses together. Or I'll read and we can all follow God's word.
[1:13] So now hear God's word together. The word of the Lord that came to Hosea, the son of Bere, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, king of Israel.

When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, go take to yourself a wife of Hordom and have children of Hordom, for the land commits great Hordom by forsaking the Lord.
When he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblim, and she conceived and bore him a son, and the Lord said to him, call his name Jezreel.
For in just a little while, I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel. And I will put an end to the kingdom, the house of Israel. And on that day, I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel.
She conceived again and bore a daughter. And the Lord said to him, call her name No Mercy. For I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them all.
[2:34] But I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the Lord their God. I will not save them by bow or by sword, or by war or by horses, or by horsemen.

When she had weaned no mercy, she conceived and bore a son. And the Lord said, call his name not my people. For you are not my people, and I am not your God.
Now I know what you must be thinking. How can that lead us to the heart of God? Well, what I want to suggest is over the next few weeks as we go through this book, it is going to do exactly that.
And of course, Hosea needs careful reading, but I hope it's a real benefit to each and every one of us as believers. We're going to come back to God's word after this next hymn.
So Hosea chapter 1 and the first nine verses. And I've titled this, I don't normally come up with titles, but I surprise myself every now and then.
[3:41] And the title of this is How We Come to Know the Heart of God. Coming to know the heart of God, How We Come to Know the Heart of God, something along that line of thinking.

Now anyone who has a general idea about the book of Hosea will understand that it's reflective of God and his relationship with his people.
And that's the purpose of the book of Hosea. It is to understand how God feels about his people. It is to bring us into the very heart of God through what we read.
And much of the book is filled with imagery or what people call imagery. And with all kinds of imagery, it needs interpreting and then it needs understanding.
But some of these are fairly straightforward. Marriage is a fairly simple image to interpret and to understand. Unfaithfulness, restoration, sorrow, love, redemption.
[4:49] You know, by now many of us are aware of how to interpret those and how to understand them. But what Hosea does with them is to draw us into the heart of God through them.

Rather than just keeping us on the outside, getting used to the storyline, he brings us right into the very heart of God. And the reason for that is because that imagery is real experience.

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They're not just illustrations. They're not just pictures to give us an idea. They are actually Hosea's experiences. Sorrowful, painful, loving, difficulty.
Many of these things are felt. They are not only understood in the terms of what is happening to me, but they are understood through, I can feel what is happening to me.
And so I want to make our way through this book sort of expositionally, taking what God has said, understanding what God means. But I want to do so by focusing on what the book does as a whole, and that is draw us in completely to the heart of God, that we may understand God better.
[6:07] The whole book wants us to know God. The central theme of the book is that we would know God because God's people here don't, that we would experience God because God's people here are not as they should be.

And God wants this. He wants them to be filled with knowledge, but that knowledge is experiential knowledge, not a head knowledge alone, but a deep relationship with God.
So as we begin, let's just look at these first few verses as a summary. There's a few things to notice in the very first verse, and that is it sets out the time frame and it sets where we are in the world.
It tells us in chapter one, verse one, that Hosea is the son of Beri in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. And in the days of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, the king of Israel.
So now we know who Hosea is, you know, where he is in the time frame of Israel's history. And we also know that Israel at this point is divided, that God's people are divided into two kingdoms.
[7:20] We have a northern kingdom, Israel, and we have a southern kingdom, Judah. And so not only is there a separation between God and his people, there's a separation between God's people and God's people.

You have a northern kingdom, you have a southern kingdom, and you have a separation between all of them, ultimately, and God himself. So Hosea is living at this period of time in history, and at this period of time in history is difficult for a number of different reasons.
So when Israel is divided, not only between themselves, but also between themselves and God, this separation is cause of much sorrow for God himself.
And Hosea is about to enter into a life of sorrow that he hadn't yet experienced. And that sorrow is actually going to reveal to him the heart of God like never before.
The other thing you'll notice as you look at verse 2 is that we read the words, when the Lord first spoke through Hosea. Now it doesn't say, as sometimes you can read in some of the prophecies, when the Lord spoke to Malachi, or when the Lord spoke to Jonah.
[8:47] It says, when the Lord first spoke to Hosea. And this is, again, important for a number of different reasons, because what we're reading is an account of what happened when it happened.

Now that's really, really important for a number of reasons. What we're reading is a written account written after the time it happened, about the time it happened.
They're not dictated notes. We're not reading something as it's happening on the ground. As though Hosea is living his life. All of this is happening around him. And right beside Hosea is someone who's taking the notes down as Hosea is dictating them out.
No, this is a written account, after everything has happened, about the time when it happened. Now the reason why that is so incredibly important is because we hear that God tells Hosea to go and marry a woman of Hordom.
And the question is, is was she a woman of Hordom before she married him, he married her, or did she become a woman of Hordom after he married her?
[9:59] Now if you read this as a straightforward account, as though this is happening as it's taking place, then it sounds like that God is telling Hosea, go and marry a prostitute.

My contention is that that is not what's happening at all. But rather God tells Hosea to marry this woman, Gomer, whom God knew would become this woman of Hordom.
And there are good reasons for reading it that way around. Hosea could be writing this account, reflecting back on everything that has happened. He's joining up all the dots. He's putting everything together.
And as he puts it all together, he knows, just like all of us know, that God called him to marry this woman and he knew what she would turn out to be. And God can write it, Hosea can write it in both the past and the present tense in that way.

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That when God first spoke to me, this is what happened. He's writing it in hindsight, with the benefit of hindsight, with the benefit of everything that has happened.
[11:08] Because God knew what type of woman she would become, he can write it down in such a way where God called him to marry that type of woman in the first place.

Because God knew what she would become. Now it's because of this that Hosea knows that God knows more than he.
Hosea knows the future. Hosea knows that God knows the future, but he also knows that he doesn't. But God is able to see what everything will turn out to be, even if Hosea himself doesn't see it for himself.
And so when he phrases it this way, that God commanded him to marry a woman of whoredom, I believe he phrases it that way in hindsight, when he looks back onto the situation that God told you, told me to marry her, and look what happened.
Well, he recognizes that God always knew what was going to happen. That's why he told him to marry her in the first place. If you are the type of person who wants to read it the other way, where God commands Hosea to go and marry a prostitute, you've got some serious difficulties to overcome.
[12:22] Some of the difficulties that you've got to overcome is the very theme of the book itself. The theme of the book is about covenant breaking. It's about unfaithfulness.

So how, if God commands Hosea to marry someone who is already unfaithful, how can she be unfaithful? How can she break a covenant if she's already out of covenant?
She can't. She wasn't in covenant in the first place. If this is reflective of God's relationship with his people, then the relationship starts off good, but then somewhere down the line, God's people break covenant with God.
They move from faithfulness into unfaithfulness. They move from a covenant into breaking the covenant. Whereas if you read it as God tells Hosea to go and marry a prostitute, then what you're saying effectively is this, that God moves Hosea and himself from unfaithfulness to unfaithfulness. That he marries a woman who's out of covenant only to then break covenant. But it makes no sense because you cannot break covenant if you're not in covenant.
[13:37] While it would work with Hosea, it doesn't work with God and his people. The whole point of being unfaithful is if you're faithful in the first place, if there's a covenant binding.

Now, it doesn't matter which way you read it, I guess ultimately, because at the end of the day, the same point is being made. But I think the point being made is stronger this way because it emphasizes the nature of covenant breaking.
That Hosea is looking back onto a time where he knew the type of man, the type of woman that he was going to marry. Just like God knew when all of us got married.
God knew what our wife would become 10 years after we're married. God knew what our husband would become 10 years after we're married, 20 years after we're married. And I would say Hosea is recognizing this and writing about it in that way.
Why is this important? Well, it's important for this reason. It would be tempting simply to concentrate on the sin. But that's not the point. The point here is to focus on why God told him to marry that woman.
[14:53] Why does God want Hosea to marry her? There's no doubt about it that God commands him to marry Gomer. Now, whether Hosea knew what type of woman she was beforehand or not, at this stage, doesn't matter as much as why God told him to marry her.

So the experience follows like this, that many people who live in this world can have really sorrowful experiences, really painful experiences, and those experiences lead them further away from a heart towards God.
They don't draw themselves to God for a moment. When a person goes through sorrow and through pain, they're not drawn closer to the heart of God. They don't become more worshipful or more devotional.
They often become less if they're a Christian. And if they're not a Christian at all, the moment they do experience pain and suffering, they are driven further from the heart of God by their own choices than actually closer to the heart of God.
But here in Hosea, it does the very reverse. God gives Hosea these experiences so that Hosea would understand the heart of God.

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[16:09] God purposely causes him, commands him to marry Gomer so that he would understand something more about God than he did previously.

So God knew, as we see, the sort of person that Hosea is going to marry. Hosea either knew about it because God says you have to marry this woman, or she became that and he found out through experience.
But ultimately, whichever way you want to read it, God still commanded him to marry her. Now, how does that reflect for us? Well, as I said, God knew the man that you were going to marry and what he would become years much further ahead than you do.
You did. God knew the woman that you would marry and what she would become five years into your marriage, ten years into your marriage, fifteen, twenty years into your marriage.
God knew all of that and yet he didn't stop you from marrying them. Why did God then allow it if it turns out bad? Why did God then allow it if it doesn't turn out in faithfulness and joyfulness and ultimately everything that honors God?
[17:24] God here commands Hosea to marry a woman knowing that the marriage is going to be a terrible marriage. Knowing that it's going to be terrible for Hosea and everywhere down there.

Why would he do that? It doesn't seem like something that God would do and yet God is showing us that by doing it, this is how Hosea actually comes to know the heart of God.
But can we take the principle away from marriage and then the principle still stand? In other words, does the principle remain true whoever I'm in relationship with?
My mum, my brothers, other family members, the people I work with, the people I'm in church with. Doesn't matter who it with, God knows that if I'm brought into a position where I'm in relationship with these people, he would know what these people and what they would do and how they would affect me a year down the line, five years down the line, how they would benefit me and perhaps how they would upset me.
How they would bring great blessing to me and how they might sin against me. God knows all of that and yet he doesn't stop any of us from getting into those type of relationships.
[18:42] And the question is why? And Hosea answers that question why emphatically. Hosea has experiences, painful experiences, that actually cause him to encounter the heart of God better than before.

It actually causes him to interpret and to understand the heart of God in a way that he did not before he married Gomer.
Hosea would come to understand God on a deeper level through those experiences rather than those experiences causes in his heart to actually turn away from God.
I've often asked the question when reading Hosea, does God bring certain experiences into ministers' lives not so that they would understand the congregation better, but so that they would understand God better in relationship in relationship to the congregation?
Because that's what's happening to Hosea here. Hosea experiences something not to understand broken marriages better, that's not the point, but rather to understand the heart of God better.
[20:03] And does God make ministers suffer not purposely in that way, but obviously by arranging events the way that he does and brings painful experiences into their life, not so that they can understand their congregations better, but so that they can actually come to understand the heart of God better in exactly the same way he did with Hosea here.

I haven't got an answer to that question, but I think it's highly likely. But then I think it's highly likely for all of us that we would understand God better through pain and through suffering, through deep, deep sorrow, that God is actually doing something good, even though the experience doesn't feel good at all.
The whole point of Hosea's life is that he would understand and feel what God feels. The point of Hosea is not that sin is wrong, it is wrong, and Hosea does make that point, but rather sin hurts. And what Hosea enters into is how sin hurts, and therefore he begins to feel what God actually feels. His heart is being shaped in the form of God's heart so that he can feel what God feels as he relates to his people Israel.
Now, if we had all the power and all the authority to take something and wipe it all away and make it all clean in an instant, we might do that.
[21:44] But then most of us who have a little bit of maturity would know that that doesn't really deal with the pain and the sorrow. Because most pain and most sorrow last much longer than the

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event that actually caused the pain and the sorrow in the first place.

it lasts way beyond it, years beyond it. One event can cause years of pain. One event can cause years of sorrow. The event itself lasted but a day, but a week.
But the pain and the sorrow that follows that follows on way further. So, the idea of someone coming up with a simple solution, if I had the power, I'd just wipe it all, doesn't work like that.
It's never worked like that. Pain doesn't work. You can't get, you can't, you can get rid of the cause of pain which would stop pain, but you cannot get rid of the feeling of pain because the cause has come and gone.
And it doesn't help either for someone who's perhaps a young Christian to say, well, simply transfer the problem upwards. God knows what he's doing. Of course God knows what he's doing, but that's not the problem.
[22:53] That's not the issue. I'm hurting. I'm not questioning whether or not God knows what he's doing. I'm not questioning whether or not God has power and authority. I know God has power and authority.

The problem I have is that I'm in deep, deep sorrow. I'm feeling the pain. I'm feeling the bitter experiences. It's not that I'm doubting anything about God.
I'm just feeling sorrowful, deeply sorrowful. And Hosea, therefore, is not just qualified to speak the word of God simply because he is appointed to.
That is the reason why he's qualified. But he begins to become qualified because through these experiences, he actually becomes to know the heart of God better.
He actually sees God's people not from God's people's point of view, but actually clearer from God's point of view, from how God feels about his people and how he feels when his people sin against him.
[23:58] What God commanded Hosea to go through is what God is going through. Okay? What God commanded Hosea to go through is what God is going through.

And sometimes God does that. We don't understand why. I don't understand why. But I accept that God did it. I rejoice in the fact that God did it, even though it's painful.
And I accept that while I would rather have gone without it, I thank God nonetheless for it because now I understand how much it hurts God.
Now I really feel what God feels. It's important then to pause and stop and think how well we actually know God in the first place.
How well do we actually know God? None of us want to fall into the trap of thinking or feeling that God feels in the same way man feels. He doesn't.
[25:00] He can't because he's God. But at the same time, we can never say that God is without emotion or that God is without feeling.

But at the same time, we have to say that God is immutable. That is, that he cannot be changed. He cannot change and he will not be changed by anything.
And we have to say and admit the impassibility of God. Now what does that mean? Well, growing up, listening to the Westminster Confession of Faith, you would have heard these words in chapter 2 verse 1.
These are some of the things that were read to you frequently. There is but one living God and true God who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, and passions.
It goes on to say immutable, immense, eternal, does everything to the counsel of his own will, but without body, without parts, and without passions. In other words, God doesn't run hot and cold with his people, emotionally, that is.
[26:13] We run hot and cold emotionally, but God doesn't run hot and cold emotionally. And what it means is this, it's not that God is without feelings, and it's not that God is without emotions, but rather those feelings are not changeable, they are constant.

It means that God's love is constant. It means that God's goodness is constant. It means that God's mercy is constant.
It cannot be changed by anything external to itself because it's part of who God is. His wrath is constant.
And therefore, God cannot be changed by his anger, like us. God cannot be changed by his love, like we can.

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God cannot be changed by these things because these things are part of who God is. And then ultimately, the assurance is this, that God will never, ever run hot and cold with you, ever.
[27:22] Never. He's constant. Without body, parts, or passions. It's not saying that God is without feelings, but rather God isn't ruled by his feelings. He's without body, parts, or passions.

And so when God deals with people, there needs to be additional help. God has to be the strength of our heart, as it says in Psalm 73.
In the same way that God was the strength of Asaph's heart, he must be the strength of Hosea's heart. And he must be the strength of our heart. Because even through sinful things, God is teaching us something about his heart.
So the point here is to recognize that Hosea's suffering and Hosea's sorrow is real, but so too is God's.
That God is not in a place where he is incapable of suffering. That God is not in a place where he cannot feel and suffer those emotions that come his way.
[28:33] Now, they are constant, and this is where the theology is deep and sometimes difficult. But if Hosea was simply to look at this situation from a human point of view, he could simply walk away and go, I married the wrong woman and what a waste of my life it has been.

What a terrible mistake. But as he looks at this from God commanding him to do it, it's not a waste at all. But he actually gets to know something about God that few of us may ever get close to.
To actually really get in to how God feels when his people sin against him. Hosea is drawn in to the very heart of God.
He's coming to understand the heart of God through pain, through sorrow, through those experiences. Not in the absence of them, but actually in the presence of them.
So here's the exhortation as we close. The account that we have from this prophet is an account that causes us to look at God. And not just to see what God sees, but so that we would feel what God feels.
[29:46] Hosea doesn't just want us to see what God sees, he wants us to feel what God feels. And his life is the example of that.

His life is the lesson by which we learn that lesson. But I think there seems to be a place here. For once we acknowledge that all sin is against God, and it's really important to understand that.
It's really, really important, lest we think that some of us have created greater sins than others. It's really not the case, you know, to think that some of us are better sinners than others.
It doesn't work like that. All sin is against God, and that's what Hosea comes to understand. All sin is against God. All sin is against the heart of God.
And so we feel that sin and the sorrow of that sin in our marriages, in our friendships, and even in our churches, and it's not wasted.
[30:49] And now we know why it's not wasted, because now we begin to understand how God feels about it. Now we begin not only to see what God sees, but we begin to feel what God feels.

As we sin and are sinned against, we are actually beginning to feel what God feels. So when you look at all those terrible and painful sorrowful sinful situations that are out there, which none of us want, which we would all rather go, we have to recognize that in them, even in them, are wonderful striking lessons.
And the lesson is that through them we actually begin to feel what God feels. Hosea begins to learn to feel what God feels when his people sin against him.
That's the lesson. That's the beauty of the lesson here, which should cause us, I feel at least, to live the Christian life with all the more seriousness and to recognize that as we look back on all of our life, and we may say, and why did you allow that God?
Why did you allow me to go there? Why did you allow that to happen? You could have stopped it. Hosea knows like we know. God could stop anything from happening, and yet he doesn't.
[32:22] And now we know why he doesn't. Now we become to understand that God feels. Not that it's just wrong, but that God feels. So as we continue over these next few weeks to make our way through the book of Hosea, we're going to be constantly directed to the heart of God.

We're going to be constantly directed to see it from God's point of view. We're even going to be directed to the fact that however much it seems difficult to say, that not even sin is wasted in this sense.

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It is all used for God's glory. In other words, we begin to see things from the point of view of God, which is, by the way, how we're always meant to see it.
Amen.

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