

The grace of thorns

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[0 : 00] Please turn to Hosea. Hosea is after the book of Daniel. In fact, if you're towards the end of the Old Testament and go backwards, you might get to it quicker.

So Hosea, chapter 2. Well, I'm going to read the last few verses of chapter 1, 10 and 11, and then a couple of verses out of chapter 2 rather than in its entirety.

You remember last week we saw, just to set its background to read, God has called Hosea to marry a wife of Hordom, and I took the position that she wasn't that.

She became that after they were married rather than before. Now, I understand that there are different commentators out there that will hold to different things. Some will even go as far to say that she was a prostitute, but the word Hordom there doesn't suggest that at all.

It would be a very loose understanding. But some would hold that. Some would hold Hordom.

Campbell Morgan, for instance, would hold where I would hold that she wasn't that.

[1 : 27] She became that, but she wasn't that initially. And so it looked just terrible. The first chapter just looked terrible that Hosea is going to end up feeling what God feels.

And yet this, in the very end of chapter 1, there's this beautiful turnaround. Absolutely wonderful turnaround. And yet, of course, all within the plan of God.

So now hear God's word. Hosea chapter 1 verse 10. Yet the number of children, Israel, shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered.

And in the place where it was said to them, You are not my people. It shall be said to them, Children of the living God.

And the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head. And they shall go out from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel.

[2 : 26] Now this is how the Lord is going to turn things around. And so we can take it in verse 6 in particular. Therefore, I will hedge her up a way of thorns, and I will build a wall against her, so that she cannot find her pass.

I'll read a few more. So she shall pursue her lovers, but not overtake them. And she shall seek them, but she shall not find them. Then she shall say, I shall go and return to my first husband, for it was better for me than now.

And then in the very end of the chapter, we have the continuation of the promise. Verse 21. And in that day I will answer, declares the Lord, I will answer the heavens.

And they shall answer the earth, and the earth shall answer the grain and the wine and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel. And I will sow her from myself in the land.

And I will have mercy on no mercy. And I will say to not my people, you are my people. And he shall say, you are my God.

[3 : 43] There is, I think, no greater, there's several great ones. But just to affirm, you know, as we gather together, that we are God's people and he is our God, is just a wonderful affirmation, a biblical affirmation, that we thank you, God, that we are your people and you are our God.

It's that promised turn around. Well, we're going to come back to that after this next hymn. Well, if you have Hosea there open in front of you, it will be helpful.

Hosea, end of chapter 1 into chapter 2. Last week, we began by understanding that how Hosea would come to understand the heart of God.

This week, it's slightly different. It's more about how we come to understand our own heart before God. And sometimes we are ready to bury things and say that it's all over, it's dead and gone, just at the very time that God is about to resurrect things.

We can look at something as though it's dead and no good can come from this now, it's all over. And yet God, being the God of resurrection, looks at the same thing we do and resurrects new life. [5 : 11] When Jesus went to the tomb of Lazarus, it was several days later. Everybody's thinking, well, it's done and gone. That was last week, Jesus. But no, Jesus comes along and raises him from the dead.

We think that when things have passed and they look as if they're dead and gone, that they are actually dead and gone. But God, who is a God of resurrection, resurrects those things and brings them back to new life.

When we talk about a turnaround, this is what our God is capable of. When we look at difficult situations, there's nothing more difficult than death itself to overcome.

And yet God overcomes it. God can even turn that around as he did for Lazarus. So we shouldn't be too ready to get out the shovels and cover it back over thinking it's too late.

When God can come along and resurrect it to a new form of life. And that's the type of God that we belong to. And that's the type of God that we are called to understand.

[6 : 19] Hosea has been called by God to actually know God's heart. That's God's intention. God wants Hosea to know how he feels when his people sin against him.

And the way that God knows that Hosea will come to learn that lesson is by telling him, commanding him to go and marry Gomer, who will be unfaithful to him in the same way that Israel has been unfaithful to God.

But it's not a straightforward unfaithfulness. There's something inherently wrong in Gomer's heart. And this is a picture of what is inherently wrong in the people of God's heart.

That they are forever going after idols rather than staying close and clean with God. So through Hosea's experience of sorrow and pain, he then begins to understand how God feels when his people sin against him.

It's not just about knowledge in an academic sense, as you might consider knowledge to be. But God in Hosea considers knowledge to be experiential knowledge as well as revelation.

[7 : 32] You will know as the people of God in two ways. A combination of those two ways or those ways independently. You will know because I've told you and you will know because you feel.

And both have to balance each other for it to be properly understood. And what's interesting is that God could have not commanded Hosea to go and marry Gomer.

He could have stopped any of that type of pain. But then he would have also stopped a relationship. And that's what we're meant to see with God and his people. God could have stopped himself from being hurt.

From feeling the sorrow of when his people sin against him. By not having a people. By keeping himself separate from people. Not moving into a relationship with him.

And not opening himself up to the sorrow that can be brought when his people sin against him.

There is a way to avoid sorrow. And that is don't get into a relationship. But this is what God is teaching us here.

[8 : 37] It is actually by him opening himself up and stepping into a relationship with his people. At the same time he is opening himself up to being sinned against.

And feeling the sorrow and the pain of when that happens. And yet in the very midst of feeling all of that sorrow and all that pain. He still continues to love.

He still continues to pursue. We rally against God with our sin. And God deals with that sin in Christ Jesus for us.

But the question here is not now how do we understand God's heart. We're getting close. It leads very close to understanding God's heart. What we need to understand now is our own.

Why is it that I can trust in an idol at the same time I can try and trust in God? Why is it that I can give myself over to something else?

[9 : 40] Hosea's wife Gomer is simply illustrating what all of God's people are like before him. We shouldn't think that Gomer is the worst one out of the bunch. Because Gomer is simply the illustration of all of God's people.

That's what they are all like in their relationship with God. It's tempting, isn't it? That you wouldn't actually call if you had, you know, if you're having a child and your child comes along and it's a girl. What shall we call her? What about Rahab? Well, what's wrong with Rahab? Okay. She, well, there's plenty of things wrong with Rahab on an earthly point of view.

But in Hebrew, she's commended for her faith. In James, she's commended for her faith. Even if it was a lie, they went that way. When actually they went the opposite. You know, she's a model of faith. And yet we tend to remember her for everything else but that. You know, we don't call our children, our daughters, that because of everything else that she was. [10:44] And that is, that's simply an indication of how our heart is bent towards that kind of distinction. Easy, it's easy to, easy to keep some things clean and other things we just can't manage.

And so we just distance ourselves from them. But our own hands are not clean. And that's the point that God is making to his people. You know, we shouldn't look down on Gomer. We're all Gomers. That's the point that God is making to his people. But how will they actually come to understand that? How do we actually come to understand to see ourselves not necessarily in Hosea but actually in Gomer?

You know, when you read a story and you sort of place yourself into the story, why are you more tempted to place yourself into Hosea's position than you are Gomer's position? And there's reasons for that because we don't actually understand our own heart. We don't truly see what we are like before God. And it's only God in his grace that he doesn't reveal all of that to us all at once.

[11:56] This is why Paul said at the end of his life that he's the greatest of all sinners. You know, I'm the greatest of all of them.

Well, you would think, right, that someone would say that at the beginning of their life, that hopefully by the end of their life, they're not as bad. But no, what Paul was expressing is simply that at the end of his life, he begins to realize just how deep and wide and awful sin is and just how far God has gone in loving him and loving him through all that sin.

So we're all Gomer's, even if we can see a little bit of Hosea in ourselves, that God can cause us to feel the sin of someone else against us as a way of us knowing what it's like when we sin against God.

That could be true also. So what we begin to see here is the lengths that God goes to for his people. The love that stretches out into areas where you think it's too late.

It's all over. It's gone too far. And yet God chooses things to accomplish his purposes. And we don't always see that God is at work.

[13:19] We see it as something else. Israel are compared to two types of people here, a wayward children that have no control over their own lives. They're just out causing havoc.

That's what Israel are like. And they're also like a woman who is bent to whoredom. That's what Israel is also like.

And as God describes his people as that, he still says he loves them. He still goes out of his way to reach out to them.

So here's the summary, really, of what we have read. God has purposely given Hosea's children's names. The names that they have are the names that God has given to Hosea to give to his children.

And in short, they're called judgment, no mercy, and not my people. So Hosea has these children that have been named by God that are a constant reminder of what God's people will feel as a result of their unfaithfulness to God.

[14:27] The judgment to come, no mercy, and not my people. They are literally being cut off, as it were. And we spoke about the immutability and the impassibility of God, which I don't have time to go over again this evening because it takes a bit of time, as you can imagine.

But nonetheless, we recognize that God can be fully just, fully loving, fully wrathful. At the same time, he can feel the sorrow of their sin against him, that he can still reach out and love, even though he feels so much of their sin against him.

And so God is going to discipline his people, but the discipline is an act of grace. It is a gracious discipline. It may not feel as though God is demonstrating or providing his grace in my life when he does what he does.

But this is the way that he has decided to remove my blindness to his goodness. God's people are blind to the goodness of God. They are blind to the grace of God.

They experience goodness, and then they attribute it to something other than God. They experience the grace and the mercy. They experience a good harvest of oil and crops.

[15 : 49] And then they say someone else other than God gave it to them. They're blind, completely blind, to these good, favorable blessings coming from the hand of God.

And not only are they blind, they then attribute them to someone else other than God, which is just heartbreaking, if I can speak in human terms.

And Israel, like Gomer, has pursued these things. They've not just been tempted away by others. Their heart is bent on pursuing these things for themselves.

And so God decides to put in a plan of action. A way of thorns, a place of walls, a way of frustrating his people.

And this is what we read in verse 6. That I will hedge up her with a way of thorns, and I will build a wall against her, that no path should be open to her.

[16 : 50] In other words, Israel will have the desire to flee, a desire to stray, a desire to go wayward. And as they desire to stray out, all that they are met with is thorns, walls, and frustration.

They're not going to be able to go. They're not going to be able to advance the desires of their heart. Their desire is to flee. Their desire is to stray. But God is going to make them stray right into a hedge of thorns.

Right into walls that lead to no paths. They're not going to be able to fulfill their desires. God is going to frustrate all of their desires, all of their plans.

And in the end, these people that were called that they would receive no mercy, will actually receive mercy. They shouldn't because of what they are like.

But they do because of what God is like. They are not God's people because of what they are like. But they are God's people because of what God is like.

[17 : 57] And so the reason I'm a Christian is not because of who I am like or what I am like. But it's because of what God is like. That I'm saved and that I'm loved and that I can receive grace.

It is because of what God is like that I can enjoy the blessings that I do. Not because of what I am like. And so people who are called, you're not my child, are called my children.

Children. And it's quite possible that though the first child belongs to Hosea, the other two do not. They belong to Gomer, but they're not Hosea's children. And so we get this sense of adoption coming in.

It's a devastating situation. Full of sorrow and full of pain. And now we're getting the picture of the type of world that Christ is sent into when he comes to seek and to save the lost.

We're not just lost, happy people getting on with their own thing. We're a people who have caused the heart of God tremendous pain and sorrow. And in that pain and sorrow, God is still sending his son into the world.

[19 : 16] So here's the first sort of focus point that I want us to look at. That God chooses the way that he brings his people back to him. Really important.

God's choice of way. God chooses the way that he will bring his people back to him. When a person comes back to God, having left God, they grew up perhaps loving God, singing hymns, repenting, believing.

And then a period in their life, idolatry crept in, though it was never recognized as idolatry. It was recognized as perhaps investigation or experimenting or taste and see what the world has to offer.

And then they eventually come back to God. It may have very little to do with who God is. It may have very little to do with the love of God. In fact, they may not love God at all when they come back.

Like the prodigal son. He didn't come back because he loved his father. He came back because he could no longer put up with the pig food that he had to eat. And so we look at this picture of God loving his people and his people coming back to him, not because they find him lovable or desirable or because their desires have changed towards him, but because they can no longer stay where they were.

[20 : 49] The pig food was just too much, said the prodigal son. It's so bad, I'm going to go back to my father because even his hired servants have more than this.

He has no love for his father. But when he goes back, what does he find? He finds a father who hasn't stopped loving him. He finds a father who opens his arms to him.

That while he comes back without perhaps the desire to love his father, he comes straight back to a father who hasn't lost the desire to love his son. This is the type of God that we have.

And that's the type of people that we are. God literally opens up his arms. It doesn't mean that the son's repentance is meaningless. No, it's real repentance.

But what I'm saying is the motivation to bring him home wasn't necessarily an act of total love for the father. It was motivated by the fact that he could no longer stomach the pig food, which is what all he had to eat.

[21 : 55] He began to recognize through what he had rather than what he didn't have. Well, as God decides to bring his people back to him, he decides to use ways and means that we're not always familiar with.

And that we may not recognize that they're actually from God unless we actually spend time reading his word and recognizing that they're actually from God. The first one here is, of course, a hedge, a way of thorns.

In other words, to stop my people from straying any further, I'm going to make it painful for them when they do. I'm going to surround them with a hedge of thorns that they can go so far.

And as they go any further, they're going to run right into pain. That God is going to cause them a certain amount of suffering because of their straying and wayward ways.

They may want to go their way. They may have the desire to go that way. But as they do, God is not going to make it easy for them. He's going to hedge them in with a hedge of thorns.

[23 : 02] They're going to feel the pain of their own choices. They're going to feel the pain of their own desired and wayward ways. He increases the pain to be a straying Christian, to be a straying person of God.

You run away from me. This is what you're going to run into. A hedge of thorns. You run away from me. This is what you're going to run into. Walls that lead to no paths.

There's no way out of this. This is what you will run into. And we would never consider walls and thorns as God's grace. And yet Hosea is teaching us here that's exactly what it is.

It is the very act of God's grace to stop these people from going too far. From straying too wide. That God will build walls.

We sing about these walls. So high you can't get over it. So low you can't get under it. So wide you can't get around it. They're the walls that God builds to stop his people from straying too far.

[24 : 07] But far enough for them to realize that their way leads nowhere. That they're allowed to go so far.

But only far enough to realize that it doesn't go anywhere. And this, at that point, is how the people begin to turn around.

That when their pursuits to keep moving forward ends in not moving forward. It is frustrated by the will and plan of God. That they cannot actually advance their own way.

They are being frustrated at every turn. That it's at this point that they begin to seek God. Verse 7. She may pursue others and she will not find them.

And even though her heart is bent on straying these idols. This is Israel. Bent on straying these idols. In the end, she will say, halfway through verse 7.

[25 : 11] Then she shall say, I will go and return to my first husband. But notice when she says that. She says it after verse 6. The hedge of thorns. She says it after verse 6.

The walls build around her so that she cannot find her paths. She says it after the beginning of verse 7. Where she will pursue these lovers, these idols. But she won't find them.

And after all of that. After being completely frustrated. She then decides to turn around. Not because it dawned on her how wonderful God is automatically.

But rather because her way leads nowhere. And she is brought back to God. Israel is brought back to God. God's people are brought back to him.

She has the desire to go. The bent in her heart. To fulfill her desires. And God has the power to frustrate every single one of them. That's God.

[26 : 12] A God who frustrates the desires of a fallen heart. Bent on straying from God. And so in the midst of seeking and not finding.

We have God's grace at work. And the lesson I think is fairly simple. That you don't know how good you've got it. With God.

We just don't know how good we have it. Belonging to God. It's good. And we know it's good.

But I don't think any of us really appreciate. Just how good it is. That we have it with God. And sometimes it takes a few thorns. And a few walls.

And plenty of frustration of our own desires. And wants and ways. For us to actually realize. That what we've got. Is better.

[27 : 09] Than all of that. God's grace. In chapter 2. Is found in trouble and frustration. And that's the grace of God.

We don't see that is the grace of God. But that is the grace of God. Why doesn't this door open up for me? Why can't I ever get that prayer answered? We pray.

Lord lead us not into temptation. And then wonder why we don't get the promotion we do. Because the very promotion. Could actually be the very thing. That leads us into temptation. God has a way of frustrating.

Those desires and plans. Because it's a very act of grace. We think he's holding us back. He is holding us back. But we don't actually know what he's holding us back from.

It could be a cliff edge. It could be a burning fire. What God is holding us. It is true. That God can frustrate you. And hold you back. But ask yourself the question.

[28 : 07] What he's holding you back from. Is it not out of an act of love and grace? Or is it out of spitefulness? Clearly not. God chooses the way.

That he saves. And seeks his people. That we would turn back. To him. Israel needs to come to see their own blindness.

They need to come to see. That they are actually blind to the goodness of God. To the grace of God. And of course to their own sin. But their sensitivity to the things of God. Has disappeared in sin.

Whenever you court sin in your life. You become less and less sensitive. To the things of God. Your senses become dull.

To the things of God. And this is the very thing that Jesus says. For instance in Matthew 13. They have ears. But they can't hear. They have eyes. But they can't see. Why? Because their heart is given over to idols.

[29 : 09] And they've become like what they worship. Idols having eyes. But not seeing. And ears. But not hearing. Some people believe.

That they can live their life. As though it's open to interpretation. That we don't have to take God's word. At what God's word says. We can sort of play around with it. But this is a bit like saying.

That a burning stacked fire. Is open to interpretation. But I'm pretty sure. But I'm pretty sure. That if any one of us went into it. We'd all burn. It's not open to interpretation.

Really is it? And so when we handle God's word. Which can be like a burning fire. Which can be like a sharp sword. We may be tempted to think. We won't get burnt.

We may be tempted to think. We won't cut ourselves on this. And it doesn't take long before we have. Because it's not open to be played around with. It's there to accomplish the purpose.

[30 : 07] That it is given to us for. So however much people's hearts. Are still bent. On moving away from God. And God still feels the pain.

Of his people's hearts. Not loving him. That God's able to bring them back. Through physical measures. Through frustration. And walls. And thorns. But at this stage.

Their heart still has to be dealt with. Because if their heart. Is causing them to stray. And even though he knows this. About their heart. He still continues to love them. And give them mercy.

He says in the end. That he will betroth himself to them. That he will be faithful to them. And that they will actually come to know him. Well word on compromise and compulsion.

Before we close. Israel. Israel. Israel. Israel. Are compelled. By their own sin. They're not free. But rather compelled.

[31 : 11] Their heart is bent. On unfaithfulness. On sinning. On desiring idols. They're not free. They're compelled. By their own heart.

And so. The moment they begin to compromise. They open the door. To trouble. Into their lives. In fact. When any person thinks. That they can make compromises.

In their faithfulness to God. However small. And then they think. They can avoid the consequences. Of those compromises. It clearly isn't the case.

They may even say. It won't happen to me. I can avoid the consequences. It's not likely. To happen to me. As it happened to you. And we can hear the word. Of every teenage boy.

Saying in his own head. To his father. Or mother. It may have happened to you. But I'm smarter. Than you. It may have happened to you. But it won't happen.

[32 : 07] To me. And then the mother. Knowing what's going through. Her son's head. Gives it a few years. Realizing. That it is going to happen to him. And it does happen to him.

And nothing can be done. To stop it. And the reason may be. Because God would allow it. To get that far. So that that boy. Would run into thorns. And wolves. Before he would then.

Come back. Some of us. Just take a lot longer. To learn. Than others. But this idea. That you can avoid. Consequences. Or even.

If you know. You can't avoid them. That you can live with them. Just isn't true. And it isn't true. Because God designs thorns. To bring you back to him.

God designs these walls. To bring you back. To him. God designs. All of this frustration. To bring you back. To him. So the idea. That you can be. The younger brother.

[33 : 02] Going off into the far country. Having a good time. End up eating pig food. And think that you can then. Live with the consequence. No you can't. Because just like that younger son.

At some point. You'll go home. Because the consequences. Are sent from God. They're not out there in the world. To be experienced. As a result of sin. God takes direct aim.

And he fires you. Fires them at you. And he never misses. The consequences. Are sent from God. Like a sniper. He hits you. Every time. And they are designed.

To bring you back to him. The thorns. The walls. The frustration. The pig food. At some point. You can live with it. And then. At one point.

You can no longer live with it. And you go back. To your father. You go back home. Because you know. It's better. Back there. But look how long. It took you.

[33 : 57] To realize. Just how good it is. Back there. And that's what. The people in Hosea. God's people. Must go through. They're on their way back.

God is bringing them back. But just look. At what they have to go through. To get back. There is no quick fix here. There is no simple way. Of doing it. God's people.

Must learn. Not. To stray. Again. Here's the exhortation then. As we close. We've come to the point. In Hosea. Where God is going to tell him. Very soon. To go and get his wife. And that's very difficult. Because Hosea. Is being asked to do. The very thing. That his feelings. Is telling him.

That he doesn't want to do. All the pain. And the sorrow. That he feels. Concerning his wife. God is now telling him. To go and get her. And he's telling him. To go and get her.

[34 : 50] Because this again. Will be another illustration. Of what God is doing. With his people. That he is going to get. Them. That God is making. These promises.

And God is indeed. Keeping these promises. At the very same time. That his people. Are sinning against him. And causing the sorrow. Of his heart. As believing Christians.

We know. What it's like. To be. Sought. By God. And found. That we belong. To a God. Who is. Sought. And saved. And here we are.

Saved by God. Who loved us. And we know this. Not just in. Knowledge. Because the Bible. Teaches it. But we know it. Because it's. Experientially true. I know I'm saved.

I know. I have been found. By God. And you do too. And so to put this. In New Testament language. That God does this. While he still suffers. The sin.

[35 : 44] Of our sins against him. Or as the New Testament. Puts it. That God. Sent his son. And loved us. While we were still sinners. That's.

That's the point. At which he. Did it. This mixture. Of pain. And love. And so we should never. Ever. Really ever.

Question. The love of God. For us. Ever again. It is a mix. Of both. Sorrow. And love. But nevertheless.

It is love. For us. As the hymn writer says. See from his hands. His head. And feet. Sorrow. And love. Flowed mingled down. Did air such love.

And sorrow meet. Or thorns compose. So rich a crown. Amen.