

Prayer

Lord God, we sometimes wonder why our lives take the paths they do. We seem to find ourselves in all sorts of situations we had never envisaged, and we wonder what You are doing with us. Keep close to us, we pray, and give us the faith to trust You, for whatever happens. Then, in Your providence, show us more of Your glory and grace, so that we may be encouraged, and praise You forever: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Watch, read or listen to the news, and pray for the people who are in the news and the pressures they feel.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian Aid agencies** *Pray for those who are responsible for advocacy, for money to be raised in an honourable and godly way*
- *Give thanks to God for the blessing of food and drink*
- *Pray for industries experiencing difficult trading conditions today*

Meditation

Lord Jesus Christ, You are love ...
and our hearts are fed by Your compassion:

Lord Jesus Christ, You are peace ...
and we rest in the intimacy of Your care:

Lord Jesus Christ, You are joy ...
and our spirits are enthralled by Your presence:

Lord Jesus Christ, You are power ...
and we are privileged to serve in Your strength:

Lord Jesus Christ, You are wisdom ...
and our minds are thrilled by Your knowledge:

Lord Jesus Christ, You are God
And we are blessed to be called Your servants.

Bible passage – Hosea 11:1-7

¹ When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.

² The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Ba'als,
and offering incense to idols.

³ But it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
taking them up in my arms;
but they did not know
that I healed them.

⁴ I led them along with cords of compassion,
with bonds of love
I was to them like those

who lift children to their cheeks.

I bent down to them and fed them.

⁵ They will return to the land of Egypt,
and Assyria will be their king,
because they refused to return to me.

⁶ The sword will rage in their cities,
it will consume their gates,
and devour because of their schemes.

⁷ My people are bent on turning away from
me.

To the Most High they call,
but he will not raise them up at all.

Bible Study

Review

In the first letter of John, we read these words; '*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them*' (1 John 4:16). How desperately God wanted His people of Old Testament times to know this truth about Him. Here, the prophet Hosea dramatically switches the basic illustration behind his prophecies, to throw new light on his message about Israel's dire sins and the urgent need for repentance. Israel is no longer the arrogant prostitute in rebellion against her husband, she is the youngster determined to go her own way against the wishes of her parents (11:7), causing them to look back with anguished fondness to memories of the younger child, once so loved (11:1-4). Every parent understands this picture of Hosea's, and it is heartbreaking. No other passage of Scripture speaks about God's love with such tender compassion, and this prophecy is one of the most moving in the Old Testament.

Hosea's words stop us in our tracks because they are not expected. We have stuck with Hosea through chapter after chapter of agonising prophecy about the rebellion of Israel in the last few decades of the northern kingdom. So we would not have been surprised if verses 1 to 4 of this reading did not exist, and we simply carried on from chapter 10, straight into the destruction prophesied in verses 5 to 7.

However, chapter 11 is different. In the studies for today and tomorrow, we will find that Hosea 11:1-11 contains four stanzas of poetry, the first two of which are in today's reading. The first stanza, as we have seen, changes the prophetic picture of God and Israel, but the second reiterates Hosea's prophetic gloom. Then in tomorrow's reading, two more stanzas echo the first two but change the theme subtly; and we realise that Hosea is pointing the way beyond the anguish of all the prophecies we have read in his book so far. Tomorrow's reading is crucial!

For today, we are left to wonder at Hosea's words. Were his children the inspiration for these verses? In the first chapter of Hosea we read about the birth of his own son Jezreel, and then the two who were born out of Gomer's prostitution, with names meaning 'Not-pitied', and 'Not-my-people'. Can we imagine the disruption and strife of a family divided by the unstable relationship of Hosea and Gomer? Can we imagine the tensions and stresses of trying to raise children who knew, through their names, that they were conceived out of wedlock? Did Hosea know what it was like to try to control not just a wandering wife, but disruptive children? We can never know for sure; but Hosea captures perfectly the agony of parents who have lost the heart and the love of a child who has grown up and rejected them. They are left looking back with longing on years when love was given and received.

So the reality for Hosea was that Israel had sinned and moved further away from her Lord (11:2). She became more entrenched in the worship of the Ba'als, and rebellious against the One who had led her and tended her (11:3,4). Just as a child grows up and makes choices for better or worse, Israel had made her choice to rebel, and she would pay the consequences. The nation would cease to exist, which is the meaning of the phrase '*return to the land of Egypt*' (11:4), and this, at the hands of the Assyrian army (11:4). And still, the people worshipped their alternative gods who could do nothing to help (11:7)!

Hosea's words illuminate the compassionate heart of God. So how can it be that Israel is cast aside like this? Surely this cannot be the end for the love of God for His people? Tomorrow we will discover that Hosea's change of imagery heralds a new twist to his prophecy and the possibility of hope. Israel is unrepentant and will pay for her sins, but God is about to reveal the beginnings of a plan.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What emotions are raised in you when you read Hosea 11:1-4, and can you imagine God feeling like this?
2. Why does God continue to judge His people when He loves them compassionately?
3. Discuss in your group whether it is ever right to cut off relationships with one who has rebelled, whether in the family, or in the life of the church.

Topics covered by this text

- *The compassionate love of God, like a parent*
- *The continued sin of God's people*

Personal comments by author

As any parent knows, there are many trials on the road of bringing up children. The tiny baby once cared for in every moment of your life reaches the point of saying 'no thanks' and walking away from what seems right and good, but they have the right to do this as independent people. This can break the heart of a parent, whatever the rights and wrongs of what happens, and whether the children are rebellious or not; and not all children sin as grievously as Israel did against God, of course. Hosea's point is this, we must recognise that God loves us with an even greater passion than we love our children or our parents loved us.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Over the course of a few days, watch carefully the way that love either works or fails to work within your own family. This can be painful, of course, but if we do this, God can teach us many things about ourselves and also about Himself.*
- *If you have a Bible concordance or a Bible dictionary, look up the word 'love' and try to find out more about the love of God as described within the Bible.*

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father, Your love is greater than we can possibly imagine with of our limited experience. Help us to understand how Your love works through what Jesus has done for us, so that we can know Your love for sure, and receive all You would give us. We praise You for Your Love, heavenly Father: ALLELUIA!
