
Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: God's provision

Lord God Almighty, from the foundation of the world You have set down the entire structure of our world with all of its extraordinary and diverse resources. Help us to use Your provision wisely, knowing that it is limited, so that we do not use more than our fair share and leave sufficient for future generations. Impress upon Your people the need to make the case for environmental responsibility and justice, according to Your Word, and in Your name, **AMEN**.

For myself

Offer the Lord your voice, your mind and heart. Prayerfully give every fibre of your being to what the Lord requires of you this day.

For others

Pray for those who are imprisoned, especially those who are imprisoned unjustly. pray for the release of political prisoners, and for those who have suffered a miscarriage of justice.

Meditation

I heard the Lord say;

‘Child, your simple faith will make you whole.’
I said ‘Thank You’ and did my very best;
But it was soon obvious that I needed help.

I heard the Lord say;

‘Child, I will strengthen you if you will trust me.’
I said ‘Thank You’ and strived to do His will;
But I was fruitful only with the help of the Spirit.

I heard the Lord say;

‘Child, my love will invigorate your soul.’
I said ‘Thank You’ and wondered how;
Until I yielded to that love and turned from sin.

I heard the Lord say;

‘Child, my patience towards you will never end.’
I said ‘Thank You’, being sure of His company.

I knew where we would go now we had walked a little.

Bible Passage

Hosea 3:1-5

¹ The LORD said to me,

'Come on, keep loving your wife, even though she loves another and has committed adultery! Be like the LORD who loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes!'

² So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a measure or two of barley, ³ and then I said to her,

'You will remain with me for a long time; you will not be a prostitute or have another man. I will live with you!'

⁴ For the people of Israel will live for many days without king, leader, sacrifice, sacred pillar, ephod or idol! ⁵ After this the people of Israel will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. Just in time, they will come trembling to the LORD to receive His blessings.

Review

This is a remarkable passage of Scripture, and there is nothing similar in the rest of the Bible. Chapter 1 has already introduced the story of Hosea and his dire marriage with Gomer which resulted in the birth of one son, and two further children who were probably the result of adultery. Chapter 2 has already shown us that Hosea perceived God's relationship with Israel as being like his relationship with Gomer, resulting in his first prophetic message linking the two (2:16-23). So what is happening here in chapter 3? Does Hosea's book merely recap the story? At first reading, it might seem to add little to what we know so far.

On the surface, the first three verses describe God's call to Hosea to be faithful to his wife in the face of her adultery, and verses 4 and 5 are as straightforward and direct prophecy about God's relationship with Israel. But unfortunately, this brief chapter is too often misunderstood. Much of the Hebrew is unclear; many of the Bible versions we read come across as very different, and readers can only do their best with what is before them. After reflecting on the Hebrew text, I offer this interpretation though it is a little controversial; few scholars agree on the details of this chapter.

To begin with, we will look at the first three verses, and what they mean. Strictly, the Hebrew text of verse 1 says something like this; *'... keep loving a woman, she loves another and has committed adultery'*. It is just possible that because Gomer is not mentioned by name here, this means that Hosea's task was not to go back to Gomer, but to take another prostitute as a wife! But surely, God does not call a prophet to practice bigamy? Another way of interpreting this passage is to reckon that Gomer had left Hosea, and with these words, Hosea attempts to get her back. There is also a third way, which is to reckon that Gomer was still living with Hosea, and these verses record Hosea's confrontation with her because of her adultery!

In order to get some perspective, I am going to start by asking you to look very carefully at this chapter. This is because if you read it carefully, you may just see that perhaps more than

in chapters 1 and 2, these words sound as if Hosea is sitting down opposite us at a table speaking to us personally about what is going on in his marriage! I am of the opinion that chapters 1 and 2 are a formal start to Hosea's prophetic word, using words, albeit dramatic ones, similar to the works of other prophets. Chapter 3 however, is a first hand report of Hosea's words, recorded by someone who did indeed listen to Hosea's personal confessions about his marriage. This extraordinary chapter has been added to Hosea to add the authenticity of a personal touch to the whole story, for after it in the rest of this book, we learn little more of Hosea's personal life. From now on, his prophecy contains classic Hebrew prophetic teaching (chapters 4-14), on precisely the themes introduced in chapters 1 and 2.

In verse 1, Hosea tells us that he has heard God's voice telling him to continue to love his wife, despite the provocation of adultery. It is quite difficult for us to imagine that God might say such a thing to someone, but these astonishing words remind us that God is willing to engage with us at the cutting edge of personal experience. He understands the minutiae of human experience and feelings; that in itself, is quite remarkable. Verse 1 reminds us that love can never be partial or temporary, it is meaningless unless it persists and is ready to go to any lengths to be victorious. Hosea learns this lesson from the Lord, who tells him that this is the nature of His love for Israel, despite the fact that individual Israelites and the nation as a whole, keep turning to the worship of other gods; the Lord *'loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes!'* (3:1).

As an aside, 'raisin cakes' were what we call fruitcakes, rich baked products that probably represented the height of culinary art. We know from ancient records that these were offered sacrificially to Ba'al, and they were different from the sacrifices required for worship of the Lord, as specified in Leviticus. The Bible only describe the sacrificial offering of raw agricultural product, not complex, prepared and cooked foods.

In verses 2 and 3, Hosea puts the Lord's word into action; he takes gifts to his errant wife, with a promise of love and faithfulness. Whether Hosea believed this would bring his wife back, we cannot be sure, but he was certainly offering Gomer the long-term, faithful and unlimited love revealed to him as God's true nature. At the end of verse 3, Hosea says the words *'I will live with you'*; his words are full of hope and passion; he wanted to be with Gomer despite her sins and he was going to do all in his power to prevent his wife returning to her old ways. All this strongly reflects God's attitude towards Israel, and it is easy to spot in them some of the key elements of God's extraordinary grace towards sinful people.

This is exactly what is picked up in verses 4 and 5. As we read them, it is as if Hosea is talking directly to us, speaking plainly and prophesying what would happen in the coming days. From his own experience of losing Gomer for a while to the abominations of adultery, he prophesied that the people of Israel, because of their adulterous worship of other gods, would live without guidance. He said they would loose their way without *'king, leader, sacrifice, sacred pillar, default or idol'* (3:4). It was a stunning prophecy, looking ahead to a time when the very nation of Israel would cease to exist. Of course, this did indeed happen in history, when Assyria invaded northern Israel in 721 BC and obliterated the state, replacing its peoples with migrants and establishing the region Jesus called 'Samaria'.

What was to become God's people? God had already revealed what would happen to Hosea. We had a hint of this in 1:11 where Hosea says that the people of Israel will join with the people of Judah to become again 'God's people'. The message is now confirmed, as Hosea again declares that Israel will again return both to *'the Lord their God'* and also to *'David their king'* (3:5), remembering of course, that in Hosea's day, only Judaea was ruled over by a king of David's line. Amazingly, Hosea has prophesied God's love not just for the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, but for all of His people; it is revealed that God wants all His people, Israelite and Judean, to be united in his love. Only then, and in fear and trembling, will they be able to receive His full blessings (3:5).

This is a remarkable message, because it is a call for God's people to turn to His love. It is also a call for God's people to be united in His love, sufficiently united for them to accept one organising authority, one king, one anointed leadership under God. It is not difficult to see the significance of this message for today.

Discipleship

Application

Returning to God's love

I doubt that it would be right for us to presume we have a perfect relationship with our God, even today, and now that Jesus has done His sacrificial work for our redemption. Sin still afflicts God's people, and many who love to worship God on Sunday struggle not to give the equivalent of idolatrous worship to everything in their lives from music, to money, to property and even to relationships. Against this background, Hosea's message continues to be relevant. In Jesus Christ, God is still calling us back to his love, a love that has already paid the final sacrifice and is willing to completely forgiveness the sinner who will turn and repent.

Unity

But there is an additional message, which cannot be avoided. Yet again, Scripture strongly warns God's people that they should not be divided, Indeed, they should specifically accept one authority and anointed leadership! It is a tragedy that God's people do not accept one anointed leadership today!

Please do not misunderstand me, I do not believe that any single leader or church structure can rise to the mark and claim to be the equivalent of David's leadership of God's people in Old Testament times. Jesus Christ is the sole leader of His people now, and they owe allegiance to Him alone. But look at us! Almost every church has its own different mission statement, website, and stated objectives! Why do we not promote to the world, over and over again, the unity we have in Jesus Christ our Saviour?

I have to say this as clearly as I can, individual churches today fail utterly if people in our world are unable to look at our websites, come to church, or talk to Christians and immediately find Jesus Christ, our motivation, our energy, our driving purpose and our end. When will we learn this fundamentally Christian lesson, which does not believe every Christian can somehow overcome the multiple divisions that exist at present, but accepts the overriding prerogative of the Gospel message above all other creed and belief, theology, doctrine, worship practice, website message and opinion. If we become embedded in Scripture, we will find that this subject will never go away.

Ideas for what to do

- Is it wise or unwise to look for illustrations of God's love within our own personal lives? If so, how can we do this in a helpful manner, and what does you own private life tell you about the nature of God's love?
- Are there people who wander away from the love of God today, and are there any similarities with the story of Hosea? Can the story of Hosea really help us today? Pray about your response to this question.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage of Scripture tell you about the man Amos, and his personal qualities?
2. What does this passage of Scripture tell you about God and the quality of His love for people?
3. In your group, discuss whether the private life of Hosea really does bring out the message of God's love, or whether it obscures it.

Final Prayer

Jesus, be our guide. Help us understand how Your grace has worked throughout past years; touch us with Your loving hand as we work through the joys and trials of the present; and give us confidence in You for the future You have prepared for us. Thank You Jesus; AMEN
