

GOD'S GRACE AS CONFRONTATION

Series: Hosea: Unbroken Love From A Broken Heart

by Doug Goins

A poignant question was turned in to us here at PBC on a card a number of years ago. I don't know how I got hold of the card, but I've saved it since 1988. The question was, "Is there any word from the Lord?" It was signed only "a sister in Christ." I thought of that question this week as I was preparing to preach this series in the book of Hosea. It is really the foundational question beneath all of our other questions about life. Most of us are longing to know what God has to say about our need, our frustration, our problems, and our failures. We really do yearn for his perspective, wisdom, guidance, and vision.

Sometimes, though, God tells us a lot more than we really want to hear and are ready to follow when we ask for a word from him. God not only constantly assures us of his love and his mercy, but he often confronts us with things that need to be changed inside us, in our relationship with him, and in our relationships with other people. But as the Lord confronts us with truth about our lives, he also provides the power to respond to it.

If we are followers of Jesus Christ, then as the Bible says, we have been elected or chosen by God to be saints, people who belong first and foremost to him. Having chosen us and called us, now God cherishes us; he loves us more than we can imagine. Our relationship to him is secure because of his faithfulness and his gracious favor toward us. He won't let us go or forsake us. And all of us need to rediscover over and over again how much we mean to the Lord. He created us to have a love relationship with him, and he has pursued us with amazing tenacity. He wooed us and drew us to himself through the powerful demonstration of his love in Christ's dying for us on the cross. He has filled us with his Holy Spirit. He has worked in our hearts and our minds so that we can respond to his grace and forgiveness. He has given us the privilege of communication with him in prayer so that we can hear him, respond to him, and understand his will. He put us into a spiritual family, the body of Christ, the people of God. He did all of this not because we are worthy or deserving, but just because of his grace, because that is who he is.

But when he chose us, he also programmed us to grow in spiritual maturity. It is true that God loves us just the way we are, but he will never leave us just the way we are. And often our growth in the Lord takes place through the traumatic experience of God's judgment---his confrontation as he challenges our hypocrisy, perhaps our lovelessness toward him, our willingness to substitute other authorities in his place, or our lust for success. Out of love for us God will challenge sin in our lives wherever he finds it.

If you want to consider the "bad news" in all of this, the one thing that God won't tolerate from any of us is to be second place in our lives. We are his people, and he will not become just one of many gods of our own making. He demands to be the sovereign over everything in our lives, not just the source of strength for us to accomplish our own purposes. There is an old saying that goes, "He must be the Lord of all, or he won't be the Lord at all."

God is always challenging us to a deeper holiness, to a greater faithfulness, and to purity of life. He is always renewing us as his people, both as individuals and as a church body. Out of his unchanging, unconditional love, this word from the Lord that we wait for communicates two things: first, his judgment as a consequence of sin in our lives, which he won't put up with; and secondly, his unqualified forgiveness in response to our repentance.

The idea of God's communicating his word is found in the opening phrase of the Old Testament prophecy of Hosea. Verse 1 is the introduction to the whole book, the superscription over every section:

The word of the LORD that came to Hosea the son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah....

Verse 2 uses the same language, but it introduces the first section of the book, chapters 1-3:

When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea....

The first section is autobiographical. It tells of the marriage that God called Hosea into, the children that God gave him, the family that was to be a symbol of the nation Israel and their relationship to God. We are going to spend four weeks going through this section together looking at the way God spoke through the life of Hosea.

The first verse of chapter 4 again uses the same language:

Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel....

This is the introduction to the remainder of the book, a collection of sermons that Hosea preached in Israel over about fifty years. It is the word of God expressed through a prophetic spokesman to the people of Israel.

Now let's return to the introduction to this whole prophecy in chapter 1 verse 1:

The word of the LORD that came to Hosea the son of Beeri, 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.

Let me say a bit about Hosea's authority, the prophetic inspiration with which he lived and wrote and spoke. The New Testament writers affirm God's authoritative communication through his chosen spokesmen, the apostles and prophets. The letter to the Hebrews begins this way: "...God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets...." Second Peter 1:21 says, "...men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." Each of these writers was talking about the Old Testament prophets like Hosea. The entire book of Hosea is the word of God, and it communicates God's activity through the man Hosea. God spoke it so that the life Hosea lived and the words he spoke and wrote were actually breathed out of God's mouth; Hosea did not make any of it up. This is the plain teaching of the New Testament in 2 Timothy 3:16, where Paul writes, "All scripture is inspired by God...." Literally in the Greek language this says scripture is "God-breathed" out of the mouth of God through his spokesmen.

That is the basis for the prophetic formulas in Hosea 1:1, 1:2, and 4:1. It is also the basis for Paul's own personal claim in the New Testament to apostolic authority. He wrote to the church in Thessalonica in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers." That is my prayer for us this morning as we enter into a study of the book of Hosea. This is God's living word. It is powerful and it will have an impact on us if we submit ourselves to it.

Let me say a word about Hosea's historical context. In the second half of verse 1 it lists four kings of Judah through whose reign he ministered, and also one king in Israel to the north. What this is saying is that Hosea was a real person who lived in a specific time in the nation of Israel. The listing of those kings in Judah and Israel would place him in the middle of the eighth century before Jesus. Hosea lived and ministered in the northern kingdom of Israel and probably spent most of his time in the capital of Samaria. During the forty-year reign of Jeroboam II, who is mentioned in verse 1, it was a time of prosperity, political stability, and security in Israel. But after Jeroboam's death the nation went into rapid decline and political chaos. In the thirty-year period before the kingdom finally fell after Jeroboam's death there were six kings, of whom four were assassinated. The northern kingdom met its tragic end at the end of this thirty-year period. Great numbers of Israelites were exiled into captivity and bondage in Assyria. The social structure in which Hosea ministered was coming apart at the seams. There was growing injustice politically in the court systems. Violence was increasing in the streets. There were increasing extremes of wealth and poverty in Israel during this period.

Spiritually, it was a very confusing time for the people of Israel. There was great religious devotion and much activity in the cultic places. But the priesthood was sold out to the king and supported the status quo. And the priesthood largely did not speak for God; they didn't represent Torah, or the word of God, to the people. There was also confusion because the identity of *Yahweh*, this Lord with whom Israel was called to relationship as the covenant God of the nation, had become blurred. The Israelites had blended in worship of Baal, the Canaanite God. (We'll talk about that more next week when we talk about the sin of idolatry in the nation.) There was no pure religion that touched people's hearts and changed people's lives. As a matter of fact, Hosea accuses the people of forsaking the Lord, even though there was much religious activity.

The section we'll look at this morning, chapter 1 verse 2 through chapter 2 verse 1, presents God's word as it was spoken to the nation through the life of Hosea, his wife, and his children. It is really truth incarnated, acted out, if you will, not by actors but by real live people. It is the word of God spoken to Hosea in the context of very specific needs in the life of Israel at this particular period in their history. This word that comes to Hosea in verse 2 is powerful and creative, but it is frightening because it turns Hosea's personal life upside-down. This marriage that Hosea is called to and the family that he is called to raise are intended by God to arrest the attention of the entire nation. Verses 2 and 3:

When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry, for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the LORD." So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim...

What this suggests is that Hosea already has an ongoing and successful prophetic ministry of preaching and representing God to the people. But then early on in his ministry God comes and speaks again in this strong word of command to take a harlot as a wife. It is almost unbelievable. God asks this young prophet to love and marry a woman, knowing full well that eventually she will prove unfaithful to him. Yet I think it began with a genuine love relationship on the part of Hosea and Gomer.

Hosea's relationships with his young bride and the three children that follow are powerfully symbolic of the Lord's relationship with a nation that is spiritually unfaithful or adulterous. Throughout the Old Testament God is described as Israel's husband. He found her, chose her, and cherished her in innocence. He is also called a father of spiritual sons and daughters who become rebellious, resisting his authority and questioning his love. So Hosea's marriage and his family are going to mirror God's experience with the nation. Hosea is commanded to make the same choice that was before God. He is to love and then marry a woman who will become involved in physical adultery, just as God was confronted with the choice to be faithful to the people of Israel when they were committing spiritual adultery by compromising their absolute loyalty to him.

These two verses introduce central themes of the book of Hosea. This prophecy is really a symphony of grace, a weaving together of different themes. First of all, it is the haunting theme of unbroken love that comes from God's broken heart and Hosea's broken heart. God cannot give up on his bride regardless of how she has violated herself and her relationship to him. And Hosea will not be able to give up on Gomer in spite of her repeated unfaithfulness to him. If we are God's people through Jesus, God chooses us, and chooses to choose us even when we are rejecting his faithfulness to us. There are no depths of sinful rebellion that we can sink to where he won't seek us out and try to draw us back to himself, wanting to put us back into right relationship with him.

But the grace that is pictured in this story and in this series of prophecies is not cheap grace. As an expression of his gracious love God will exercise righteous judgment against the sin of Gomer and the sin of each of the children, just as he does against our sin. Judgment as a consequence of sin is another one of the tragic themes of this symphony of grace.

We really have to work hard to personalize this dilemma that God has in dealing with Israel's unfaithfulness. One way to do it is to think about the cross of Calvary. Christ's death there suggests two things that are held in tension in the heart of God. It reveals God's judgment of sin, his jealous anger toward our unfaithfulness, his wrath that was deserved yet turned aside, and the penalty that was paid for sinful rebellion. But the cross also speaks of God's loving forgiveness of sin, his merciful compassion toward our unfaithfulness, and our sin's

being washed away. It becomes very real if we examine our own lives and consider honestly God's problem with each one of us. He can't wink at our sin. The sins that express our rebellion separate us from him. So he has to do two things at once: He has to find a way to get our attention and confront us, and he has to find a way to heal us and forgive us.

It is an astounding realization that God persistently chooses to be our God no matter what we have done or been. It really is amazing love. But it is love that we can't take for granted. If we presume on his grace and play with his love, it's not going to change God at all, but it will affect us---that is the frightening part. We can drift so far from God that we no longer cherish being chosen by him, we become incapable of confession of sin, and we can't even hear his voice of forgiveness. We may remember a love that was pure when we were young in the Lord, but now we can't find it anymore. Although we may want to return to that innocence, our callused and increasingly stubborn hearts are unable to change.

That callousness and stubbornness come from resisting God's confrontational love and grace, ignoring his word to us. That is exactly what happened to Israel. And when Hosea in obedience to God names his three children, it is a stark reminder of that fact. These three names are message names, and these children are living symbols of the reality of God's judgment on Israel's movement into spiritual harlotry. Look at the first child at the end of verse 3:

...and [Gomer] conceived and bore [Hosea] a son.
And the LORD said to him, "Call his name Jezreel; for yet a little while, and I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. And on that day, I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel."

The word *Jezreel* means "God will scatter." This has a double meaning. It can mean God will scatter in a good sense, like a farmer scattering seed on the soil to bring up a crop, to bring life. But it can also be a word of judgment or punishment, like scattering people, or the nations. Here, obviously it is a name of punishment in vengeance. God is going to scatter disobedient, rebellious Israel as worthless chaff is scattered to the wind. Moses had warned the people in Deuteronomy 4:25-27 that God would scatter them if they were disobedient and rebellious to him.

The Jezreel Valley mentioned in these two verses had been the scene of bloody atrocities by King Ahab a hundred years earlier, and then in retaliation King Jehu had killed many of the house of Ahab. It became a name that was synonymous with murder and violence and bloodshed, and it became a place that God said he hated because of what it stood for in the history of the nation. God says in these two verses that he is going to judge the descendants of Jehu, meaning Jeroboam II who was on the throne as Hosea began his ministry. God says that there will be an end to the kingdom of Israel in the north when her military might, "the bow of Israel," is broken in defeat in the valley of Jezreel.

That prophecy was historically fulfilled in 722 BC when Shalmaneser V and the Assyrian army swept across all the Galilean territory, took Samaria, and carried the Israelites away into captivity in Assyria. But at the time of this prophecy when Hosea's family was being born and this truth was being preached, it was still a warning of things to come in the future. Jeroboam II heard Hosea preach, and the people could have repented of their great harlotry in forsaking the Lord, but they were in a spiritual stupor. There was such prosperity and things were going so well that they didn't listen to the warning of judgment to come.

In verses 6 and 7, the name that is given to Hosea's and Gomer's second child carries the impact of judgment on the lack of the response to the first name *Jezreel*. It describes a daughter who is shown no loving compassion.

She conceived again and bore a daughter. And the LORD said to him, "Call her name Not pitied, for I will no more have pity on the house of Israel, to forgive them at all. But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will deliver them by the LORD their God; I will not deliver them by bow, nor by sword, nor by war, nor by horses, nor by horsemen."

The name Not pitied in Hebrew is *Lo-ruhamah*. The word *ruhamah* is translated in our Bible as compassion, mercy, love, or pity. It is a word of parental concern for a child. If you are a parent, you probably remember when you had your first baby and your overwhelming awareness of their vulnerability and innocence. You loved that baby so much, you were urgently concerned to protect and care for them. That is God's feeling for his children Israel.

But now he says, "No, there will be no more of that." That is the judgment. He is going to give the nation what she really wants. She has always wanted to live independently from him. She has not wanted to be loved by God, but has squandered her own love on false gods. So God is saying to the nation in this name, Not pitied or Not shown compassion, "You have shown me in many ways that you don't want my love or mercy. Now I am going to call you by the name that expresses what you apparently desire. You don't want to bear any responsibility for being my cherished people."

Another thing he says in verse 6 is that there will be no more forgiveness for sin. The people wouldn't acknowledge their sin and seek forgiveness. God says very emphatically that he is not going to take away sin anymore. What a frightening thought! But God can't forgive sin that is not confessed. If people won't admit that they are sinners, there is really nothing God can do in response. Amazingly, in verse 6 God gives the nation the desires of their heart, to live the way they want to live in independence from him as a loving father.

Let's think of verse 6 in terms of our own relationship to God. What are we telling God about our need for his merciful, compassionate love and our need to have our sins forgiven? Do we really want him to be our God? If we do, why is our prayer life so superficial, taking up so little time in our lives? Why do we resist his guidance when he speaks so clearly through his word and ignore it most of the time? Why is there so little evidence of personal holiness or social righteousness in our daily lives? Why do we expect so little from God, and why are we so satisfied by that? These are the questions the prophet confronts us personally with.

Verse 7, which is parenthetical, is spoken to the southern kingdom of Judah. It seems at first to be a relief from the severity of God's judgment on the northern kingdom of Israel. In reality, God did deliver Judah from the military threat of Sennacherib and the Assyrian army. All the Assyrian army encamped around Jerusalem died in their sleep one night. Judah never had to lift a bow or a spear; God won the battle. And God did give the southern kingdom 147 more years of grace after the northern kingdom fell and went into exile. But Judah, on which he says he is going to have pity for at least a little while, didn't pay any attention when the northern kingdom fell. They didn't listen to Hosea or to Isaiah, the prophet to the southern kingdom. And in 586 BC Jerusalem did fall to the Babylonian invaders who carried the citizens of Judah into exile.

Judah's response of ignoring God's judgment on Israel and not applying it personally, points up our tendency to assume God's judgment is meant for other people and not for us. It is amazing how much we can rationalize and justify. How often pride helps us step out from under the force of God's truthful confrontation! I remember last spring when I was preaching through the prophet Jonah. One Sunday I was especially emphasizing the inescapable need for self-examination and repentance in our own hearts. A man came up to me after church and said, "That was a great sermon, Doug. Just what this church needs. I hope people listened to what you had to say." But this is the word of the Lord for us, for me, for you. It's not just for those other people.

The name given to Gomer's and Hosea's third child in verses 8 and 9 communicates the final stage of judgment God would bring upon his people. If they weren't moved by the shocking prophecies that the kingdom was going to be destroyed and cut off, and that God's pity and his merciful love would be denied them, there is really not much God could do but call them by a name that would totally shatter their spiritual pride, which grew from their being God's chosen people. Look at verses 8 and 9:

When she had weaned Not pitied, 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."

This message name should have jarred Israel from her self-satisfaction. There is nothing more fundamental to Israel's spiritual identity than her relationship to the God of covenant, to *Yahweh* ---I Am Who I Am. In

Deuteronomy 4:20, God calls Israel "a people of his own possession." He was saying, "I found you and rescued you, and you belong to me." In Leviticus 26:12 God said, "And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people." That was how the relationship had been defined, but Israel had denied his loyalty and had tried to escape being God's holy people. This name, Not my people, should have warned them that for a time God was going to cut them off and abandon them.

There is also a frightening name change in the very last phrase of verse 9: "I am not your God." Throughout this prophecy God is *Yahweh*, I Am Who I Am. But God changes his own name for the people: "I am not I Am Who I Am anymore. I am not the God of all power and presence and resource for you. I am not your God at all. You don't even know me. I am not an ally or a resource to you."

We need to pause and let the full impact of the three message names of Hosea's and Gomer's children sink in for us: *Jezreel*---God will scatter, *Lo-ruhamah* ---Not pitied, and *Lo-ammi*---Not my people. Those names of God's judgment expose the progressive drift away from the Lord in any age, including our own. It begins with the pride of refusing to accept our own spiritual emptiness. We insulate ourselves against admitting our own spiritual need, and then it progresses to believing that we don't have anything to confess to God. Usually we try to justify our handling of failures and inadequacies, or blame other people or circumstances for our sinful failure. Or we cover up our inadequacy by trying harder. Finally, we become closed to God's Spirit. We resist claiming Jesus Christ as the source of strength for the challenges and difficulties in life. The more often we say no to truth that the Spirit of God shows us about ourselves, the easier it becomes to withhold ourselves from fellowship with God. We get embarrassed, and the distance becomes greater and greater. Ultimately we become spiritually callous, self-satisfied, and hardened.

The frightening thing is that we can resist truth so long that we no longer have any desire to respond to what God is calling us to be and do. It causes God's heart great pain, because he sacrificed so much for us, loves us so much, and has invested so much in us. But would God ever give up on us? No, no matter how great the drift, our hope really is in God's faithfulness. The judgment symbolized in the names of those three children is meant to restore us, to drive us back to a right relationship with him. The frightening news of God's judgment prepares the way to hear the wonderful news of his restoration and the promise of salvation. This family suffering such great tragedy becomes a family of great hope in 1:10-2:1:

Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Sons of the living God." And the people of Judah and the people of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head; and they shall go up from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel.

Say to your brother, "My people," and to your sister, "She has obtained pity."

The contrast couldn't be greater in these two sections. Israel has turned her back on the covenant, and God has stopped showing mercy. He has cut off the relationship. Israel's doom is spelled and they go into exile in Assyria and Babylon. But the picture here encompasses more than that period of captivity. It is a picture of restoration of their relationship with *Yahweh* and of living in prosperity. There is a building crescendo of excitement in these three verses.

In verse 10 Hosea reaches all the way back to the promise that God first made to Abraham that he would multiply his progeny so that they couldn't even be measured in numbers. It is a complete reversal of what happened in the exile to Babylon and Assyria when the population was decimated. It is a wonderful picture of hope beyond that time of destruction. They will come back to the land. They will be restored, and their numbers will grow. In the middle of verse 10, to emphasize how great the restoration is, Hosea says that although they were not God's people, now they will be called "sons of the living God." This emphasizes the fact that *Yahweh* God is the only one who has the power to restore them; they don't stand a chance without him. God is the only one who can bring life out of death and good out of evil.

The excitement grows in verse 11 as God's saving activity goes farther and farther. Not only will there be a

population increase, but the bitter division between the northern and southern kingdom will be healed. There will be a messianic king placed over them, a spiritual leader who will love them and serve them. Jesus comes to fulfill that promise. There is a great phrase, "and they shall go up from the land," in the middle of verse 11. This phrase really speaks of resurrection from the dead, of God's resurrection power to reverse any situation. God will perform a miracle of regeneration, of new life out of the death experience of judgment. So for those who turn to the Lord, what could have been the end for them becomes new life. And the new names that are listed at the end of verse 11 and verse 1 of chapter 2 reflect that new life, harmony with Yahweh, and the promise of a new-covenant relationship. *Jezreel* isn't God's scattering people in judgment anymore but God's sowing the good seed of new life. And now the people who had no identity are "my people"; they have a new identity. *Lo-ruhamah* has obtained pity and forgiveness for sin. The reversal is complete.

In the first century the apostles clearly saw that these promises were fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Paul quotes them in Romans 9 in his focus on God's calling of not only the Jews but also the Gentiles, who through faith in Jesus Christ are called "my people," *Ammi*, the people of God. The apostle Peter speaks of God's elect, those of us who are Christians as a chosen generation (2:10): "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people, once you had not obtained mercy but now you have obtained mercy." We can apply to ourselves this hope as well as the judgment and evaluation.

We began this morning with the question, "Is there any word from the Lord?" This opening passage of Hosea speaks to the reality of God's power to bring hope out of the ashes of human sin and rebellion. That theme is going to be repeated throughout Hosea's prophetic word of the Lord. Both his confrontation and his sacrificial love are meant to bring us back to himself, and he uses both in all of us. Thinking of the metaphor of a callused, stubborn heart, and I saw an image of hearts frozen solid, cold toward God. It occurred to me that the judgment of God breaks up the ice jam in our heart, and the love of God melts the remaining chunks of resistance and stubbornness that impede the flow of the Spirit in our lives.

Throughout this year we are going to go through fourteen weeks of sitting under the word of the Lord through Hosea. Let me ask you to pray that God would confront you. Don't be afraid of his confrontation of things that need to be judged in your life, things you're holding onto and covering up. Ask God to expose them so healing and restoration can take place. Also ask God in these weeks to confirm your identity in the Beloved through the prophet Hosea. I hope we learn more and more how much God loves us.

Let's read the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 4:29-31 and apply them to ourselves: "But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the LORD your God and obey his voice, for the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not fail you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers which he swore to them."

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