

# SONGS OF HOPE IN VALLEYS OF DESPAIR

*Series: Hosea: Unbroken Love From A Broken Heart*

by Doug Goins

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In Hosea 2:2-13 the prophet preached condemnation in response to idolatry, the syncretistic blending of Baal worship with the worship of *Yahweh*, the true God. Over and over were listed the wages of sin, the consequences that we suffer when we reject God's word, his love, and his plan for our lives. The word "therefore" came up several times indicating a consequence of sin. Look at verse 6 again, "Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns." And look at verse 9; "Therefore I will take back my grain in its time..." We would logically expect another thundering prediction of judgment in Hosea 2:14-23, because verse 13 promised punishment for sin: "And I will punish her for the feast days of the Baals, when she burned incense to them and decked herself with her ring and jewelry, and went after her lovers, and forgot me, says the LORD."

But the "therefore" in verse 14 is followed by a wonderful surprise. This is a different kind of judgment sentence than we heard after the other "therefores." There are beautiful images repeated in these verses of people singing joyfully in response to God's love and of valleys of fertility and life. (Keep in mind as you read this passage that the Hebrew verb to answer can be just as legitimately translated to sing, as in an answering song.)

We can legitimately interpret this wonderful prophecy of hope two ways. First of all, we understand it historically as a prophecy for the nation Israel. It looks forward to a time when that nation will experience great physical blessing from God. That was partially accomplished when they returned to the land after the Babylonian captivity, but Israel has never experienced the quality of life described in this passage, not even since the establishment of the nation-state in 1948.

The Valley of Achor mentioned in verse 15 is in the West Bank near the city of Shechem. It is not a place of joyful singing to the Lord today, but a place of violence and ongoing conflict in the Arab-Israeli dispute over the land. Verse 18 speaks of living in safety without threat of war or violence. The nation has never experienced that. The government of Israel that is now in power is totally secular. They don't have the kind of faithful love relationship with God that is described in verse 20, that of knowing the Lord intimately. No, Israel has returned to the land, but they have not yet returned to the Lord. The complete fulfillment of this prophecy for the nation Israel will come only in the glorious thousand-year reign of Christ that is still off in the future, the millennium described in Isaiah 11 and Revelation 20.

But the other way we can legitimately interpret this prophecy is that it is right now being spiritually fulfilled for each one of us in our relationship to God through Christ. We saw a wonderful promise of restoration in chapter 1 verse 10 through chapter 2 verse 1, which the New Testament writers similarly understood in the light of Jesus Christ. They saw the promise of a New-Covenant relationship that was described by the prophet Jeremiah in 31:31-34. The apostle Peter quoted verse 23 of this passage in 1 Peter 2:10 to describe Christians as God's elect. The apostle Paul in Romans 9:25-26 also quotes Hosea to focus God's calling not only on the Jewish people but also on Gentiles.

Let's look at the promises in verses 14-23. The opening two verses speak of a restored relationship with God that the nation is going to enjoy.

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her,  
and bring her into the wilderness,  
and speak tenderly to her.

And there I will give her her vineyards,  
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.

And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth,  
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt."

With mercy and longing for things to be right again the way they were before, God wants his estranged wife to be reconciled to him. (Remember, in all the threats of judgment in verses 2-13 the goal was restoration. God wanted to bring Israel back. Though she had forgotten him, he said he would never forget her. Though she was helplessly entangled, he would help her escape.) So God is going to convince Israel to follow him into the wilderness, to be alone with him and get away from the influence of the Baals. The wilderness is like Israel's youth; the days of lost innocence will be restored. In the wilderness he will speak tenderly (some versions say "with comfort") to her. Literally it says he will speak to her heart. This message of comfort or tenderness is the promise of a new deliverance and the hope of restoration. The vineyards that were going to be destroyed in verse 12 are going to be reestablished. *Yahweh*'s goal is not to leave this nation in the wilderness of the exile to come, but to return her to the vineyards of her own nation.

The metaphor of a door of hope in the Valley of Achor is very significant. The Valley of Achor was the last place that Israel would have expected to have an access to hope. The name Achor is synonymous with moral failure. Joshua 7 records a humiliating event that took place when the ancestors of these people were following the leadership of Joshua in taking possession of the land God had promised them. The first major campaign was to take the city of Jericho. It was a long process, but God won a decisive victory. And the instructions had been very clear before the battle that all the spoils of the city belonged to God; they were sacred and nobody was to touch any of them. But a man named Achan, one individual out of the entire nation, chose to be disobedient. He took some shekels of silver, a bar of gold, and a robe for his own use, and buried them under the floor of his tent.

Immediately after the battle of Jericho, not yet knowing about Achan's sin, they went to do battle against the very small city of Ai. It should have been an easy victory, yet they lost. Joshua knew that there was something wrong between God and the people because God didn't bless them in the warfare. He put on sackcloth and ashes and begged God to show him what the problem was, and God revealed Achan's sin. Joshua and the leaders took Achan and his entire family, executed them in a valley, and buried them there. Joshua named that valley Achor. It means trouble, or violating a ban. This story of humiliation, failure, and shame was burned into Israel's national memory. It would be like our shameful memories of the Me-Lai massacre of the Vietnam War in which American soldiers slaughtered innocent South Vietnamese families.

Now in this context Israel's idolatry, corruption, and rejection of God have created their own eighth-century BC Achor of humiliation. And every one of us somewhere in our history has a Valley of Achor in our memories of sin and failure. These valleys are dark, shadowy places of haunting regret, self-condemnation, and remorse.

In all my years of pastoral counseling, some of the most anguished people I have cared for have been single women, as well as some married women with their husbands, who were struggling with the memories of babies they had chosen to abort, whether recently or many years earlier. Each of those people lived in dark valleys of despair. But in our community there is a vital ministry of reconciliation that God has given the Crisis Pregnancy Center to such women. And there is a great word of hope spoken in this passage for people struggling with those kinds of memories or whatever memories we wrestle with of our own moral failure before the Lord. This was a word of hope to the nation of Israel; God promised to transform Israel's repetition of Achan's sin into a doorway of hope out of tragedy.

The liberating news for us this morning is that the same God who offered a door of hope to Israel came to be that door for us in Jesus Christ. Remember what Jesus said with divine authority in John 10:9-10: "I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved...I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." The apostle Paul describes the person who has passed through Jesus Christ in this way as a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). When we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we go through the door to new life, right now and for all eternity. And all through our lives the door to repeated forgiveness stands open, as many times as we need to go back through to be cleansed.

God predicts in these two verses that Israel will respond to his amazing love and will sing the answering song in the last two lines of verse 15. He longs to hear this from us as he did from Israel. In response to God's wooing, Israel's heart will be won over and she will respond to his love. And the response is going to be more than songs; it will be a commitment. His offer of redeeming love always requires an answer from each one of us. So the metaphor also extends to the door of our own hearts, which have to be opened before we find any motivation or the will to go through the door of hope, so that Jesus can rule from the throne of our hearts. The Lord Jesus spoke to John in the Revelation and said to each one of us, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me."

The second half of verse 15 also remembers the days of Israel's youth, a time of willing obedience to trust him, follow him, and love him. This is a reference to the liberated, joyous singing of the people after they had come out of the bondage of Egypt and crossed the Red Sea (Exodus 15:1-18). It is a great hymn of salvation thanking God, praising him, and confessing absolute loyalty to him. This was before they got into the wilderness and became stubborn, resentful, and bitter; and of course before the people's later syncretism with the Baals. This new song that will be given back to Israel continues and swells.

Verses 16 through 20 are a wonderful expansion of all the blessing, benefits, and resources that God wants to give his people when they surrender to him in love and trust. Verses 16 and 17 pick up the marriage image again to describe this new relationship of trust that they are going to have in God in his identity as their husband:

"And in that day, says the LORD, you will call me, 'My husband,' and no longer will you call me, 'My Baal.' For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more."

Remember, the worship of *Yahweh* had disintegrated to the extent that the names of *Yahweh* and Baal were so confused that they were used interchangeably. They had lost God's clear, unique identity. But here *Yahweh* looks forward to a new day when Israel will no longer look for security, meaning, and worth in what the Baals have to offer. She will again recognize God's role as her husband.

The idea of God being our husband is very significant. It suggests two things about husbanding: the intimacy, love, and endearment of the relationship with God into which he had drawn his people; and also his leadership and sovereignty. They had given those up when they went looking for the Baals and had given allegiance and loyalty to them instead. The promise is that they will learn to trust God's leadership as a husband, his loyalty to them, and his shepherd and servant heart toward them. That should be easier for you to understand if you are a wife than if you are a husband, because you know how hard it is to trust your husband's leadership, to really believe that he is committed to your best and that he will act on God's behalf in your marriage relationship and in your family.

The good news here is that the nation will learn to joyfully submit themselves to the leadership of God as their husband. This song of commitment will be on their lips, and you probably know from experience that as the Bible says, out of the heart the mouth speaks (Matthew 12:34). This song of devotion represents a total transformation of the heart, a new creation, a new inner nature. Not only will pagan Baal shrines and worship be removed from the land physically, but they will also cease to be an inner distraction to the people.

Can this really happen? Can human nature really be changed? Can we really be liberated from false gods to make an unreserved commitment to the one true God? If you look at the history of Israel, sadly it didn't happen for them. This could not be accomplished until Christ came with the transforming power of his redemptive work on the cross and in the resurrection, until the life that a living, glorified Savior offers came into effect. The apostle Paul says in Ephesians that out of that a new man was created. The change of human nature that allows us to trust God completely is nothing less than a miracle of God through Jesus Christ. He elects us, calls us, gives us the faith to accept his love and forgiveness, and fills us with his Spirit.

This beautiful image of a trusting love relationship in marriage is expanded in verses 18 through 20 to include

the covenant that God makes to reverse the earlier destruction (which we saw in verses 2-13):

"And I will make for you a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy, I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD."

This picture of harmony in the physical world---humankind at peace with the animal world and with the environment, and a world without war or violence---will be fulfilled ultimately in the millennial reign of Christ that is yet to come. But it also focuses our thinking on the greater spiritual safety and serenity offered to us in the New Covenant. The language in Jeremiah 31:31-34 picks up all the same images of this paragraph, 110 years later renewing this promise that God would establish a new spiritual relationship with his people. Through reconciliation with God through Christ's blood we experience lasting peace and safety. It is the peace of forgiveness. It results in trust and the absolute assurance that God will provide exactly what we need to face each hour; he will fill our longings. Peace is the gift that is given in the valley after we go through the door of hope. The conflict between us and God, within ourselves, and between us and other people is gone through the gift of Christ. Peace is knowing that we belong to God forever; it says in verse 19, "...I will betroth you to me for ever..." It reaffirms the length, depth, and height of God's commitment to us in love. There are five words in verses 19 and 20 that describe God's character and form a foundation on which we are able to build this hope. First, he is a God of righteousness. This means that he is integrated within himself or, or whole. He is not dysfunctional in any way. He is always consistent with his own nature.

He is a God of justice or fairness. All through the Scriptures he is called the judge of the whole world; a God who maintains order by his just, fair decisions.

He is a God of steadfast, loyal love. His is a purposeful, focused love. He always works to maintain the relationship that he has established with us in his covenant. And that covenant stays steadfast and immovable; in the words of the prophet Isaiah, God says, "I will hold fast my covenant" (Isaiah 56:4,6). It can never be broken. His love is totally reliable.

He is a God of mercy. We saw this word in chapter 1. It speaks of the kind of love that parents have for their infants because of their helplessness and innocence. As a parent you can't describe these feelings inside for your child. That is God's merciful, pitying love for us as vulnerable children. Finally, he is a God of faithfulness. His character is constant. In what he says and does he is not fickle or capricious. That faithfulness is set in direct contrast to the unfaithfulness of Israel, the wife in Hosea's prophecy.

These five words are God's own self-revelation through Hosea; the prophet didn't think up these things. God is saying to his people, "This is what I am like and what you can always count on me to do for you." All five of the words are rich with meaning. They communicate how Yahweh will act in any time or circumstance. We can stake our lives on these things that he has said about himself.

The capstone of all the attributes is given in the last phrase of verse 20, describing the relationship we can have with God if we will surrender ourselves to him: "You shall know the LORD." We'll talk more about what it means to know God when we get to chapter 4, but it is much more than understanding information about him, knowing theology, or even having a personal acquaintance. The Hebrew verb implies intimate personal relationship.

I could say to you, "I know Bill Walsh," the head football coach at Stanford. I knew him for years when he coached the Forty-Niners and when he was a TV analyst for football. I even have a "nodding acquaintance" with him. My daughter Kathryn and I were at the Stanford basketball game against Cal last Thursday night, sitting two rows up from the floor, and Bill Walsh and his wife Jeri walked right in front of us. I caught his eye and smiled and nodded, and he smiled and nodded back. But I don't really know Bill Walsh; I'm no intimate of his. I just know a lot about him. But it is personal involvement that God created us to experience with him, as he promised, "You shall know the Lord."

Verses 21-23 continue to expand this vision of God's miraculous intervention and restoration. The metaphor of singing in the valley shows up again in the valley of Jezreel:

"And in that day, says the LORD,  
I will answer the heavens  
and they shall answer the earth;  
and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and they shall answer Jezreel;  
and I will sow him for myself in the land.

And I will have pity on Not pitied,  
and I will say to Not my people, 'You are my people';  
and he shall say, 'Thou art my God.'"

Again, God is declaring his supremacy as the source and sustainer of life. Jezreel represents the nation of Israel, who has cried out for nourishment in the time of drought and agricultural privation that was predicted in verse 9. The Valley of Jezreel is the image of rebellion and violence against God. But the promise now is that the valley is finally going to live up to its true name---God will sow life there. These verses are an affirmation that God is totally in charge of every aspect of the natural world, meeting all the material needs that we could ever imagine. It reminds us again that God is totally adequate to provide all our physical, emotional, and relational needs.

The amazing thing to me is that here even in the valley of Jezreel, a valley of resistance, faithlessness, and self-assertion, God sovereignly chooses not to bring the deserved retribution, but by grace to bring incredible blessing. Have you ever thought about what you really deserve from God? Think in terms of God's tabulating the judgment you deserve for sin. What if we had to pay for our sins and failures? I have memories that are anguishing for me of the failures in my past. And yet when I read a passage like this that shows how God is committed to restoring us, I'm overcome by the wonder of his grace in my life and things that I never suffered for that I should have. The debt was paid in the blood of Christ.

I was thinking too of all the times I have experienced God's goodness to me when he stepped in to give me supernatural strength, insight, and courage. You realize more and more how great God's goodness and his overwhelming provision in your life are when you consider the problems and the difficulties that he has unraveled. There really is no limit to what he is ready and able to do through us and in the people we're concerned about, if we're willing to give him the glory and trust him for the results.

I had an amazing experience a few years ago with Carl Gallivan in a women's prison in Mexico. We preached the gospel to about fifty women who were incarcerated there, and a number of them responded to receive the Lord. Then our hosts lined all the women up in two lines, and two of the Mexican hosts went to each end of one line, and motioned to Carl and me to go to the opposite ends of the other. I realized that these women wanted me to pray for them. I don't speak Spanish, and I didn't have a clue what their needs were. I prayed, "Lord, help me. I don't want to waste their time or be a phony. I want to know what to pray for." And with every woman that I put my arm around, incredibly, I did know what to pray for. I saw husbands who were struggling with illness, children who were estranged, families in financial distress, and so on. God provided so that I was able to minister. I can't explain it; all I can do is thank the Lord for raining down blessing and using me in that way.

But what about the times when we can't respond that way? Instead we worry when we're faced with difficulty and overwhelming circumstances. That worry is really rooted in lack of trust that God is going to provide. Worry can become a habit. We can get so used to being anxious that we can actually be uncomfortable without it. It's like a narcotic; we can become addicted to fear so that we can't exercise faith in God as our security. That was the anxiety that led Israel to put her trust in Baal, and the apostasy that resulted edged *Yahweh* and his righteousness out of first place in her life. We ought to be able to empathize with that. Think how desperately we try to hang onto security on our own in relationships, material resources, and emotional

support; and how easily we're willing to compromise.

Verse 23 is great good news because it talks about how totally God is committed to having a people who will put him and his righteousness above all lesser loyalties. He promises to sow us and grow us up as a people in the land, who, in the words of Proverbs 11:30, will produce "fruits of righteousness" out of our lives and relationships. After *Yahweh*'s disciplining judgment, Israel receives mercy and is restored to a love relationship with him. The names of Hosea's three children are again reversed, so that instead of scattered Jezreel will be a place where God sows life, Not pitied will be changed to Pitied, and Not my people will become My people. There is an answering song of faith and obedience that is sung back in the last phrase of our passage: "Thou art my God." So the song in the valley is antiphonal; God sings, "You are my people," and we respond "You are my God." The valley of moral failure becomes a door of hope; and the valley of faithless fear becomes the place where God ransoms us, heals us, restores us, and forgives us. We end up singing songs of hope and worship in those valleys of despair.

I was part of a service like that a year ago on January 30, 1993. It was a worship service for a group of wonderful women who had gone through the Crisis Pregnancy Center's post-abortion recovery series of Bible studies. It was an amazing service focused on God's character and activity first of all, as our passage has been, and it was a service of memorial as those women with great courage remembered their unborn babies whom God had lovingly gathered to his bosom through those abortions. They knew their babies were secure with their heavenly Father, and they thanked God for his saving activity in the lives of those little ones. It was a service of closure for the spiritual and emotional healing that they had experienced in those months together. These were women of God who had accepted his forgiveness, and they knew through the ministry of that group that they had been fully reconciled to their heavenly Father. They had taken hold of the healing process, and they affirmed that God himself was at work in them through his Spirit. Finally, it was a service of celebration and joy, laughter through tears, a time to thank God for his renewing work in their lives. They knew the truth of the passage we have just worked through. They expressed gratitude that they were now walking in spiritual victory through this process of recovery.

The first verse of the hymn *Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven* (by Henry Lyte, based on Psalm 103), beautifully summarizes the truth of our passage and provides our own answering song:

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven,  
To His feet thy tribute bring;  
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,  
Evermore His praises sing;  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Praise the everlasting King.

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