

GOD'S TOUGH LOVE AT WORK

Hosea: Unbroken Love From A Broken Heart

by Doug Goins

*Think about His love, think about His goodness.
Think about His grace that's brought us through.
For as high as the heavens above
so great is the measure of our Father's love.
Great is the measure of our Father's love.*

(Integrity's Hosanna! Music)

Chapters 11 and 12 of the book of Hosea press our hearts next to the loving heart of God. These chapters describe a profound quality of love that is beyond any human understanding, bringing to life our series title, *Unbroken Love from a Broken Heart*. Perhaps the greatest anguish that a loving heart can experience is the pain of estrangement; the pathos of longing to love someone; yet having its love manipulated, resisted, taken advantage of, or totally rejected.

I have a dear friend here at PBC whom I respect very much, a widow with grown children. She came to know Jesus Christ later in her life, and now she aches for each one of her grown children to come into a personal relationship with the Savior. We have prayed together for each of her children's salvation, but she struggles with a sense of separation from them. She is concerned about the self-destructive patterns in their life. She agonizes over their resistance to spiritual reality that she would love to share with them. She said to me at one point, "I've tried everything. I can't affirm their lifestyles or values, and I anguish over what they are becoming, but I'm trapped. They won't accept my love or involvement. I feel a terrible helplessness."

When we get in touch with that kind of frustration over people we want to love, care for, and encourage but who respond only with rejection or manipulation, then we are able to understand God's anguish over the nation Israel. Hosea 11 and 12 are two of the most moving, tender chapters in the Bible. They allow us to feel the heartbeat of God's yearning love for his people. Both of these chapters are set in the context of family life. In chapter 11, the first eleven verses, the picture is drawn of a rejected father who exercises tough love—a suffering, enduring, "in-spite-of" kind of love-toward his son. God is that Father, and the nation Israel is the son who won't return to his Father's love. Look at the first four verses:

**When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,
and burning incense to idols.
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms,
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of compassion,
with the bands of love,
and I became to them as one
who eases the yoke on their jaws,
and I bent down to them and fed them.**

Innocent first steps

This passage recalls the innocence of the early days of the nation's deliverance from bondage. God graciously loved his son Israel and helped him leave Egypt. Verse 2 tells us that Israel responded with rebellion: They chose new gods, violating the most basic responsibility of their covenant relationship with him: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Verse 3 stresses how quickly Ephraim turned-as soon as he was taught to walk by his loving heavenly Father, he immediately walked away after other gods.

Don't miss the innocent delight that the Father and his child have over these first steps. Last week I looked back through photo albums of

our four children to find pictures that we had taken of their first lurching attempts to walk. The thing that struck me, on all their faces as well as Candy's and mine, was the incredible grins stretching from ear to ear. Do you remember the first staggering steps of your children into Mama's and Dada's arms, and how fun it was to catch them, pick them up, and affirm their first steps?

Throughout the Scriptures, the picture of walking with God is always synonymous with trusting and obeying him. *Yahweh* had called Ephraim to be like Enoch, Noah, and the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who had all learned to walk with God.

A vital part of God's teaching in their life was to bring them back to health after the bondage they had experienced for four hundred years in Egypt, so that they could walk in strength. Verse 4 is a beautiful image of how their Father God lifted that yoke of bondage and led Ephraim with a compassionate, guiding hand and with a band of love, not the control of a harness with a bit. We also see the picture of their heavenly Father stooping down to their level to meet their needs, feeding them tenderly-remember how God provided the manna in the wilderness.

But these memories of Ephraim's early years couldn't deny the reality of what the grown children had become. So verses 5-7 deal with the painful necessity of judgment or punishment-the reality of the consequences that sin always has:

**They shall return to the land of Egypt,
and Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.
The sword shall rage against their cities,
consume the bars of their gates,
and devour them in their fortresses
[or because of their schemes or counsels].
My people are bent on turning away from me;
so they are appointed to the yoke,
and none shall remove it.**

Growing up and facing the consequences

As we have seen before in our studies in Hosea, Egypt is a symbol of re-entering bondage. Because of the nation's disloyalty to the covenant, they will be returned to the kind of slavery to sin from which they have already been delivered. The reason for judgment is not just the sin of apostasy with the Baals, nor their schemes or counsels (verse 6), but their persistent refusal to return or repent; their commitment to turning away from God. There is only sadness in *Yahweh's* description of this forthcoming doom and destruction. As I was working through this I could see the invasion unfolding, the Assyrian armies wiping out city after city; and God standing as a lonely figure, watching with hands clasped behind his back, biting his lip in self-imposed restraint. He is refusing to invade their stubbornness with some sort of hasty intervention that would deny his people the opportunity to grow up through facing the consequences of their rebellion and sin.

God's forgiving grace

In verses 8-9 God directly and personally appeals to his people. The emotion and pent-up grace in his heart are expressed in beautiful poetry:

**How can I give you up, O Ephraim!
How can I hand you over, O Israel!
How can I make you like Admah!
How can I treat you like Zeboiim!
My heart recoils within me,
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger,
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not man,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come to destroy.**

Here is the glory of God's grace at work. That is why he doesn't give up on Israel, or on us. Our hope is based on the faithfulness of God regardless of our unfaithfulness to him. The words of these two verses weave together strands of his unqualified grace into a band of love, a cord of compassion that slips around our wandering hearts. God is relentlessly loving, and his love won't let his people go. Although he does have to judge and punish them, he can never finally give up on them or hand them over to total destruction. He can't do to Ephraim what he did to the two cities mentioned, Admah and Zeboiim. These were cities that were totally destroyed on the plain of Sodom and Gomorrah (see Genesis 14; 19). The people aren't going to receive the obliteration they deserve. After the destruction of the land by the Assyrians, the Lord will begin the process of restoring his people.

This passage tells us that God's holiness is foundational to his love. God isn't vindictive, but righteous in his judgment. His punishment is remedial. And overwhelmingly his forgiving grace is at work. His purpose in all the circumstances is reconciliation. And he says it is

because he is not like man; he is not controlled by the "quid pro quo" of human nature. His holiness and forgiving love will ultimately bring his people back to the land.

God will bring his children back

There is a picture of the full return in verses 10-11:

**They shall go after the Lord,
he will roar like a lion;
yea, he will roar,
and his sons shall come trembling from the west;
they shall come trembling like birds from Egypt,
and like doves from the land of Assyria;
and I will return them to their homes, says the Lord.**

Here is the loving heart of God reaching into the future, when his people will live in obedient, trusting, faithful relationship with him. They will express a wonder and reverence before his powerful, loving roar of return, and they will gratefully accept his providential care. I thought of the picture that we see a number of times in *The Chronicles of Narnia* of the loving roar of Aslan and of the children trembling with hope before that roar.

The picture in verses 10-11 has the millennial kingdom in view. There has not yet been the complete return to the land that is described here. And Israel today is certainly not a nation that trembles in awe and reverent worship before the Lord.

These eleven verses paint a picture of the tough, suffering, "in-spite-of" love of a rejected Father. Israel is a prodigal son who won't return to his Father's love. And yet there is a wonderful window of hope for the future, a day coming when Israel will return wholeheartedly to their heavenly Father.

I was thinking about the spiritual reality of this in my own life. There was a season in my life at the end of my high school years and in my early college years when I was a prodigal, consciously making choices to turn away from the Lord. I had been raised in a wonderful Christian home, but I rejected the Lord my folks loved and submitted their lives to. There was a consistent pattern of active rebellion in my life. Finally God used some wonderful, godly seniors in my dorm to turn me back to himself. I remember a night I spent on my knees by my bed, weeping before the Lord, saying, "I give up. I want to come back. I don't like the way I've been living."

When I went home and told my dad where I'd been and what I'd been through, he wasn't surprised. I was kind of shocked that he knew so much, because I had worked hard to protect him from all that. But he said, "Yes, I knew the struggles." I asked him, "Dad, how come you didn't beat up on me about it? How did you get through those three or four years of rebellion in my life?" He told me he claimed Philippians 1:6 for me, where Paul says, "And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." Dad said, "I've prayed that almost every day for you, waiting for you to come back." And God in his faithfulness did bring me back.

Manipulation and schemes

Starting with verse 12, the theme of family continues, but now the issue is not rejected love but love that is taken advantage of and manipulated. In verse 6 God's judgment came because of their "false counsels or schemes" for survival. That issue of dishonesty is expanded now. And pictured for us is the love of the Father in response to Israel's deceit and manipulation. Again, it is tough love that initiates confrontation. In this section Israel's national life is mirrored in the life of Jacob the schemer and manipulator. Jacob was the grandson of Abraham, the son of Isaac, and the father of the twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of the nation. His name was changed to Israel, and the nation itself became his namesake. At the heart of the passage is a call for the nation Israel to return to his Father's love. Let's read chapter 11 verse 12 through the end of chapter 12:

**Ephraim has encompassed me with lies,
and the house of Israel with deceit;
but Judah is still known by God,
and is faithful to the Holy One.
Ephraim herds the wind,
and pursues the east wind all day long;
they multiply falsehood and violence;
they make a bargain with Assyria,
and oil is carried to Egypt.**

**The Lord has an indictment against Judah,
and will punish Jacob according to his ways,
and requite him according to his deeds.
In the womb he took his brother by the heel,
and in his manhood he strove with God.
He strove with the angel and prevailed,**

he wept and sought his favor.
 He met God at Bethel,
 and there God spoke with him-
 the Lord the God of hosts,
 the Lord is his name:
 "So you, by the help of your God, return,
 hold fast to love and justice,
 and wait continually for your God."

A trader, in whose hands are false balances,
 he loves to oppress.
 Ephraim has said, "Ah, but I am rich,
 I have gained wealth for myself";
 but all his riches can never offset
 the guilt he has incurred.
 I am the Lord your God
 from the land of Egypt;
 I will again make you dwell in tents,
 as in the days of the appointed feast.

I spoke to the prophets;
 it was I who multiplied visions,
 and through the prophets gave parables.
 If there is iniquity in Gilead
 they shall surely come to nought;
 if in Gilgal they sacrifice bulls,
 their altars also shall be like stone heaps
 on the furrows of the field.
 (Jacob fled to the land of Aram,
 there Israel did service for a wife,
 and for a wife he herded sheep.)
 By a prophet the Lord brought Israel up from Egypt,
 and by a prophet he was preserved.
 Ephraim has given bitter provocation;
 so his Lord will leave his blood-guilt upon him,
 and will turn back upon him his reproaches.

The story of Jacob highlighted in this narrative is detailed in Genesis 25-36. Hosea uses it to communicate what the Lord wants to see happen to the nation that he loves so greatly. Let me sketch some of the details of Jacob's life to dramatize this picture. The first phrase in verse 3 recalls that from the moment of birth and into manhood, Jacob had been a conniver and a deceiver: "In the womb he took his brother by the heel...." Even before he came out of his mother Rebekah's womb, he tried to cheat his twin brother Esau; he was born with his hand clutching Esau's heel. His birth name means, "He is at the heel," though the root really means "deceive." And he lived down to his own name, stealing his brother's birthright after they were grown and then manipulating his father Isaac to give him the blessing of the first-born.

Understandably, there was terrible conflict between the two brothers as a result. Jacob, fearing for his life, left home and ran for Aram to live with his uncle Laban, as it says in verse 12. One night on that trip, Jacob had a dream. He saw a ladder from heaven to earth with angels ascending and descending. In that dream he was lifted up to God's presence, and God assured him of a greater birthright than he had manipulated from his brother Esau and from his father. It was a mind-blowing birthright! (see Genesis 28:13-17). Jacob had not expected to meet God there. He wasn't searching for God, and he certainly had done nothing to deserve the blessing that God wanted to give him. Jacob was deeply moved by this dream, and he built an altar and called the place Bethel, "house of God." Hosea 12:4:

He met God at Bethel,
 and there God spoke with him-
 the Lord the God of hosts,
 the Lord is his name....

Jacob the manipulator was confronted by the sovereignty and majesty of God. And God was getting him ready for still another confrontation that would come twenty years later.

The boomerang effect

When Jacob arrived in Aram, he met his match in his uncle Laban, who was probably a bigger operator than he was. Jacob fell in love with Laban's daughter Rachel and struck a bargain with Laban. The bargain is described in verse 12:

(Jacob fled to the land of Aram,
 there Israel did service for a wife,
 and for a wife he herded sheep.)

He offered to work seven years for Rachel's hand in marriage, and Laban agreed to that, but he had a trick up his sleeve. When the seven years were up, Jacob asked for his beloved Rachel, and Laban gave a wedding feast. But then late at night Laban sent his older daughter Leah instead of Rachel into Jacob's tent as his wife. Jacob must have had more than enough to drink at that wedding feast, because he didn't even know until morning that it was Leah and not Rachel with whom he had consummated his marriage. There is a strange irony in this: It was like his own deception when he falsified his identity to his nearly-blind father in order to get the blessing of the first-born. It reminded me of God's promise to the nation in verse 14: "[He] will turn back upon him his reproaches." Life does have a costly kind of boomerang effect on the deceptive.

Laban had outmaneuvered Jacob the manipulator, and he persuaded Jacob to work another week to marry Rachel. But then Jacob had to stay seven more years beyond that to keep her, and somehow Laban convinced him to work another six years beyond that. He ended up spending twenty years in Aram achieving much evidence of physical blessing in his life. But he was restless. There was unfinished business in his soul. Verse 8 describes his predicament, "but all his riches can never offset the guilt he has incurred." He couldn't forget what he had done to Esau, and he longed to return home. Although Laban double-crossed him one more time, so that he had to rebuild his flocks and herds, he secretly escaped with great material wealth, leaving full of self-confidence because of all his resources. Laban came after him with an army, and they negotiated a truce. The only reason that happened was because God intervened; he appeared to Laban and said, "You must deal fairly with Jacob." So Jacob could take no credit for the truce.

In the Genesis narrative it says over and over again, "God was with Jacob," just as he had promised twenty years earlier he would be. Jacob had been oblivious to that presence and activity in his life, but God was preparing him for a very decisive encounter with Esau and, more importantly, with God himself. Jacob headed back toward Canaan, he felt a growing sense of dread and panic at the thought of meeting Esau after all he had done to him. The fleshly patterns of manipulation kicked in again, and he sent messengers ahead to assure Esau that he had great flocks to share with him. He went to elaborate lengths to prepare for this encounter.

God's blessing, our greatest need

In a telling comment in Genesis 32:20, Jacob said to himself, "I may appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me." This issue of acceptance was central in Jacob's life. That was what he longed for. He had never really experienced it from his father Isaac, and he certainly had no right to expect it from his brother Esau because of the way he had treated him. What Jacob didn't understand was that only God could give that precious gift. When we receive God's gift of acceptance, we finally have a chance to get free of manipulating people to assure its flow to us. That was exactly what happened to Jacob during the night before he met Esau in Genesis 32. That account is summarized in our text beginning in verse 3:

**...in his manhood he strove with God.
He strove with the angel and prevailed,
he wept and sought his favor."**

The Genesis 32 text makes it very clear that God initiated this confrontation in which he wrestled with Jacob all night at the ford of the brook Jabbok. Jacob called the place Peniel, which means "the face of God." He said, "...I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (Genesis 32:30). As that crucial night of confrontation was coming to an end, God dislocated Jacob's hip (perhaps broke it); and Jacob limped the rest of his life because of that dislocation. God did that so he couldn't fight anymore; because he wouldn't let the Lord go until he blessed him. The deepest need in Jacob's life was to know God's blessing, and it is the deepest need in all of our lives.

The lack of a sense of God's blessing was the real cause of his deceptive, manipulative life. In that wrestling match with God, Jacob had to face the man he had been and relinquish the control of his life to God. As that struggle persisted it must have included soul-searching honesty, a confession of sin against God. All of us have to have a Jabbok encounter, a time when we come to an end of trying to manipulate life, other people, and especially God himself. Our Jabbok is when we are completely honest with God and we confess our patterns of duplicity, compulsiveness, impatience, and pretending to be things we're not. Our real self meets the true God, and we go to the mat over who is going to run our life.

As a result of Jacob's encounter with God, he was given a new name. No longer was he "the deceiver," or "the manipulator." Now he was Israel, "God strives" (or "exalted one with God"). This became the issue for the new man emerging in the old Jacob. God would always strive on behalf of him and his spiritual descendants. God would exalt him out of his brokenness and new-found humility before him. God gave the blessing that Jacob longed for because it is God's nature to bless us; that patriarch did nothing to earn it or deserve it. And now he would have a limp for the rest of his life to remind him that God hadn't just touched his hip, but he had also touched the secret places of his heart. God's strength had to be shown in Jacob's weakness.

When morning came it was the beginning of a new life, and we meet the new man Israel. And we do see a change in him in terms of how he related to his brother. The deceitful, willful manipulator had become willing to be molded by God. There was a new compassion in him, a gentleness and tenderness that we have never seen before. When he went to meet Esau, Esau ran to him and fell on him and embraced him. And listen to what Jacob said to his brother now: "...Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, with such favor have you received me. Accept, I pray you, my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me...." (Genesis 33:10-11). For the first time in his life he understood God's gift of love and the blessing that God wanted to give.

Before and after

The transformation of Jacob is exactly what Hosea sees that both the northern and southern kingdoms need. Both kingdoms are mentioned in our passage; both are equally guilty of deceit and manipulation. He wants them to be like their forefather in turning to the Lord and being honest before him, in meeting God the way Jacob did. Verse 6:

**So you, by the help of your God, return,
hold fast to love and justice,
and wait continually for your God.**

In other words, "Your name is Israel; therefore *Yahweh* is your God. So learn to live like your forefather-*after* the Jabbok encounter with God, not before. Alexander the Great said to his cowardly son who bore his name, "Either change your character, or change your name." But that is not what Hosea says to the nation Israel. He says, "Claim your name, claim your identity in the Lord. Live with mercy and justice rather than with lies and manipulation. Return to God, stop wrestling against him and let him strive for you on your behalf. Wait for your God to bless you. You will find your true identity and purpose and hope and survival only in your God.

There are two key phrases in verse 6. The first one is, "...by the help of your God, return...." It is an incredible relief to know that even our returning to the Lord, our repentance, is dependent on his help. It is impossible to return to him without his enabling us by his grace. And the other key phrase is, "...wait continually for your God." It is hard to learn how to wait on the Lord continually as a lifestyle. But the Old Testament says that those who wait for God will never be frustrated. God will act in his own time to effect his purpose. Those who wait for God to act will be renewed in their strength. The Lord is good to those who wait for him.

Meekness-trusting the Lord

We are called back to our heavenly Father's heart of love today, whether we are a prodigal who has completely rejected God's love and gone away from him, or a schemer who tries to manipulate God's love and commitment to us for our own purposes. We as Christians can be like Jacob, persistently striving against God, and the issue is our will. Willfulness is a distortion of the gift God gave us of being able to make choices. It is turning that against God. It is being demanding of those around us, and manipulating others so that we are the center of attention. It expresses itself in inflexibility and a need to be in charge. It is comparing ourselves to others as a way of life; driven by covetousness, we become competitive and combative. We are impatient with people and with circumstances we find ourselves in. We can spiritualize willfulness by calling it confronting in love or being proactive in other people's lives, but it is the Jacob syndrome of striving and wrestling. The ultimate issue is control; power and influence. We have to be in charge at all costs, and the price is really high.

I know, because I have lived periods of my Christian life without the blessing of God, without his guidance and peace, because I wouldn't give in and I wouldn't give up my rights to him. I have spent a good part of my adult life dealing with the Jacob in me (and my best friends will say amen to that) and learning to claim my identity as Israel. Praise God, I am learning that the opposite of willfulness, with its peculiar blend of false self-sufficiency and posturing, is meekness. We talked about meekness in our study of chapters 9 and 10 (see Discovery Paper 4399). Jesus lived this quality of meekness. He said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle [meek] and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29). Jesus made meekness one of the sure signs that we have accepted our blessedness of being chosen, called, and cherished by the Lord.

Jesus also said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). He probably had Psalm 37 in mind in that beatitude. In verse 9 it says, "But those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land." Consider the opening nine verses of Psalm 37, in contrast to Jacob's lifestyle of striving, in contrast to the schemes of the nation Israel, and in contrast to our own manipulative egocentricity:

**Do not fret because of evildoers,
Be not envious toward wrongdoers.
For they will wither quickly like the grass,
And fade like the green herb.
Trust in the LORD, and do good;
Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.
Delight yourself in the LORD;
And He will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the LORD,
Trust also in Him, and He will do it.
And He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,
and your judgment as the noonday.
Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him;
Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way,
Because of the man who carries out wicked schemes.
Cease from anger, and forsake wrath;
Do not fret, it leads only to evildoing.
For evildoers will be cut off,
But those who wait for the LORD,
they will inherit the land.**

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