



In chapter 15 of The Story God is trying to reach his people with a message. It's like he's calling them on their cell phone. The question is: Will they take the call or put Him through to voicemail? And if they take the call, will they listen and not just listen but do what He asks? The message God wants them to hear is delivered by servants called prophets.

When we left The Story, the nation had split into two kingdoms: Ten tribes called Israel in the north and two tribes in the south called Judah. Eventually, the northern kingdom of Israel would fall to Assyria and over 100 years later the southern kingdom would fall to Babylon. You might wonder, why did God allow this to happen to his people?

God divided the nation because his chosen people were sending the wrong message. He wanted to use them to show the world who He is. But they rebelled from God, disobeyed His commands and worshipped idols. They weren't fulfilling their purpose to be a light and a channel of blessing to the surrounding nations. It's like if our Campus Pastors—Shawn Peterson, Rob Hall and Neal Benson—robbed banks in San Francisco and had their mug shots posted everywhere, but continued to preach God's word on Sunday mornings. They'd be sending the wrong message. God divided the nation to purify the message about His character.

And God sent prophets to call His people back to obedience. They're called prophets not because they predicted the future, though they sometimes did that, but because they spoke God's word. They were His mouthpiece. Their message wasn't some kind of crystal ball through which we see into the future, but it was God's word to His people and it had to do with the here and now. The prophets believed God had chosen a people for Himself and made a covenant with them. They were the apple of His eye, called to display His character to a dark world, but they'd broken their end of the deal. And so, these men stood up and called them on it. The outstanding quality of these men was moral courage. They were the John Waynes of the Bible. They rode into town and said what nobody wanted to hear. We need more men and women like that today. We don't need ear ticklers; we have lots of those; we need truth tellers who'll stand against the tide come what may.

Today we're going to look at the life and ministry of just one of those prophets who was sent to the Northern Kingdom of Israel before they fell to Assyria in 722 BC. His name was Hosea.

The Story of Hosea

Before we look at Hosea, I want to tell you a story that's more recent. John Edwards ran twice for his party's presidential nomination. He was also John Kerry's vice presidential running mate in 2004. In 2008, he admitted having an affair with a campaign worker. Later, his wife, Elizabeth, wrote about how her husband's adultery affected her. When they were first married, she'd pointedly asked him to be faithful. Her greatest fear was having an unfaithful husband, but she had confidence in John's love for her. When she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2005, he stood by her during her treatment. In 2006, she encouraged him to travel without her when necessary to pursue his career. She had no idea he'd begun an ongoing relationship with another woman. Finally, almost a year after beginning the affair, he admitted to her he'd been unfaithful on one occasion. She writes, "After I cried, and screamed, I went to the bathroom and threw up. And the next day John and I spoke. He wasn't coy, but it turned out he wasn't forthright either. I felt the ground underneath me had been pulled away. I spent months learning to live with a single incidence of infidelity. And I'd like to say a single incidence is easy to overcome, but it's not. I am who I am. I'm imperfect in a million ways, but I always thought I was the kind of woman, the kind of wife to whom a husband would be faithful. I'd asked for fidelity, begged for it, really, when we married. I never need flowers or jewelry. I don't care about vacations or a nice car. But I need you to be faithful. Leave me, if you must, but be faithful to me if you are with me."

You can sense the pain and betrayal she and anyone would feel under those circumstances. But what if I told you there was once a guy who married a woman knowing beforehand that she'd be unfaithful? What if I told you one of our prophets was married to a woman known to be promiscuous both in and out of marriage? And what if I told you it was God Himself who told this prophet to marry her with full knowledge of who she was and what she'd go on to do?

This is the story of Hosea. We don't know a whole lot about him. He's introduced in 1:1.

The word of the Lord that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel:

We know nothing of his father but his name. He spoke to Israel in the final days before their conquest and exile into Assyria. The

king in Israel was Jeroboam. Based on the names of the kings of Judah he also ministered during the reign of others who followed Jeroboam. These were kind of the “best of times and the worst of times.” It was a time of prosperity in Israel. They seemed to be secure from outside threat. These were also very religious people and signs of their devotion were everywhere. But it was the worst of times because their faith was shallow, their religion was diluted and injustice was rampant on every level. Not only that, Assyria to the north was on the rise, preparing to march on Israel.

God's Love is Reckless

In the midst of this, look what God told Hosea to do.

When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, “Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord.” So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son (1:2–3).

From time to time, God called his prophets to not just speak to his people, but to act the message out; to dramatize it. To show Israel the magnitude of her rebellion, God told Hosea to marry a woman who was promiscuous, perhaps even a prostitute. Some find this to be so shocking they say she couldn't have been that when Hosea married her but would only later become that way. However you look at this, it's clear Hosea knew what he was getting into.

But this isn't just a message about Israel's unfaithfulness. More than anything, this is a message about God's love; about His relentless love for rebellious people. And God hasn't changed. He still loves rebellious people. I'm so glad for that. Yesterday, I was reflecting on this past year, and the thing I kept coming back to was how hard and sinful and rebellious my own heart is. But I was also struck by God's love and faithfulness to me. Take Hosea and what he teaches us about God's love.

One of the things is God's love is downright reckless. Why would a man marry a woman he knew would cheat on him? Who would do that? That's reckless. But here's something even more reckless: What kind of God makes a covenant with a people he knows will go chasing after other gods? It doesn't make sense. Why not choose a people you know will be faithful? Why not choose people who'll appreciate your blessings?

We keep thinking God only loves us when we're good, or at least people try to be good. But He loves the broken. He loves sinners. He loves people He knows will fail him. And just as He told Hosea to marry Gomer, He enters into covenant with us. Singer Steven Curtis Chapman said it well: “In the Gospel, we discover we're far worse off than we thought, and far more loved than we ever dreamed.”

We have this little dog named Daisy. We got her from a rescue organization and honestly she was a little rough around the edges. We brought her home and when you get a dog like that

the first thing you do is make sure your fences are secure and she can't get out. We did that the best we could but nevertheless there were a few times she managed to escape. And when she did we had to go looking for her. Even when we found her, and she saw us, she ran. But we kept chasing here down. When you think about that, you kind of wonder why anyone would bring into their home anyone or anything that would choose to run away every time they had a chance. But that's what God did with Gomer and that's what God does with us.

God's Love is Passionate

But Hosea shows us that not only is God's love reckless, it's passionate. We can make the mistake of seeing God's love as sort of matter of fact, even something he's coldly reluctant to offer. But in this story, God says, “Here's what my love is like: It's like a man madly in love with a woman. He woos her and wins her. They get married and have a child together. Everything seems wonderful. But then she starts acting strange. She doesn't want to be near him. She goes out with her friends 3-4 nights a week. He begins to suspect something is going on. Then one night he follows her and watches as she enters another man's house. He's angry but his heart is broken.” God says, “Hosea, I want my people to understand how I feel about them by watching how you feel about Gomer. Show them the pain I feel.”

It wasn't easy to be a prophet! When you love someone passionately you can get hurt. That's the nature of love. It's risky. You can't force someone to love you back. God's hurt comes out in the naming of the children seen in verses 4–6. Gomer's first child is a little baby boy. He looks like Hosea. But God says in v. 4, “**Call him Jezreel.**” Hosea must have thought, “Did I hear that right?” Jezreel was a place, and not a very pleasant place in the history of God's people. It was in Jezreel that a man named Jehu massacred the house of King Ahab and took the throne. The current king, Jeroboam, came from that stock. This is like calling your son Auschwitz. God says in v. 4: “***I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel.***”

Sounds to me like a wounded lover! But it gets worse. Verse 6 says, “***And Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter.***” This one didn't look like Hosea because she didn't come from Hosea. The Lord tells him, “***Call her Lo-Ruhamah (which means 'not loved'), for I will no longer show love to Israel, that I should at all forgive them.***” What a name for a little girl—not loved. But doesn't the Bible say God's love endures forever? It does, but when we insist on our own way and cling to our sin, God withdraws His daily mercies from us.

But Israel still didn't get it. Four years later when her daughter was weaned Gomer went out again and her adultery produced another son. God said, “***Call him Lo-Ammi (which means 'not my people), for you are not my people and I am not your God.***”

God's Love is Tough

In some of the things God says it almost sounds like he's divorcing his people, washing his hands of them. But there's a purpose, a strategy in all of this. You see, God's love isn't only reckless and passionate, His love is also tough. Hosea didn't minimize the wrong Gomer had done to Him. He didn't gloss over it. He didn't say, "Oh, it's no big deal. I know you didn't mean to do it." He took it seriously. And when Gomer insisted on being unfaithful to him, he let her go. He must have known what would happen. She'd be used and abused. She'd be called names by those who were supposed to love her. She'd be beaten and treated like an animal. Hosea couldn't protect her from all that since she'd run away from him. So she'd learn the lessons of life the hard way and live out the consequences of her poor choices.

When we're unfaithful to God, when we run out on Him, when we refuse to listen, He has all kinds of ways of getting our attention, and most of them have to do with **pain**. This comes out repeatedly in chapter 2. Look at verses 8–13.

**"She has not acknowledged that I was the one
who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil,
who lavished on her the silver and gold—
which they used for Baal.
Therefore I will take away my grain when it ripens,
and my new wine when it is ready.
I will take back my wool and my linen,
intended to cover her naked body.
So now I will expose her lewdness
before the eyes of her lovers;
no one will take her out of my hands.
I will stop all her celebrations:
her yearly festivals, her New Moons,
her Sabbath days—all her appointed festivals.
I will ruin her vines and her fig trees,
which she said were her pay from her lovers;
I will make them a thicket,
and wild animals will devour them.
I will punish her for the days
she burned incense to the Baals;
she decked herself with rings and jewelry,
and went after her lovers,
but me she forgot,"
declares the Lord.**

And why is God doing this? Why is He allowing His beloved to suffer so much? Look at 2:14–15.

**"Therefore I am now going to allure her;
I will lead her into the wilderness
and speak tenderly to her.
There I will give her back her vineyards,
and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
There she will respond as in the days of her youth,
as in the day she came up out of Egypt."**

Do you see what God is doing? He's allowing His people to taste the bitter fruit of sin so they'll return to Him. He's luring them back. It's tough love. By the way, that's what eventually happened with Daisy. She somehow learned her lesson out there. Now when she gets out she doesn't run away anymore. She just hangs around our front door until we let her back in.

There's a beautiful image at the end of v. 15. God says, ***"I will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope."*** There was a place in Israel called the Valley of Achor where Joshua dealt with a troublemaker named Achan. Achan means "trouble." Sometimes you and I have to go down into the valley of trouble before we can find a door of hope. Some of you are there today and you need to know there's a door of hope open for you. But you can't travel through it without repentance. The New Testament speaks of "sorrow that leads to repentance." It also speaks of God's discipline. Hebrews 12:5–6 says, ***"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son."*** In other words, thank God for the valley of trouble where He chastens you because without it there's no door of hope!

Gordon McDonald, at the passing of a lifelong mentor, wrote this about his loyalty and the counsel he gave in crisis: "He was there when, many years later, my life fell apart because of a failure for which I was totally responsible. In our worst moments of shame and humiliation, he came and lived in our home for a week and helped us do a searing examination of our lives. We will always remember his words: 'You're both momentarily in a great darkness. You have a choice to make. You can—as do so many—deny this terrible pain, or blame it on others, or run away from it. Or, you can embrace this pain together and let it do its purifying work as you hear the things God means to whisper into your hearts during the process. If you choose the latter, I expect you'll have an adventurous future modeling what true repentance and grace is all about.'"

Inflicting pain sounds cruel, but it's really more like a severe mercy. Are we letting pain do its purifying work? We do pay a price when we don't follow the Lord. But what kind of price does He pay?

God's Love is Costly

God's love is costly. Look at 3:1.

The Lord said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes."

Remember, Gomer's been out there for awhile. You'd think Hosea was just starting to move on with his life. But God says to go find her. Go show your love for her again even though she's in another relationship. I want you to show everyone I love Israel like that.

I must tell you, I've known marriages like this, marriages devastated by the unfaithfulness of a spouse. I've seen the pain and the damage that kind of betrayal brings to a marriage. And sometimes a marriage can't recover from that. But I've also seen how there can be repentance and forgiveness and healing. It's not an easy thing or a quick thing. And it's costly to the one who gives it.

So Hosea goes looking for her. We don't know how long it took him. But one day he found her on the auction block. Look at 3:2.

So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley.

Gomer couldn't have been a pretty site. One thing had led to another and she ended up a slave for sale. By the way, slaves were always sold naked. The normal price for a slave was 30 shekels of silver. But when Hosea showed up he got her for a bargain: 15 shekels of silver and a bushel of barley. Imagine her humiliation. It's like she's being sold in the Dollar Store! Then what did he do? Now he owned her. He could do whatever he wanted. She could become his slave. He could even kill her. But he clothed her and brought her home. Look at 3:3–4.

Then I told her, "You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will behave the same way toward you." For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or household gods.

Things couldn't be the same between them for awhile. She still had to wean herself off her lovers as Israel would have to do in her exile. But what kind of love is this? It's costly love. It's a love where God seeks us and finds us. He then steps into the marketplace of sin and buys us out of slavery through the death of His own Son. We're Gomer. We're being sold on the auction block of sin. The world bids for us. Satan bids for us. But Jesus comes along and offers Himself. He says, "I bid the price of my blood to have that sinner as my own." The auctioneer says, "That's the highest bid. Sold to the Lord Jesus Christ." Then what does He do? He clothes us with His own righteousness and brings us home, teaching us to walk with Him.

God's Love is Everlasting

And because of that, there's one more thing we can say about His love. It's everlasting. In 3:5 God says something very important.

Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the Lord and to his blessings in the last days.

So He's looking forward to the time after the exile and in what He calls the last days when His people would freely return to seek the Lord their God and David their king. At the end of chapter 1 He spoke about that time as well. Look at 1:10–2:1.

"Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'children of the living God.' The people of Judah and the people of Israel will come together; they will appoint one leader and will come up out of the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel.

"Say of your brothers, 'My people,' and of your sisters, 'My loved one.'"

This is looking forward to this present time. The new, regathered Israel is us, the church. This leader, this King Hosea spoke of, is the son of David, Jesus Christ. We weren't God's people but now we are. We weren't loved but now we are. Look what Paul writes about how God has chosen us in Romans 9:23–25, *"What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea: 'I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one.'"*

In the end God won't give up or walk out on His people. His love **does** endure forever. In the very last chapter of this book God says, *"I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them"* (14:4).

God's love for rebellious people is relentless. It's a love that's reckless, passionate, tough, costly and everlasting. You can't outrun this love. You might be so far away right now from God, but He's seeking you. He's calling you. Maybe He's blocked your path with thorn bushes. Maybe He's walled you in. Maybe He's taken away your grain and your new wine. But make no mistake: He wants to turn your valley of trouble into a door of hope. Will you let Him do that? When He calls, will you pick it up? Will you listen to what He's saying? Will you do what He tells you to do? Or will you put Him off to voicemail? Maybe He's telling you to start a new discipline, or stop a bad habit, or step out in faith in some act of obedience.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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