

GOD LOVES AND FORGIVES

Teaching-Learning Resources

BAPTIST LEADER

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Background Scripture: Hosea 11; 14

Key Passage: Hosea 14

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This lesson introduces Part III, “Appeals to Recommitment Rejected,” the last unit in the thirteen-week study on “The Kingdom and the Early Prophets: God’s Call to Responsible Decision.”

The golden days, or “gold-plated” days, of Jeroboam II turned out to be more glitter than gold. There was just enough glitter to attract the attention of the Assyrian empire builder, Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 B.C.). According to 2 Kings 15:19, when Tiglath-pileser III (called “Pul” in the biblical text) demanded tribute from Menahem, king of Israel, around 738 B.C., there was no gold to give; the tribute had to be paid in silver. The wealth that had been so ruthlessly acquired during the days of Amos had evaporated by the time of Hosea; their ministries just about overlapped.

Whereas Amos’s ministry had been an “early warning system,” designed to initiate change during a time of affluence when there was enough moral strength to move, the ministry of Hosea was the final warning—the last chance. But Hosea’s era was characterized by anarchy rather than affluence, and the people were too sick and sinful to change. The clock was running out. One proper move in response to Yahweh could have called for an extended “hold,” but no proper moves came. All systems were “go” in a countdown to oblivion. In 721 B.C., the Northern Kingdom reached the zero point—

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destruction. Exile was the first stage, and the loss of national and ethnic identity was the final stage. The ten lost tribes of Israel never survived to claim the promises of their God.

The Biblical Setting

Hosea was confronted with three realities: (1) the reality of God's love for Israel, (2) the reality of Israel's sin and the broken covenant with Yahweh, and (3) the reality of the menace from the East in the reawakening of the Assyrian giant. These three elements molded the message and ministry of Hosea. All three deserve careful study.

The Reality of God's Love

Three chapters in Hosea explicitly deal with God's love for Israel: chapters 2, 11 and 14. The statements in chapter 2 are the most difficult to understand. As the English translations stand, Hosea appears to deny that he and Gomer are husband and wife:

“Plead with your mother, plead—
for she is not my wife,
and I am not her husband.”

Hosea 2:2

But in all probability Hosea indicated the exact opposite, since in response to Yahweh's command he did “take” Gomer and fathered children by her.

The difficulty is due to the fact that in biblical Hebrew two words with opposite meanings were spelled the same way. They were the words “not” and “indeed!” which were both written as *l'* but pronounced differently. “Not” was pronounced *low*, and “indeed!” was pronounced *lou*. (Hebrew scribes did not use vowels when writing, only consonants.) Current biblical studies have indicated about fifty examples of

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this confusion. Translating Hosea 2:2 in the light of this knowledge, one sees that Hosea affirmed, “Plead with your mother, plead—for she is indeed my wife, and I am indeed her husband!”

It was the husband-wife relationship, the relationship of love, that was the essential message of the action parable of Hosea’s marriage to Gomer. The relationship of Yahweh and Israel was a love relationship! It was not strictly speaking a “marriage” relationship, but it was a covenant relationship of love. In the relationship of Yahweh and Israel, it was Yahweh who corresponded to the saintly prophet Hosea, and it was Israel that fitted the role of Gomer. There was nothing very pure or dependable about either Gomer or Israel. Nevertheless, Yahweh loved Israel, and that divine love was demonstrated symbolically by Hosea’s love of Gomer (3:1). Sin could not break the bonds of love; but love demanded that the covenant be fulfilled.

The covenant between Yahweh and Israel carried some very specific stipulations which when fulfilled brought blessings (Deuteronomy 28:1–14), but when they were broken brought curses (27:15–26; 28:15–68). God’s love moved him to bestow repeatedly the blessing on Israel. But the blessings led to affluence and arrogance, idolatry and adultery. God withheld the barrage of curses. Instead, for the purpose of repentance and renewed blessing, he sent only punishment and discipline, not destruction. But the sole effect of the punishment was only *temporary* righteousness; the words of his prophets were muted by false prophets and priests who deceived the people. [page 19]

Repeatedly God worked for the salvation of his people, but he was constantly frustrated. His love transcended his frustration, but Israel’s sin led to the point of no return. The cove-

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nant was not just broken but was abandoned! The curses became inevitable. What began as God's love affair with Israel ended in Israel's repudiation of Yahweh. She abandoned life for death, blessings for curses. Israel actually abandoned Yahweh for Baal; and Ephraim never really abandoned the "old-time religion" which recognized the reality of other gods.

Although God was frustrated, he was not defeated. He was the persistent lover. If his love could not keep Israel free from the curses, his love would be there when the curses were over. Thus, Hosea is able to reflect the feelings of Yahweh:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
How can I give you up, O Ephraim!
How can I hand you over, O Israel!

Hosea 11:1,8

I will destroy you, O Israel;
who can help you?
Samaria shall bear her guilt,
because she has rebelled against her God.

Hosea 13:9, 16

"And I will make for you a covenant on that day . . . I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. . . . I will betroth you to me for ever . . ." (2:18–19).

The final theme of the ultimate triumph of love and the abolition of war is developed in chapter 14. This will receive greater attention in another section of the Resources, "Interpreting the Biblical Lesson."

The Reality of Israel's Sin

The Book of Hosea contains a catalog of sins rampant in Israel. They need little explanation since we are familiar with

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the same evils in our own history and contemporary culture.

An alphabetic listing of the attested evils speaks for itself:

- adultery (4:2; 7:4)
- alcoholism (4:11; 7:5, 14)
- broken covenant (6:7; 10:4)
- corrupt clergy (5:1, 7; 6:9)
- corrupt politics (5:1; 7:3, 7, 16; 8:4)
- harlotry (4:10)
- idolatry (4:13, 17; 8:4–6, 11; 9:10, 15; 10:5; 11:2; 12:11; 13:1–2)
- ignorance (4:1, 6)
- insane foreign policy (5:13; 7:11; 8:9; 12:1)
- killings (4:2; 6:8)
- lying (4:2; 7:1, 13; 10:13; 11:12)
- militarism (8:4; 10:13)
- no mercy (4:1; 6:6)
- oppression of the poor (12:7)
- robbery and stealing (4:2; 6:8–9; 7:1; 12:7)
- superficial religion (6:4, 6; 7:14)
- whoredom (4:14; 6:10)

This list contains a few surprises. In a nation such as ancient Israel, which followed for hundreds of years a holy-war theology and viewed God as the divine warrior, one would not have expected “trust in military might” to be a sin. But Hosea had rejected the old theology, even though Assyria was a rising military menace. Hosea advocated a nonmilitary solution for Israel’s problems: “I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land” (2:18). Even the deliverance of Judah would come by a nonmilitary method: “I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will deliver them . . . I will not deliver them by bow, nor by sword, nor by war, nor by horses, nor by horsemen” (1:7).

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It is also surprising to find *ignorance* among the sins of Israel. Perhaps Hosea was influenced by the wisdom traditions in Israel, which equated the quest for wisdom with the quest for God. But the people of the northern tribes shared none of Hosea's enthusiasm for wisdom. Therefore, the prophet was forced to announce:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;
because you have rejected knowledge,
I reject you from being a priest to me.

Hosea 4:6

The ignorance, which included the failure to remember the law, was a contributing factor in the surge of crime.

The Reality of the Assyrian Menace

The United Kingdom of Israel, which flourished under the leadership of David and Solomon (1000–922 B.C.), became a reality during the 150 years of Assyrian weakness. One need not argue whether it was by providence or coincidence, but had David appeared on the scene during a period of Assyrian imperial expansion, the history of the twelve tribes probably would have been radically different.

Following the reign of Tiglath-pileser I (1116—1078 B.C.), Assyria went into a decline which lasted to the end of the tenth century B.C.. At the time of the division of Israel into Northern Israel and Southern Judah (922 B.C.), Assyria flexed its muscles for world conquest. A second decline coincided with the reigns of Jeroboam II and Uzziah, during the first half of the eighth century. But by the last half of that century, under the leadership of Tiglath-pileser III, Assyria was again on the march as the dominant power of the whole ancient Near East.

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Tiglath-pileser III followed a peace policy of deporting captured populations to distant areas of the Assyrian empire and then repopulating vacated territory with people from other remote corners of the realm. In this way, no one was in his native land to fan the fires of rebellion. But this peace policy was instituted only after a nation had been crushed in military defeat. The Assyrian military machine was as brutally effective as any in the history of warfare.

Hosea appears to have had some knowledge of the Assyrian potential for violence. The sinful state of Israel was in no position to defeat the Assyrians in battle, but at the same time he recognized that the Israelites were in no mood to accept Assyrian subjugation without a fight. The combination of apostasy and anarchy spelled disaster for Israel. [page 20]

Assyrian military might would be the means by which Israel would be forced to experience the curses resulting from her repudiation of the covenant with Yahweh. Israel would have to reap what she had sown, and she that lived by the sword was to perish by the sword.

Samaria shall bear her guilt,
because she has rebelled against her God;
they shall fall by the sword,
their little ones shall be dashed in pieces,
and their pregnant women ripped open.

Hosea 13:16

God's love affair with Israel was to end in separation, divorce, and unspeakable horror. This was not Yahweh's desire, for he wanted to maintain the covenant relationship of love, as Hosea made so perfectly clear in chapter 14.

Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

Hosea 14:1—"Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God."

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The Hebrew word for “return” is the same as the word “repent.” Israel was to return to the covenant relationship. God had not moved away from Israel. He remained faithful to the covenant, as Hosea had remained faithful to Gomer. The separation between God and his people demanded that the people return. This involved genuine repentance rather than the mechanical, superficial confessions of the past, mentioned in Hosea 6:1–6.

Hosea 14:7— “They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden.”

It is difficult to determine the exact meaning of the passage. (The translation of the Revised Standard Version is preferable to the King James rendering, even though it involves a minor alteration of the text.) Hosea was expressing either (1) his confidence that Israel would “repent” and dwell beneath the shadow (i.e., the “protection”) of Yahweh, without suffering the inevitable curses at the hands of the Assyrians, or (2) his affirmation that after Assyria had crushed and depopulated Israel, the survivors would “return” (physically speaking, not in the sense of “repent”) from the ravages of war and exile to live in a new Eden-like garden with Yahweh as their Lord and lover. This was the idea expressed earlier in Hosea (2:19–20): “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.”

Applying the Lesson to Life

To apply the message of Hosea to life will mean that we take the last verse in the book seriously:

let him understand these things;
let him know them;

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for the ways of the Lord are right,
and the upright walk in them,
but transgressors stumble in them.

Hosea 14:9

The survey of the circumstances in Israel during the days of Hosea leaves one feeling very uncomfortable. So much of what was a part of the Samaria scene then is now a part of the American scene. Were a prophet to catalog the evils in our own country, he would simply need a larger ledger. Were the prophet to expose the commitment of the churches to the new covenant established through the love of Jesus, it would appear that many Christian disciples had abandoned the covenant and divorced themselves from God and his Messiah.

Indeed, one must be generous with ancient Israel. Eight hundred years before Christ they failed to live up to ethical standards which were the aspirations of some Canaanites. But now, two thousand years after Christ and twenty-seven hundred years after the fall of Samaria, our own nation refuses to care adequately for the poor and needy, the sick and the hungry. We will do it only if it is profitable and will not disturb our economic idols.

We know better than to construct idols out of wood and stone, gold or silver. But we construct our idols in the recesses of our minds and worship ideas, ideologies, doctrines, and philosophies which are our own inventions. More than money and physical wealth, we worship and idolize the power which riches bestow. We bow at the Baal of competition in the quest to be superior.

Each new generation sacrifices its children to the gods of competition, who may have their holy places in some hallowed halls of our schools and in the bleachers of our stadiums. Success, superiority, and security have become the new

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trinity; faith, hope, and charity seem to have no place in a day of competitive technology. It's not important how one gets to the top, but one must get there.

Consequently, we build ourselves up by tearing others down—the rich become richer and the poor become poorer. True justice, mercy, and love are alien aspirations in much of our society; there is no profit in any of it. God's good earth has been prostituted; truth is adulterated for propaganda; graffiti have been made a substitute for literacy; and weapons merchants have replaced the missionary as our "peace" ambassadors. Hosea would feel at home in our communities, for little has really changed. The new covenant can be broken just as easily as was the old covenant.

The new covenant, like the old covenant, carries with it a whole series of blessings and curses. The Christian, like the Israelite, reaps what one sows, and the crops will have to be harvested. But God is loving and forgiving, and there is always time to sow a new crop. The seeds of love, mercy, and justice, when watered by the dew of heaven, grow quickly, and even curses can be transformed into blessings. But whether it be native American or the professing Yahwist, everyone must speak and declare one's intent. We must respond to God's love