

“The Word of the Lord that Came to Hosea”

Sermons on the Minor Prophets: Hosea (1)

Texts: Hosea 1:1-9; Romans 10:1-21

Now for something completely different—the Prophecy of Hosea. Hosea has been described as the “death-bed prophet of Israel.” This is because he is the last of YHWH’s prophets sent to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, before that kingdom was conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C. Hosea was present throughout the tumultuous and tragic days of Israel’s fall. His prophecy opens with YHWH’s command to marry a prostitute because this act mirrors YHWH’s covenantal relationship to his people, Israel. Hosea will play the role to this woman that YHWH has played to Israel—a faithful husband to an unfaithful spouse.¹ Israel’s apostasy—seen in the idol worship rampant throughout the land—is like that of promiscuous wife who repeatedly breaks her marital vows by cheating on her husband and bearing the children of her lovers. Hosea’s wife Gomer, is a graphic and tragic mirror image of Israel’s chief institutions—the kings, the priests, and the religious life of the nation. Despite Israel’s on-going and deepening apostasy, repeatedly, Hosea pushes us to see that even Israel’s sin cannot nullify YHWH’s gracious covenant promises. Right up to the end (in fact, even beyond), YHWH always stands willing to forgive and restore a repentant people who heed his call to return to him in faith and obedience.

We have completed our study of Amos—a prophet from Judah called to proclaim YHWH’s covenant lawsuit to Israel, the breakaway and short-lived Northern Kingdom. We have also completed our study of the Book of Jonah, who was a loyal Israelite, called by God to preach the word of YHWH to the city of Nineveh, in the very heart of Assyria, Israel’s mighty enemy to the north. This morning we begin our study of the prophet Hosea, who unlike Amos was an Israelite, and whose prophetic ministry overlaps that of Amos. But the Book of Hosea is very different than the Book of Amos. Hosea is the first book found in the Hebrew Minor Prophets—the Twelve—and takes on a form unique to the Minor Prophets. A book without a clear outline, Hosea’s prophecy opens with an enacted parable (chapters 1-3), before giving the reader a series of warnings, laments, poems, and sermons (chapters 4-14). Hosea is, as one commentator tells us, “a difficult book, [yet] also a great book.” He adds:

[Hosea] is like a tree whose roots go down deep into the Torah and whose branches bear the fruit of a discourse that became the grammar of biblical prophecy. Many of the themes, and much of the vocabulary, of the great literary prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel originate in Hosea. It also is a book that jolts the reader; it refuses to be domesticated and made conventional. It does comfort the afflicted, but it most surely afflicts the comfortable. It is as startling in its presentation of sin as it is surprising in its stubborn certainty of grace. It is as blunt as it is enigmatic. It is a book to be experienced, and the experience is with God.²

We are in for a difficult but rewarding study in the weeks ahead.

¹ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Hosea* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 19.

² Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, vol. 19A, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), on “Historical Background.”

As we have seen throughout our time in the Minor Prophets, whenever we take up the various books included in The Twelve, it is vital that we ask and answer a series of questions, “Who?” “When?” “Why?” and “What?” so as to consider the Minor Prophets in their historical context. It is necessary that we understand their message to their original audience, so that we can draw proper application. That context is distinctively covenantal. That is, these were prophecies given to people living under the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai through the mediation of Moses. It is wrong—and unfortunately, an all too common error—to ignore that context and lift passages from these prophets and apply them directly to specific contemporary cultural or political situations.

That said, as we look at how Hosea’s prophecy spoke to a disobedient people under the hand of YHWH’s judgment, we find what the Westminster Confession (19.4) identifies as “general equity,” that is, ways in which God’s judgment and restoration of Israel do indeed apply to God’s people today in a general sense—i.e., as we strive to see our sin, repent, and find forgiveness, and then strive to live lives of gratitude before God as spelled out in our Catechism. Hosea was not written to us—it was a legal indictment of 8th century B.C. Israel in light of the terms of the Sinai covenant which the Israelites had repeatedly and callously broken. But the things identified as sin then, are still sins now, although live we in a completely different biblical and historical context as we read these prophecies through the lens of a new and much better covenant than Israel experienced.

We start with “Who?” The opening verse gives us the author’s name and nature of his prophetic call. “*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.*” The author, or better, the recipient of the word of the Lord, is identified as Hosea, son of Beeri. Beeri means “YHWH is my wellspring,”³ but other than this, we have no information about Hosea’s family—where they lived, or their background. Hosea is said to receive the “*word of the LORD*” but is not specifically identified as a prophet (i.e., as coming from one of the schools of prophets then found in Israel). Given the lengthy time span of the kings mentioned in the opening verse, it is safe to assume that YHWH calls Hosea to his prophetic ministry at an early age—at about the time of his marriage to Gomer. He lives a long life. We know nothing about the date nor manner of his death. “Who?” Hosea.

As for the matter of “When?” the prophecy was written, we are given much more information. Hosea’s prophecy comes in the final years of the Northern Kingdom which falls to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Writing about the time of Amos or shortly after, Hosea is one of the earliest of all the biblical prophets. Like Amos, he is a contemporary of both Isaiah and Micah, who were prophets YHWH sent to the Southern Kingdom of Judah about the same time. Hosea’s mention of Jeroboam II in the opening verse (Jeroboam ruled from about 786-746 B.C.) indicates that Hosea began his ministry at some point before the king’s death.

But once Jeroboam dies, Israel entered a period of political chaos. When we are told in verse 4 that the house of Jehu will end, this points to the fact that Hosea’s ministry continued until king Zechariah, son of Jeroboam died. Zechariah was the last member of that self-appointed dynasty of Jehu destined to fall from the very beginning (see 2 Kings 15:8-12).⁴ Since Hosea also mentions several kings of Judah (the Southern Kingdom), including Hezekiah who ruled from 716-686 B.C., it may very well be the case that

³ Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 21.

⁴ J. G. McConville, “Hosea, Book of” in Boda and McConville eds., Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets, 338.

Hosea began his ministry late in Jeroboam's reign (about 760) and continued into king Hezekiah's reign (710 B.C.), a period of about 50 years. This means Hosea was active during the waning years of Jeroboam II's reign, and remained active during the fall of Israel in 722 B.C. Likely, Hosea continued to prophesy in some capacity after. Some have even speculated that Hosea escaped to Judah and completed his prophecy there.⁵

Jeroboam II ruled during a time of relative peace and prosperity, even defeating Syria, a victory which, in turn, held off the Assyrians for a time. Jeroboam extended Israel's kingdom as far north as Damascus, then as now, the most important city in the region. But as we saw in our study of the Book of Amos, serious trouble was brewing, as Amos warned of Assyria's growing power and brought YHWH's word to Israel confronting them with their deplorable treatment of the poor and warning of the nation's increasing idolatry. After Jeroboam died, he was succeeded by Zechariah, who was assassinated in 753 by a man named Shallum, who, in turn, was assassinated less than a year later by Menahem in 752. Menahem sent much Israelite gold to Assyria (as tribute) in futile hopes of staving off the inevitable invasion.

Menahem was succeeded by his son Pekahiah in 742, who was assassinated in 740 B.C. by Pekah, a high-ranking military officer who, unlike the prior regime wanted war with Assyria. Pekah formed a coalition with Syria against Assyria and tried to get Judah to join him—but king Ahaz would not go along. Hoshea [not Hosea] assassinated Pekah in 732, took the crown, and tried to enlist Egypt into a joint Israelite, Syrian, and Egyptian alliance against Assyria. When the king of Assyria discovered this foolish political manoeuvre, he took Hoshea prisoner and began taking Israelites into captivity—Assyrian records indicate some 27,290 Israelites were exiled about this time into Mesopotamia. In 722, Sargon II—King of Assyria—finally conquered the few remaining Israelite areas holding out [see map].

Confused? How can you not be! But this is the chaos into which Hosea was sent to proclaim the word of the LORD. It was a time of great political instability, economic decline, and one humiliating military defeat after another. Israel was warned over and over again about what would happen if the people continued to violate the terms of their covenant with YHWH. But despite the warnings, the nation and its leaders drifted deeper and deeper into idolatry, and became increasingly emboldened to ignore God's word and seek to go their own way. One of the difficulties in studying Hosea is that there are no easily identifiable ties between the specifics of Hosea's prophecy and the unfolding and chaotic political events just mentioned. Hosea lives at a time of a collapsing empire, great political instability, on-going invasion, and the stunned realization that YHWH's threatened judgments were no longer threats, but were being realized in the day to day life of a nation which was coming apart at the seams. So as to the "When?" question, Hosea was written about 725 B.C., shortly before the kingdom's fall.⁶

To answer the "Why?" question, we look at Israel's historical situation in the days of Hosea. God's stern judgment upon Israel did not occur in a vacuum, nor was it in any sense YHWH acting capriciously or unfairly. Because we are so far removed by time and understanding from the world of Hosea's day, it is vital we remember that the prophets God sent to Israel as covenant process servers, were sent specifically to remind the people of Israel of that covenant YHWH established with at Mount Sinai (in the 13th century BC, 600 years earlier) and then renewed with them before the people of God entered into the land of Canaan in the days of Joshua. The blessing/curse structure of the law reflects the works principle

⁵ Garrett, Hosea, Joel, on "Historical Background."

⁶ Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 21.

of God's prior covenant with Adam in Eden ("do this and you shall live"), a point made explicitly by Hosea in chapter 6:7. "*But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.*" Israel is, in a sense, acting as YHWH's son. In Hosea in 11:1, he identifies the nation as YHWH's son called out of Egypt (the Exodus), a passage which is later directly applied to Jesus in chapter 2 of Matthew's gospel (when Joseph and Mary leave Egypt after escaping Herod).

Recall that before entering the promised land, the people of Israel swore on oath that they would do everything the Lord commanded of them so as to possess the promised land. Hosea sees Israel as functioning under probation much like Adam did while in Eden. If Adam had not sinned, he would have been confirmed in righteousness and then glorified. But, as we know, that did not happen. Adam wilfully sinned against YHWH, ate the forbidden fruit and plunged our race into sin and death. Adam and Eve were then cast from Eden, and forced to wander about in exile, in Nod, east of Eden. Israel occupies a similar role in redemptive history—placed in the promised land under a similar blessing/curse principle. Like Adam, Hosea says, Israel broke YHWH's covenant. The nation will come under YHWH's curse and find themselves banished from the promised land of Canaan by the Assyrians.

One of the best indications as to how far God's people had fallen into idolatry and unbelief was the 10th century B.C. civil war which divided Israel into a Northern Kingdom and a Southern Kingdom (Judah). Under the self-appointed king Jeroboam I, the Northern Kingdom established their own holy sites (rejecting Jerusalem and its temple) its own kings (who were not descendants of David), and ordained their own priests, (who were not Levities). We can gather from the nature of the covenant lawsuit YHWH brought against Israel, that the Northern Kingdom seems to have been a religious place (in terms of on-going sacrifices and feasts), but that religion was an amalgam of Judaism (Old Testament religion), and Canaanite paganism (Baal, and local Canaanite deities). By the time of Hosea, it could be said that Israel was now the bride of Baal, not YHWH, as stated in Hosea chapter 2. Since Israel had taken Baal as its spiritual husband, it was self-evident that the nation has fallen deep into spiritual adultery. Under these circumstances it should hardly come as a surprise that YHWH's threatened covenant curses would fall upon the nation.

Israel's own history explains why so much of the language and images found in Hosea's prophecy reflect the Torah (the first five books of Moses—especially Genesis) and the covenant. The blessing/curse principle of the Sinai covenant—blessings will come from YHWH when the people obey, curses will come when the people disobey—is assumed throughout the prophets, but is often expressed in the form of predictions of destruction, followed by the promise of redemption. In the near future, the nation will experience a time of woe (invasion and destruction at the hands of the Assyrians), while in the long term there will be great blessing (i.e., when the messianic age dawns, Jesus began his public ministry in Zebulun and Naftali, as stated in Matthew 4:13-17, places which were once in Israel).⁷

One way this connection between Israel's covenant renewal (the Book of Deuteronomy) and the Prophecy of Hosea can be seen is by looking at Deuteronomy 4:20-31, where Moses sets out the blessing curse principle in light of Israel's imminent entrance into Canaan. This same situation is assumed to remain in force throughout Hosea's prophecy, given six centuries later.

But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people

⁷ Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 7.

of his own inheritance, as you are this day. 21 Furthermore, the LORD was angry with me because of you, and he swore that I should not cross the Jordan, and that I should not enter the good land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance. 22 For I must die in this land; I must not go over the Jordan. But you shall go over and take possession of that good land. 23 Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the LORD your God has forbidden you. 24 For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. 25 “When you father children and children’s children, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, so as to provoke him to anger, 26 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. You will not live long in it, but will be utterly destroyed. 27 And the LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD will drive you. 28 And there you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. 29 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. 30 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. 31 For the LORD your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them.

Moses’ words of blessing and curse in these verses are reflected throughout Hosea’s prophecy. Just as Israel was called from bondage in Egypt and constituted a nation at Mount Sinai, so too, YHWH will call Israel from bondage to the pagan god Baal and restore Israel’s covenant faithfulness. Throughout Hosea’s prophecy, it is assumed that this will be the case and that Israel’s future will be determined by the nation’s faithfulness to the terms of that covenant established at Mount Sinai. There will be blessings enjoyed and blessings withdrawn. There will be curses threatened and then delayed. But at some point those curses will fall on this disobedient and stiff-necked people (as Paul describes Israel in Romans 10, from our New Testament lesson). Israel’s great sin was to assume they had no sin, or that their sacrifices to Baal appeased the gods, or that YHWH was indifferent to whether the people kept the law or not.

Finally, Hosea speaks of a glorious but future restoration of YHWH’s people, a restoration which comes after a period of exile and destruction. Off in the distant future, YHWH will restore his relationship to his people, remove the curse (death as the wage of sin), and extend great blessing. This is a prophetic reference to the messianic age and the coming of Jesus seven hundred years later. The coming restoration (the messianic age) is reflected in the various promises found throughout Hosea’s prophecy.

But we miss the nature of these promises if we fail to see that will be realized only after the covenant curses are meted out. Israel will experience covenant curse because of the people’s sin. But this sets the stage for the coming of a Messiah who will be the ultimate blessing to the people of God. So, the “Why?” question can be answered by realizing that Israel was dominated by spiritual adultery in the days of Hosea, immediately before the final Assyrian invasion. Hosea laments in 5:4, *“their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. For the spirit of whoredom is within them, and they know not the LORD.”* It is because of this situation that YHWH commands Hosea *“to take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD”* (1:3). This command is an enacted parable, which we will discuss in more detail next week.

Finally, there is the “What?” What is in *“the Word of the LORD that came to Hosea”*? As previously mentioned, Hosea’s prophecy defies covenant literary arrangement. It can be divided into two halves: the

family parable (chapters 1-3) and a series of blessings and promises which come in the form of warnings, laments, poems, and sermons (chapters 4-14). If we knew the Torah as well as those in Hosea's day did, we would notice the repeated references to the Torah found throughout Hosea's prophecy. There are eleven specific references to the Book of Genesis. There are seven allusions or references to Israel's exodus from Egypt. Hosea chapter 2 should be seen in the light of the blessings and curses we've mentioned from the Book of Deuteronomy. Hosea 9:9 refers to the Book of Judges, chapters 19-21. As one commentator notes, "Hosea's critique of his generation is founded entirely upon the Pentateuch."⁸ Israel lives by obedience to the law. Israel will die by disobedience to the law. This is reflected in the work of Jesus, who died on the cross because our disobedience was reckoned to him, and who was raised from the dead through his own perfect obedience to YHWH's commandments. In God's future restoration, death still precedes resurrection, symbolized in Christian baptism as we die to sin and rise to newness of life (Romans 6:1-4). This is why we speak of Jesus as the true Israel.

I don't want to take us off subject, but there is a very important refutation here of the standard view of critical scholars that the Pentateuch did not reach its present form until the days of Josiah (a hundred or so years after Hosea) because the Five Books of Moses, supposedly had not yet been written. This is called the documentary hypothesis, which holds that the five books of Moses were not written by him, and were actually four separate oral traditions finally edited into the current Pentateuch (by an unknown scribe) at some point before the Fall of Judah in 586. I find it interesting that Hosea repeatedly cites from the Five Books of Moses in 725 B.C., a hundred years or so before critical scholars contend they were written. This is but another case where the assumptions made by critical scholars simply (and rather embarrassingly) do not fit the facts, nor will they change their minds.

One interesting feature of Hosea's prophecy found in the first three chapters is the mention of the births of three children, Jezreel (a son), Lo-Ruhamah ("no mercy," a daughter), and then Lo-Ammi ("not my people," another son). As recounted in Hosea 1:3b-5, the birth of Jezreel represents the future punishment coming upon Israel. Lo-Ruhamah represents both Israel's destruction and restoration (1:6-7). The longest account, that of Lo-Ammi, tells us how Hosea's family represents the nation of Israel foretelling of a time of Israel's restoration (1:10-11), and the future punishment (2:2-13), before again speaking of restoration (a chiasm). Hosea's point is that Lo-Ammi (which means "not my people") can again become the people of God.⁹

In chapters 4-14, the same three names continuously appear, especially in chapters 4-7, with the three children representing three classes of people in Israel—the religious leaders (the kings and priests), common people, and women, who seem to be especially drawn into pagan worship. This section ends with YHWH's declaration that the people of Israel are so deeply engaged in their spiritual adultery, that they can no longer repent. In chapters 8-14, YHWH (who speaks in the first person) and Hosea (in the third person) engage in a sort of back and forth dialogue. Hosea will often elaborate on the words of YHWH, confirming what we have been told in the opening chapters—Hosea's relationship with Gomer the prostitute reflects YHWH's relationship to Israel, thereby confirming Hosea as YHWH's prophet.¹⁰ Hosea takes on the role of a faithful husband to a promiscuous wife.

⁸ Garrett, Hosea, Joel, on "Historical Background."

⁹ Garrett, Hosea, Joel, on "Historical Background."

¹⁰ Garrett, Hosea, Joel, on "Historical Background."

In chapters 8-10, YHWH condemns the political intrigue in Israel. The nation no longer looks to YHWH as covenant Lord and protector, but instead seeks alliances with pagan kings and foreign gods—depicted as Israel’s new lovers. In chapters 11-13, we read again of YHWH’s perplexing bride. Does he punish her? Or forgive her because he loves her? At the end of the section it becomes clear that Israel’s offenses are so great, the nation must be punished. But this is followed in chapter 14 by a plea for Israel to return to YHWH, yet with the realization that the nation has moved past the point of no return. The people will be exiled as a means for a future restoration.¹¹ But future restoration will come.

Hosea’s wife (Gomer) represents Israel as YHWH’s unfaithful wife, even as Gomer is unfaithful to Hosea. If Gomer represents the religious leadership of Israel (the kings, priests, and ruling class who have led the nation down the road to ruin) the three children represent the people of Israel, who suffer because of the actions of their leaders, yet who, more and more, despite knowing better, begin to worship Baal, trust in fertility rights, divination, and sacrifices to the gods, rather than seek to be faithful to YHWH, their true covenant Lord. Just like an adulterous wife has broken her marriage vows, and gives birth to the illegitimate children of her lovers, so too Israel has broken its covenant with YHWH. The nation has become Lo-Ammi, “not my people.” YHWH will send this disobedient people in to exile so that once again, they will be known as “my people,” and renounce the worship of Baal and foreign gods. One day, they will see YHWH as their covenant Lord and faithful bridegroom. But that day will not come until national judgment comes. Israel (as a nation) must die, so that a new nation (a true Israel) can take its place. This, then, is the “What?” of the Book of Hosea.

This sad yet hopeful prophecy reminds us once again of how all of God’s word—including the difficult prophecy of Hosea—points ahead to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Looking back at Israel’s history from the vantage point of the death and resurrection of Jesus, in Romans 10, Paul sees the foolishness of seeking to be righteous through good works, or assuming YHWH will just overlook our sin, as did Israel in the days of Hosea. The curse (of which the covenant curses, are a part) will fall upon anyone (Jew or Gentile) who thinks they are righteous in themselves, or righteous through obedience to the law of God, or through performing religious ceremonies, or even feeling as though they never were in need of a perfect righteousness which God requires of us on the day of judgment. As we work our way through the Minor prophets we look at Israel and we say, “how could they be so sinful, so stupid, and so disobedient, and so openly engage in spiritual adultery?” Yet, we are Israel—we are guilty of many of the same sins, including spiritual adultery. But in Jesus Christ, we have a perfect bridegroom, whose obedience and death removes sin, stupidity, and disobedience from us. When he has finished his work within us, we will be his spotless bride, the guilt of our spiritual adultery washed away, and the desire to do so broken.

As Paul says of his own people, the Jews, “*for, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.*” Any future restoration of Israel will come through the obedience, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The only way any of us can withstand God’s judgment is to be found in Christ through faith, whose death removes the guilt of our sin, and whose perfect obedience to God’s commands is reckoned to us. And this is the true message of Hosea.

¹¹ Garrett, Hosea, Joel, on “Historical Background.”