

Scandalous Grace – The Book of Hosea

He Came and Bought Her

Hosea 2-3

Mark Vroegop

“Say to your brothers, ‘You are my people,’ and to your sisters, ‘You have received mercy.’ ‘Plead with your mother, plead— for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband— that she put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts; lest I strip her naked and make her as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness, and make her like a parched land, and kill her with thirst. Upon her children also I will have no mercy, because they are children of whoredom. For their mother has played the whore; she who conceived them has acted shamefully. For she said, ‘I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.’”
(Hosea 2:1–5, ESV)

My name is Mark Vroegop. And I am Gomer. The scandal of the book of Hosea is my scandal. I am the one who “played the harlot.” I was the one who used God’s gifts and let them feed the idols of my heart. I was the one who ran away. And I was the one that Jesus bought. He rescued me from the vanity fair of my idolatrous ways. Gomer’s story is my story.

That is how we should approach the book of Hosea.

Last week we started a six-week series on this 8th Century B.C. minor prophet. For some of you, it was the first time you’ve read or studied this kind of book in the Bible. I hope that you saw the gospel of Jesus Christ differently last week. And I hope that you not only understood the message, but that you also felt the message of Hosea. Hopefully, all week long.

The aim for our study called Scandalous Grace is to see how God gives grace to wayward people because He is God. In other words, like our study of Exodus five years ago, the story of Hosea is not about Hosea, or Gomer, or Israel. It is about God – a gracious, loving, righteously jealous, and redeeming God – who pursues sinful people in their rebellion.

So, while we say “I am Gomer,” we also need to say, even louder, “He is my Deliverer.”

Background of Hosea

In case you weren’t here last week, or in case you were checking Facebook during the introduction of my sermon, let me review a few key points from last week.

We are studying this book for four reasons: 1) So that we feel the weight and beauty of God’s grace, 2) Minor prophets are important voices to which we should listen in every era, 3) Spiritual adultery (as we’ll see today) did not end after the prophetic era, and 4) there are wonderful fore-shadowings of the gospel in this book.

This book helps us to hear the melody of the gospel through a different tune.

Just to set the scene again, this book is a prophetic book. It delivers a message from God to His people. The Northern Tribes, called Israel, are the audience. Hosea was written during the time period when the nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms. Judah was in the south. Israel was in the North. Israel was more rebellious, and they had worse leaders.

Hosea writes during a time of economic prosperity, national expansion, and geo-political tension. The Assyrian nation to their east was rising in power, and eventually God would use Assyria as the means of discipline for Israel and as stern warning to Judah. Forsaking God has consequences. In 722 B.C. Israel fell to an Assyrian invasion, and the people were scattered over the world as exiles.

This book attempts to warn them about the spiritual unfaithfulness in their nation, which is putting them on a collision course with God's love and justice. In order to help them feel the weight of what God feels and what they've done, the book uses the metaphor of Hosea's marriage to a woman who becomes a prostitute as a picture of His relationship with Israel.

The image, the language, and the story are designed to make you wince. Hosea helps you to see and feel the true scandal of God's grace.

Pursuing People with Costly Grace

Chapters two and three continue our journey through Hosea with a unique twist. Chapter one set the scene for scandalous grace. In the next two chapters, we see God's posture toward His people. We see God leaning in to love His people. We see Him enticing and wooing Israel. We hear His warnings about discipline that will come their way. And we also witness a very vivid illustration as Hosea buys his wife back.

These chapters show us the way God pursues His people with costly grace. So, as we walk through this section of Hosea, let's be sure not to disconnect ourselves from the story. Let's regularly remind ourselves that God still pursues people with costly grace. In fact, it may be that the reason you are here today is because of God's gracious pursuit of you right now.

1. Gracious Pursuit (vv. 1-5)

Chapter two is remarkable because of how it begins. While the people are rebellious, God lovingly and graciously pursues them. God reaches out to them, casting a vision for the future, reaffirming His love for them, while the text highlights Israel's waywardness.

Verse one is likely connected to the previous promise in 1:10-11, where God reaffirmed His covenant-keeping love and His intention to restore His people back to Himself. Therefore, we hear in verse one, "You are my people . . . you have received mercy," as we find God communicating His love for His people even in their waywardness.

Everything that God will say and do, including divine discipline, is based upon His love for His people. The tough tones of judgment that will follow should not eclipse this foundational reality. God loves His people. He will always love them.

If you are a parent with a wayward child, you know exactly what this is like. Children who disappoint and hurt their parents are still loved by them. I've talked with parents who wished they could stop loving their kids because it is the parental love that makes their waywardness so painful. The same is true for an unrepentant spouse. The hurt of the waywardness is rooted in love, so if you know this personal pain, take heart. God does too, and how He responds could be a helpful encouragement to you.

After affirming His ultimate intention of love, God pleads with Israel. The word is used two times in close proximity, which is a frequent way of emphasis in Hebrew poetry. The Hebrew word is connected to a serious – even legal – request. It is noteworthy that the NIV translates this as “rebuke” and NASB as “contend.” There is a tone of heart-felt desperation in the text.

God is deeply grieved over what the people of Israel are doing. All the warnings that follow in the text are part of God's intentional pursuit of His people. He warns them strongly because He loves them.

Verse 2 also reminds us why any action on God's part is gracious. The marriage to Israel is broken, and it is due to Israel's spiritual adultery. She is living the life of a wayward woman. The wording in verse two has historical references to sexuality and infidelity (see Jeremiah 4:30, Song of Solomon 1:13).

Next God warns the people what will happen if they refuse. Judgment is going to come. But notice how the divine discipline is described:

- Israel will be publicly exposed and ashamed (v. 3a)
- She will be vulnerable, like a little child (v. 3a)
- There will be hardship and suffering (v. 3b)
- Consequences will extend to her children (v. 4)

The final verse puts some further color on why this is happening. Beyond repeating the waywardness of Gomer (“played the whore”), we hear the words of her heart:

For she said, 'I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.'” (Hosea 2:5, ESV)

We get here the longing of an idolatrous heart. The people of Israel are not idolaters simply because they are bored with worshipping God. Rather, they pursue other gods because they believe that they will be given something.

Now, in order to understand what is happening here, you need to know something about the false god called Baal. This god was a central part of the Canaanite culture and worldview, along with another goddess called Astarte or Asheroth. Both Baal and Astarte were believed to be connected to the fertility of the earth. Baal was a male god associated with storms and rain, while Astarte was a female god associated with agriculture, trees, and plants.

The Canaanites believed that the fertility of their crops was directly related to the fertility of the gods. Therefore, the worship of Baal involved both offerings and rampant immorality. Sexual activity was central to the worship of Baal, as it was believed to be the means by which the fertility of the crops, animals, and the land was facilitated. Cultic prostitution was a part of the worship of Baal. In fact, when a worshipper selected a cult prostitute he would say, "I beseech the goddess of Asarte to favor you and Baal to favor me."¹

The deadly attraction of Baal was the satanic strategy of combining what people believed they needed along with sexual pleasure and then making it seem normal. The crops needed rain. Baal provides it. Baal is moved to act through sacrifice and sensuality. In order to get what is needed, spiritual idolatry and sexual immorality combine in a deadly and addictive pattern of worship.

Can I just tell you that the enemy has not changed his strategy? Paul addresses nearly the same problem at Corinth with the temple of Diana and the Gnostic error that separated physical acts, such as sex, from the condition of one's soul (see 1 Cor. 6:12-20). Paul, using Hosea's language, rests his case by saying "you were bought with a price . . ." (1 Cor. 6:20). In Colossians 3:5, after listing four sexually-oriented sins and covetousness, he says ". . . which is idolatry."

Even today the enemy uses the deadly combination of what we think we want or need with a physical or emotional pay-off. Years ago, I read the following analysis of idolatry by Ed Welch:

So it is with modern idolatry as well. We don't want to be ruled by alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, food or anything. No, we want these substances or activities to give us what we want: good feelings, a better self-image, a sense of power, or whatever our heart is craving. Idols, however, do not cooperate. Rather than mastering our idols, we become enslaved by them and begin to look to like them . . . Idolaters lose their spiritual moorings . . . controlled by the lure of the sirens: "this will is the way to feeling good, pleasure, belonging and a better self-image." But they are doomed to be destroyed on the rocks.²

The issue of idolatry has not gone away since the 8th Century before Christ's birth. It is still a rampant problem and God is still pursuing His people because of it. He is still graciously pursuing people whose "want" is broken and who are guilty of having another god. Sin always offers a pay-off, yet God keeps pursuing us. Why? Because He is God.

2. Gracious Discipline (vv. 6-13)

The second gracious action on God's part involves His discipline. Verses 6-13 detail two kinds of divine intervention that God will employ in order to stop Israel from this idolatrous slide.

Divine Resistance

The first aspect of God's discipline is to make Israel's idolatry more difficult. That is why we read about a "hedge" and a "wall" around her so that Israel cannot find the wrong paths (v. 6). God intends for her

¹ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1619.

² Welch, Ed and Gary Shogren, *Addictive Behavior: Resources for Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 1995), 40.

to have a struggle finding her lovers (v. 7) so that she'll give up her sinful pursuit and turn back to be faithful.

She needs this divine resistance because her mind and heart are "darkened" (to use Paul's language in Romans 1:21). The nation no longer connects the blessings of their lives with God's favor. They not only take God's kindness and mercy for granted, but they also use those resources for their idolatry.

In James 4, after calling the people adulterous because of their covetousness and conflict, we hear "God resists the proud, but he gives grace to the humble" (James 4:4,6). God still brings resistance to His people when they stray. Some of you know exactly what that looks like. Maybe this message is even part of that divine resistance. You keep getting warnings from the Lord. That's the first step of discipline, but there's more.

Divine Removal

In verses 9-13 we find the Lord taking more specific and more drastic actions. There are six "I will" statements, all connected to discipline from God.

- v. 9 – God intends to take back the supplies that the people trusted in. Notice the similar reference to the coverings of the Garden (Genesis 3:7).
- v. 10 – God will expose her actions publicly. She cannot hide in the dark anymore.
- v. 11 – Israel's celebrations will be stopped. The party is over.
- v. 12 – God will remove the things that she believes she has earned or deserved.
- v. 13 – The favor of God will be removed, and she'll be punished for her pagan worship.

God removes resources, privacy, happiness, position, possessions, and His favor. God intends for Israel to know that they are experiencing the discipline of the Lord in order to win her back. God loves Israel. Therefore, He must do something.

The book of Hebrews echoes this sentiment about the loving purposes of divine discipline. The writer quotes Proverbs 3:11-12 as an encouragement to see discipline as a sign of God's love:

"And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."" (Hebrews 12:5-6, ESV)

God disciplines His people out of love. I wonder if that is where you are today? Have the idols of your heart gotten the better of you, and can you see that the Lord is sending you a message through resistance or removal? Why not turn back to the Lord today? He's loving you by making life tough. Don't resist His discipline another day.

Sometimes I'm asked how you know if the Lord is disciplining you. Something bad happens, or multiple things happen. You wonder. At one level, everything hard and good has discipline or growth qualities that can emerge, so it is not always a clear answer. But how do you know if something big is connected to a specific sin? My answer: You know. Almost immediately. And when you do, remember it is a sign of God's love for you that it happened.

3. Gracious Hope (vv. 14-23)

The text makes a beautiful, redemptive, and hopeful turn in verse 14, as we see the third expression of God's merciful pursuit of His people. The tone shifts from warning to wooing.

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her."
(Hosea 2:14, ESV)

God intends to win back the heart of His people. The word "allure" can be strong enough to suggest enticement or seduction.³ God is going to make the emotional and personal case for Israel's return. His strategy, to speak tenderly to her, was often used in romantic contexts in the Bible (Gen. 34:3, Ruth 2:13).⁴

Take note of the fact it is God who is making the first move and the greater effort. Israel initiated her waywardness, but it is God who initiates the gracious pursuit to bring her back. This reminds me of one of the most well-known passages in the Bible – "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." (John 3:16). This is who God was. This is who God is. He offers gracious hope because He is the one who brings it to wayward people.

What follows in verses 15-23 is a beautiful picture of what God desires to do for His people. He allures them with the promise of His blessing:

- God will make places with bad memories, such as the Valley of Achor⁵, places of redemption (v. 15)
- God will restore them to their first love, as in their deliverance from Egypt (v. 15)
- God will renew His relationship with His people (v. 16)
- God will wipe the temptation toward idolatry out of their experience (v. 17)
- God will make a covenant of peace with His people (v. 18)
- God will betroth them to Himself with a bride-price of righteousness, justice, steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness (v. 19-20)
- God will show His glory and kindness to the entire created order (v. 21-22)
- God will show mercy and grace to those who formerly rejected Him (v. 23)

Did you notice all the "God will" statements I just read? God is the one who is going to bring hope into the equation. God's people, just like you and me, prove time and time again that our redemption cannot rely on our reliability. Our faithfulness cannot be dependent on our fidelity. Our only hope is for God to be God.

And what a joy to consider the God-centeredness of the hope of redemption. God allures His people. God makes promises to His people. God restores His people. God makes covenants with His people. God is the one whose glory is displayed.

³ Hubbard, David A. *Hosea: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 24, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 91.

⁴ Hubbard, 91.

⁵ See Joshua 7.

“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

4. Gracious Picture (3:1-5)

And just to be sure that we get the picture deeply embedded in our hearts, chapter 3 records Hosea’s gracious rescue of his wife as he buys her back. Verse one sets the scene again for us. The prophet is commanded to love a wayward woman, but this time there is a specific price. Verse 2: *“So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley.”* We are not sure of the specific context of Gomer’s situation. But her plight and helplessness are clear. She was either enslaved or was in debt so badly that she was trapped.

Keep in mind that this would have been the second time that Hosea has paid for Gomer. He would have surrendered a sizable sum to her family as a bridal dowry.⁶ Now he is paying for her again. Can you imagine? Like God with us, Hosea pays Gomer’s debt so that what already belonged to him can be brought back to him. The purchase is redemptive. Hosea intends for Gomer to be rescued and for her to change. Verse 3 bears this out. Gomer will belong to Hosea, but his purchase of her was not so that she can be free to continue her previous lifestyle. Hosea’s purchase is designed to bring about a new relationship between Gomer and him.

God is setting His people on a path for restoration. That is what verse 4 is referring to. And there is a hope for a future day when the people who sought after Baal will once again seek the Lord their God. There is a dream of a coming day when a David-like king will rule them. And there will be a time when they will fear the Lord in the right way and experience the beauty of His goodness.

I Am Gomer

What a picture of the beauty of God’s grace that we find in this book! This text calls us to do a number of things:

- Consider if God might be calling you to turn from your waywardness and come to Jesus today.
- Contemplate the way in which God rescued you from the slave market of your own idolatry.
- Confess areas of idolatry that have taken hold of your life.
- Celebrate the God-centeredness of redemption.

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:4–9, ESV)

⁶ Dearman, J. Andrew. *The Book of Hosea, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 135–136.

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