

Scandalous Grace – The Book of Hosea

A Full and Forgetful Heart

Hosea 11-13

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“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, 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. They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but 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 because of their own counsels. My people are bent on turning away from me, and though they call out to the Most High, he shall not raise them up at all. 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.”
(Hosea 11:1–8, ESV)

I want you to think with me about the last time you asked yourself the following questions:

- Where am I? – Probably a situation where you were lost.
- Where is this going? – Probably a scenario where uncertainty was the norm.
- Who am I? – Probably a personal crisis that caused you to ask some probing questions.
- Who is God? – Probably a painful situation that created spiritual questions.

If I were to interview various people, the last time you asked yourself those kinds of questions was probably an uncomfortable or difficult moment. Maybe you are asking yourself those questions today. Maybe you are in church today because of those questions.

But aren't those questions important to ask all the time? They are fundamental questions in life, aren't they? If you don't know where you are, where life is going, who you are, and who God is walking through life can be very, very challenging – even dangerous.

Crisis or pain tend to pull the “cork out of the bottle” when it comes to these questions. They are always lingering underneath the surface of our lives. Sometimes it takes a crisis for those questions and answers to become clear.

The Crisis of Sunday

However, a crisis is not the only place where those questions and answers are clarified. The aim of our corporate gathering is to wrestle with these questions. In fact, I hope you'll join us in November (after we wrap up Hosea and two weeks on Global Missions), for a series that I'm calling: *Come Let Us Worship*. We are going to explore the strategic and spiritual purpose of why we gather together. I'm excited to walk through this series together.

What happens every Sunday as we gather is a spiritual crisis of sorts. We are reminded about some very important spiritual truths – the kind of things that create and answer critical and eternal questions.

Hosea is a crisis book. It began with the crisis of a prophet marrying a wayward woman. It featured her rescue from the slave-market of her rebellion. And the point of the entire book was to send a message to the people of God about the scandalous nature of their sin and God's grace. Remember the theme of Hosea is: God gives grace to wayward people because He is God.

This book and Sunday helps us to see that again.

Today we are going to cover Hosea 11-13. These chapters give us a cyclical portrait (similar themes keep re-emerging) regarding what God is like and what people are like. It is too easy for us to fall into a pattern where we forget some foundational truths. We can become so full of life or ourselves that we forget who God is and who we are. And we need the crisis of Sunday to awaken us. We need the reset that comes through the Word to help us.

So let's look at what we can learn about God and ourselves. And then we'll see how Jesus and the gospel connects to all of this.

What is God Like?

The theme of the book of Hosea is to call the people of Israel back to God. The prosperity and the cultural pressure around them created a fractured relationship between the nation of Israel and their covenant keeping God. The book began with the personal illustration of Hosea, who faithfully and sacrificially loves his wayward wife. The picture was designed to point the reader toward God. Israel is Gomer. God is Hosea.

We see this picture very clearly in the first two verses of Hosea 11. These verses could be a summation of the prophetic message of Hosea:

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols." (Hosea 11:1–2, ESV)

The contrast between God's faithfulness and the faithlessness of Israel are so evident. So what does this and other texts tell us about God?

1) God has a people

These chapters remind us about a very basic concept in the Scriptures. They show us that God considers human beings His children. They are His people. You see this in verse one as Israel is called "a child" and "my son."

We also see this concept in 12:9 when God says, "I am the LORD your God." He is reminding them who He is and about His special relationship with His people. The word LORD has its roots in the creation account. It was first used in Genesis 2:4 as a summary statement regarding God's creative power. God is the creator of all people. He has people. But the story of the entire Bible is the way

He is attempting to bring the people He created back to Himself. Within all created people, God has specific people who He seeks to rescue.

We hear that theme in Hosea 13:4 where God tells them: “you have no God but me...” God has a people.

2) God loves His people

We also see the remarkable love that God has for His people. The word for “love” means strong affection and attraction towards. It is the same word used negatively for Gomer’s lovers in Hosea 2:7. It is the same word that the prophet Jeremiah used when he said this about God’s love:

“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.”
(Jeremiah 31:3, ESV)

God has great affection for His people, and we see this with parental metaphors in 11:3-4, teaching Ephraim to walk and leading them with bands of love.

In 11:8-9 we see the loving conflict of God. He desperately wants them to change, and He is conflicted with how they are acting. Notice the language “my heart recoils within me...” in verse 8. And in 13:5, God reminds them about the journey that they’ve been through. God loves His people.

3) God corrects His people

We also see a picture of God correcting His people. Out of His love and concern for them, He brings regretful but necessary circumstances that are designed to awaken them to their spiritual condition.

In Hosea 11:10-11, the prophet talks about the time when God will call His people out of exile. He will use their displacement in order to awaken their hearts to Him. In 12:14, there are divinely given consequences for Israel’s actions. Israel is not going to get away with their rebellion. In fact, being on the wrong side of divine justice is described in 13:7 like a lion or leopard stalking its prey or like a bear robbed of her cubs.

These statements are designed to call Israel out of her spiritual complacency. God loves His people enough to enact divine discipline.

4) God delivers His people

There is a final observation that we can make about God in these chapters. Throughout chapters 11-13 there is a clear theme of God delivering His people. His relationship with them, His love for them, and His discipline of them all are designed to accomplish their deliverance.

This theme begins in 11:1 when we read “out of Egypt I called my son.” This is obviously referring to the Exodus – the most profound act of deliverance in the Old Testament. It became the defining story of redemption. God rescued people from slavery. He conquers false gods. He split the Red Sea. He is a delivering God.

In 12:10-13 we learn that God not only conquered nations like Egypt, but He also proclaimed His word through the prophets and gave them leaders. The revelation through the prophets and the provision of leaders was part of God's kind deliverance.

And finally, God emphasizes to His people that there is no other savior besides Him in 13:4b.

This is what God is like. He is the Creator. You were made in the image of God. He created people, and He is calling people to become His people – even today. Are you one of His people?

Do you know that God loves you and cares for you? Do you need to remind your heart today about what God is like? Has the enemy tempted you this week to believe lies about God? Has suffering or your own sin caused you to forget about the faithfulness and loving kindness of God?

Do you know that deliverance, forgiveness, and cleansing is available to you – not because of your faithfulness, but because of His?

Remember the words of the apostle John in 1 John 1:9 - *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* (1 John 1:9, ESV)

What are We Like?

Now this explanation of what God is like points us toward the stark contrast of what people – His people – are like. The reason grace is scandalous is owing to how bad and sinful human beings can really be. We need a regular reality check because we will easily convince ourselves that we are the exception to the rule and that everyone else is worse than us.

Let's allow this section to remind us who we really are, knowing that we are not going to stay there.

1) Broken desires

The tragedy of God's people is that we have an insatiable appetite to do the wrong thing with hearts that are bent the wrong direction. In 11:2 we hear that the more they were called (by sin) the more they were drawn away. And 11:7 tells us that the natural heart of mankind is bent toward evil.

Paul says that same thing in Romans 3.

"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10–12, ESV)

2) Prone to hypocrisy

In 11:12 God takes them to task for their spiritual hypocrisy. They are surrounding God with lies, telling Him they love Him when, in reality, nothing could be further from the truth.

It is similar to what Isaiah said: *"...this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me..."* (Isaiah 29:13, ESV). Sacrifices and worship and singing are

continuing, but their hearts are far from God. No doubt they despise hypocrites. And yet they are full of spiritual fakery.

3) Futile living

We find a devastating statement in the beginning of chapter 12. The people “feed on the wind” and “pursue the east wind all day long” (12:1). In the Bible, this kind of language is used to describe a passion for pointlessness. The book of Ecclesiastes frequently uses wind this way (Ecc. 2:1, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9). A great example is Ecclesiastes 1:14 - “*I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.*” (Ecclesiastes 1:14, ESV).

They are pursuing things that will not deliver them, will not satisfy them. Rather than looking to God for their deliverance, they turn to Assyria or Egypt. They are afraid of what is happening to them, but they keep running to the wrong places.

Tim Keller connects this kind of fear with the problem of idolatry when he writes:

One of the signs that an object is functioning as an idol is that fear becomes one of the chief characteristics of life. When we center our lives on the idol, we become dependent on it. If our counterfeit god is threatened in any way, our response is complete panic. We do not say, ‘What a shame, how difficult,’ but rather ‘This is the end! There’s no hope!’¹

4) Self-Deceived

In 12:7 we find that the people are characterized by self-deception. Their culture is characterized by oppression and unfairness. But the wealth of the nation causes them to cover over their sins. Their wealth convinces them that they are better than what they really are. Their prosperity led to pride. And their pride caused them to minimize their waywardness from God.

Oh how tempting it is to think, “Look what I did!” How dangerous it is to believe “God blessed us because we are special or faithful.” How frequent it happens that we believe the press release from our self-deceived hearts.

5) Never satisfied

I wish the indictment stopped there, but it doesn’t. It continues with a damning statement in 13:2 – “they sin more and more.” Human beings are never static in sin. There is always a pull toward what is next. The text tells us that they have become skillful at creating metal images. They are the works of the craftsman. And yet it makes the people like a morning mist, like dew on the ground, like the chaff, or like smoke.

I’m sure you sense this. The promise of the next vacation, the next experience, the next weekend, the next job. The promise of the next compliment, the next affirmation, or the next completed

¹ <http://dailykeller.com/category/idolatry/>

project. Or maybe the promise of the next relationship, the next sensuous image, or the next sexual experience. This relentless pursuit makes you unstable, unfulfilled, and deeply unhappy.

Sin is a shadow that never satisfies. It is never static. It always wants more.

6) Forgetful

The final dark description comes in 13:6. It is a great summary of the essence of the problem for Israel and for mankind. We became full. And when we are full, our hearts are lifted up. In our pride, we forget God.

The people were warned about this very thing in Deuteronomy 6. They were cautioned against taking the gifts of the promised land – vineyards, olive trees, wells – and forgetting how God had rescued them from Egypt.

Is this not true in your life? What is more dangerous for your spiritual attention and affection: hard times or good times? Do you not pray more intentionally and with greater fervor when you are scared? Did you not seek the Lord more passionately when your marriage was on the rocks? It is much easier to forget the Lord when the heart is full.

And for Israel, it wasn't long until they wanted a king so that they could be like the other nations (1 Samuel 8:6). And God gave them kings in His anger and took them away in His wrath (13:11). All of this was to make them realize how far they had fallen. Sometimes God puts people in our lives in order to remind us that we need Him. He knows how easy it is for us to forget.

What are we like? Let's review. I know that this is a pretty heavy list, but it's an important one because part of the reason that you are here today is to receive a caution from the Word about what we are really like. Israel's story is your story. Gomer's story is my story.

Peel back the layers with all of us and you'll find broken desires, hypocrisy, futile living, self-deception, insatiable desires, and forgetfulness.

I don't tell you this to shame you or to make you feel more guilty than what we should. I tell you this because the hope for spiritual change doesn't come from ignoring this reality, but from embracing it. This text is meant to encourage you by helping you see yourself for what you are really like.

Immature and insecure people never want to be told when they are wrong. The same is true for spirituality.

Listen to how C.S. Lewis summarized the need for self-reflection in *Mere Christianity*:

"When a man is getting better he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him. When a man is getting worse he understands his own badness less and less. A moderately bad man knows he is not very good: a thoroughly bad man thinks he is all right. This is common sense, really. You understand sleep when you are awake, not while you are sleeping. You can see mistakes in arithmetic when your mind is working properly: while you are making them you cannot see them. You can understand the nature of drunkenness

when you are sober, not when you are drunk. Good people know about both good and evil: bad people do not know about either."

What Jesus is Like

The story of Hosea and Gomer is meant to point beyond the 8th Century B.C. The waywardness of Israel is designed to point us to the ultimate solution for the people of God. Because of what God is like and because of what we are like, we need a Savior. This text points to both the person of Jesus as the true embodiment of the people of God and reminds us that God's greatest demonstration of love and redemption has already happened. Therefore, we can read the dark account in Hosea with hope.

Where do we see Jesus in this text? Well, back to 11:1. We know that Jesus not only comes to the earth as an infant (Luke 2:11-14), and He is called a beloved Son at His baptism (Matthew 3:17), but Matthew even uses the flight of Jesus to Egypt as a type of the people of God in Matthew 2:15.

But how different He was than Israel! Unlike the deceitful people of Israel (Hosea 11:12), Jesus committed no sin nor was any deceit found in His mouth (1 Peter 1:21-22). Their worship is fake. He cleansed the temple of its fake worship (Matthew 21:12-17), and He identifies true righteousness as a matter of the inside and the outside (Matthew 5-6).

Whereas Israel trusted in her riches (Hosea 12:8), Jesus emptied Himself and took the form of a servant (Phil. 2:5-7). He became poor so that we could be enriched by the grace of God (2 Cor. 8:9). Jesus became the Savior that they so desperately needed. He is the righteous King who is not given in wrath, but who absorbs the wrath of God.

Jesus is the prophet who spoke God's word, telling sinful people – "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the father but by me!" (John 14:6). At the Feast of Tabernacles, He offered living water to anyone who comes to Him and from them will flow rivers of living water (John 7:36-38).

Rather than being a Lion waiting to pounce in Hosea 13:7, He's the Lion of Judah who conquers sin and is able to open the scrolls of God's will (Revelation 5:5). He is the embodiment of obedience that Israel (and we) lacked, but He is also the one who made redemption possible.

In the God-man, Jesus-Christ, God provided full obedience and complete atonement. Jesus was and is everything that we are not so that He could provide the forgiveness we so desperately need. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, there is a path for the kind of deliverance that all people need.

Back in Hosea 13:14 we read these words:

"I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol; I shall redeem them from Death. O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting?" (Hosea 13:14, ESV)

And it is the apostle Paul who quotes this verse in his letter to the Corinthian church when he talks about the victory that belongs to those who are in Christ:

"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 15:55–57, ESV)

That's what Jesus is like.

Hosea shows us the kind of crisis that would cause God's people to take close look at themselves. It was a book designed to push them toward questions like "who is God?", "who am I?", and "where do we turn?"

I wonder if you are asking those same questions today. Or maybe, if you are honest, your heart is full and forgetful. And today was a good wake-up call. Or perhaps you simply needed to be anchored again to who Jesus is.

Regardless, this text invites us to wrestle with three questions:

What is God like?

What am I like?

What is Jesus like?

My hope is that the crisis in Hosea will create spiritual life in you as you look to Jesus.

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