

UNDERSTANDING HOW GOD FEELS
Exodus 20:1-6; Matthew 4:8-10; Hosea 1:1-2:1

Wangaratta, 25/10/15

How would you like to be known as a “*minor prophet*”? Reading back into the Old Testament today, the prophets are regarded as heroes – which they surely were. These were the men, and women, chosen by God, filled with his Spirit – long before Pentecost – and called – conscripted sometimes – to deliver God’s message to his people. What an honour! What a challenge! What about the term “*minor prophet*”? Was he only *partly* filled with God’s Spirit? Did God only trust him with relatively unimportant instructions; leaving the really heavy stuff to the “big guys”, like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel?

Not at all. The expression “*minor prophets*” doesn’t really do justice to the tasks they were given. It simply means their writings are not as long as the “*major prophets*”. On that basis, Hosea, the man of God we’ll consider this morning, and next week, only just missed the cut. There are twelve chapters in Daniel, the last of the so-called “*major prophets*”. Hosea has fourteen, but some of them are quite short. (And of course the chapter divisions we use today were introduced much later.)

How could you tell a “*real*” prophet from a false one, back then? It was pretty easy, really. The real prophet was the one still alive and walking around! God took the proclamation of his word very seriously – and I was going to say “back then” – but of course he still takes the proclamation of his word very seriously, and so should we. Back then, if a prophet’s predictions failed to come true, then he was a “*false*” prophet, and stoned to death.

The life of a “*real*” prophet in those days was no bed of roses, either. God’s people back then didn’t always behave themselves in ways appropriate to their high privilege. Throughout this series we’ll note some sobering similarities between our times and theirs. So the message God gave his prophets to proclaim was often stern and uncompromising, and as we can well imagine, unpopular with those who received it.

We use an expression today: “Shoot the messenger.” As far as I know, no-one ever shot an Old Testament prophet, but they did a heap of other unkind and unpleasant things to them. It was an honour to be chosen and called to be God’s prophet. It was never easy, or comfortable.

To introduce Hosea and his message, and this series we’ve planned around the minor prophets, I want to take you on

I. A Brief Overview of a Nation’s History.

Let me give you the two points in my outline under this heading, because they run together, rather than in sequence. As we consider Israel’s history, they were

A. God’s Chosen People; and they were B. Often Disobedient.

Did I mention there are similarities between our times and theirs?

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God called Abraham to leave his homeland for a new land and a whole new way of life. God promised Abraham he would become the father of a mighty nation. God would bless him, and multiply his descendants, and through this nation, ultimately, the whole world would be blessed. Abraham obeyed God, and after a rather slow, and bumpy start, Isaac was born, then Jacob (his son), and through Jacob and his twelve sons, the dynasty started to take shape.

In a time of great famine, the family left the Promised Land, and took up residence in Egypt; where they would stay four hundred years. Jacob's sons became the leaders or founders of the tribes of Israel; and the Egyptians, fearing their growing numbers, made them their slaves.

God raised up Moses to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt and back to their Promised Land. The people grumbled along the way, and what should have taken weeks, took God's people forty years, during which all the grumblers died in the wilderness. (I'm glad I live in our times, not theirs!) Sadly, Moses too disobeyed God in a moment of frustration. He saw their precious Promised Land from a distance; but he died before his people finally made it home.

Joshua was chosen to lead God's people back to the land he gave Abraham so long ago. We know God stopped the flow of the Jordan so the people could cross safely; he demolished the mighty walls of Jericho so his people could capture this city, strategic to their return. Some of us struggle with the violence and bloodshed in all this, and God's command to drive the Canaanites out of the land he'd given to Israel. We place this in the context of the destructive influence of the Canaanite's evil worship practices, and the knowledge that God accepts and welcomes those who repent and turn to him. Rahab the prostitute from Jericho was spared in the destruction of that city, and welcomed into the royal line into which David, and ultimately Jesus, was born.

Settled back in their Promised Land, the people were ruled by a series of judges, of varying skill and capacity; and when the people clamoured for a king, like the nations around them, God, reluctantly it seems, gave them Saul. He turned out to be a dud, and was replaced by David, a mighty warrior and powerful king. He was succeeded by his son, Solomon, who asked God for wisdom, and ruled his people wisely, most of the time. His son, Rehoboam, lacked his father's wisdom, and after some disastrous decisions, civil war broke out and the once united nation, divided. The northern tribes are usually called "Israel", the southern kingdom became Judah. It was a disaster, with an uneasy relationship between the two kingdoms, and ongoing hostilities with their neighbours. Which brings us to

II. Hosea & Gomer.

Hosea served God as prophet during a succession of kings in Judah, while Jeroboam the second reigned in Israel. During this time, Israel especially drifted further and further from God; and God sent a series of prophets to warn his people and call them to repentance.

We worship God as Creator, and he found a particularly creative way to show his people how he felt about their conduct and behaviour. He said to Hosea, "We're going to put on a play. I want you to take the starring role. You can be me!"

What an honour! Can you imagine playing the role of God? I think Morgan Freeman played God once, in a film whose name I can't recall! This wasn't a film! And it was no ordinary play, either; it was

A. A Real Life Drama.

Hosea was going to act out, in real life, an experience that showed how God felt about his relationship with his people. Right about now I reckon Hosea started to feel nervous. As a single man, I'm sure he would have looked forward to meeting someone special, getting married, and settling into the joys and blessings of married life and raising a family. At this point Gomer enters the drama.

Now, in his first chapter, Hosea doesn't waste much time or many words describing their courtship! But in the chapters that follow we see something of the depth of his love for Gomer. Perhaps she loved him too, *at first*. They married, and in due course, Gomer became pregnant, and gave birth to a son. God told Hosea to name him "Jezreel", the site of a particularly violent battle in Israel's past. The name also means "God's scatters," which can refer to God's threat to scatter his disobedient people, or to God scattering seeds in preparation for a harvest. Both these prophecies would be fulfilled in Israel's history. As a name, "Jezreel" sounds a bit dodgy, but I've heard worse!

Sometime after the birth of Jezreel, Hosea's relationship with Gomer started to fall apart, according to the script God had warned Hosea to prepare for. Gomer became restless in their marriage and started to look around. She began a sexual relationship with several other men, who gave her gifts in exchange for her sexual favours. Hosea records the birth of two more children; and Gomer's behaviour, and the names God told Hosea to give these little babies lead us to suspect Hosea was not their father.

He called the little girl, "Lo-Ruhamah" which means "not loved". What a terrible name! Remember, this is a real life drama, portraying how God now feels towards his rebellious people. God told Hosea to call the little boy, "Lo-Ammi, "not my people." It sounds, on the surface, that Hosea is saying to his community, "He's not mine!" In the symbolism of the drama, we hear God saying, "these are not my people." Immediately, we remember the terms of what we now call the "old covenant", first given to Abraham. God said, "I will be their God," "and they will be my people." "If you are going to behave like this," God tells the people now, through Hosea and his heartbreaking experience, "*I disown you!*" We don't take lightly the instructions of a jealous, sovereign God! (The word "jealous" is God's term; not mine!)

What had God's people done that was so bad it prompted such a devastating response? We see in Hosea's life experience drama – a tragedy really – the close parallel between two terms that sound a bit similar:

B. Adultery and Idolatry.

Many years ago now, as a teenager teaching Sunday School, I hit a bit of a roadblock. The series of lessons we were following took us to the Ten Commandments. The first few were OK (we read the first two from Exodus 20 this morning.) But I knew in just a few short weeks, the seventh commandment was coming. How do I explain "Thou shalt not commit adultery" to a class of young boys? I'm sure I wasn't the first – or last – Sunday School teacher, or Children's Church leader, to agonise over this one!

My Sunday School Superintendent at the time was very helpful. He said adultery is taking something precious that belongs to the family, and giving it away to somebody else. I honestly can't remember if this satisfied the natural curiosity of a class of young boys, or if they wanted to delve further into the specifics; but that wise man's definition has stayed with me, and I still find it helpful. Adultery is betrayal; it's a violation of trust, and God hates it, as he hates all sin. The little book of Hosea gives us

C. A Glimpse Into the Heart of God.

God regards idolatry as spiritual adultery; taking something precious, the worship of the people he loves and calls his own family, and giving it to someone else. Ask Hosea how he felt about Gomer sleeping around, and we know he'll describe it as heartbreaking. What a terrible assignment God gave Hosea! "Now you know how *I* feel," God told him. "*Tell my people!*"

How could they do it to the God who loved them? Their whole history was bound up in God's love and compassion, his bountiful provision, his patience and forbearance as they regularly disobeyed him and let him down. "Tell my people this can't go on. My patience will not last forever. If you continue to trample on my love; if you continue to give your love and worship to somebody else, then our relationship is over." God's heart breaks when his people prove unfaithful.

It wasn't as though they didn't know. The very first of ten very clear and unambiguous commandments spelled it out for them: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."

III. No Other "gods".

A. We Live in a Pluralist Society.

This is more than just Hosea's story, for the people of his times. God's people today continue to put him through the same heartache that prompted the drama with Hosea and Gomer.

Back then, the people returning to their Promised Land failed to drive out the Canaanites, with their foreign gods and despicable worship practices. (Think temple prostitution and child sacrifice.) How could God's people even contemplate such evil?

I'm sure they didn't, at first. But it's human nature to begin to tolerate that which we've become accustomed to. Do you remember what the people did, out in the wilderness, while Moses spent an unusually long time away, up on the mountain with God? They brought their gold to Aaron, and pleaded with him to make a golden calf; and they worshipped this thing Aaron made, *and thanked it for delivering them out of Egypt!* That's just about the stupidest thing I've ever heard! How could they do that?

They'd spent four hundred years amongst people who worshipped that way. It's the frog in the saucepan of boiling water syndrome. By Hosea's time, God's people had spent at least four hundred years back in the Promised Land. God told them to drive out the Canaanites, and they didn't. God told them: don't marry a Canaanite; don't bring that horrible stuff into your homes; and some of them married Canaanites, and brought idols and set up shrines in their homes. And bit by bit, the hearts of the people turned. Not all of them, and maybe not completely; but the pure worship of the one, true, living God was diminished, and diluted, and adulterated.

Can you see where I'm going with this? Let's consider, for a moment, some

B. 21st Century "gods".

I'm not tempted to set up a golden calf. We're not attracted to worship involving temple prostitution or child sacrifice. The little exposure I've had to eastern religions, to be honest, did absolutely nothing for me, spiritually or intellectually. Our nation is quite edgy about the growth and spread of Islam right now, and with good cause; but Islam isn't the religion that poses our greatest threat. There is something far more dangerous.

The people of this "faith" don't wear unusual clothes; they don't build conspicuous places of worship, or gather in ways we notice, to worship their "gods" or promote their religion. It "just happens" all around us, and this is partly what makes it so dangerous. We call it "secular humanism"; I'm not sure its followers use that term.

I have at home a book by Richard Foster with the bold title, *"Money, Sex and Power"*; three things, not bad in themselves, in fact, God's gifts to us when used appropriately, but misused,

they become gods in our times. We may want to add *Technology and Pleasure* to Foster's list, to better reflect our century.

Perhaps he could have simply called his book, "*Me, Me, Me*"; or "*More, More, More*"! Right back in New Testament times, Paul warns of the danger of greed, which he calls "idolatry". In secular humanism, God is unceremoniously dumped from the throne (humanists say he doesn't exist) and the throne is offered to me.

Of course, we recoil in horror! We would never usurp God's rightful position. We've been living amongst the humanists and their gods for generations now. Have we unconsciously brought some of their practices, some of their gods, into our lives, our homes, our families, our church? How does God feel about the way we live and worship and allocate our time?

Hosea's experience and his message were intended by God as a warning, while there was time for his people to assess their lifestyles and make some changes. I've not found this an easy message to prepare or deliver. Considering what God asked *Hosea* to do, I'm not complaining!

I want to pick up his story, and his message again next week; and I want to foreshadow something of what is to come, as Hosea foreshadows it in the last paragraph of our reading, which begins with the words, "*Yet the time will come...*" Here, Hosea offers us the

C. Hope,

we've been looking for, in what has otherwise been a fairly gloomy picture. With God, always, there is hope! And promise. And opportunity. In this time to come, Israel's numbers will increase greatly: like the sands of the seashore, too many to count. And those poor little kids with those terrible names will be renamed; the "not" will be taken out. They, and the nation they represented, will be called "my people", "the ones I love". Always, there is hope.

But there's risk as well. The promises were conditional on Israel's repentance and return. And we know from history they saw dark days before the promises were realised.

How much better if the people had never allowed themselves to be tempted, turned away from their true worship of God. Will we learn in time, the lesson they learned through sad and bitter experience? God uses the powerful imagery of marriage to make his point through Hosea. We have the privilege and opportunity of living to please the One who loves us. Let's seek to do that.

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