

Sermon Series: *Hosea: A Divine Love Story*



The Rewarding Love of God

I Desire Love, Not Sacrifice

Introduction

Once upon a time there was a father who had two sons. The youngest son became so enamored with the luxuries of the world that one day he said to his father, "Dad, you know I wish you were dead so I could have all the money that's coming to me through my inheritance."

The father was was deeply moved by the painful words of his youngest son and after a night of weeping, the next morning he initiated the liquidation of half of his estate. After the liquidation was complete he handed to his son a massive sum of money and said, "Here it is, the money you would receive if I died today." His son jumped up and down with great joy, took the money, and began packing his bags.

As his son was about to drive away, the broken-hearted father mustered all the self-control he possessed and said, "I want you to remember one thing, although there is a part of me that died today, my love for you will never die. When you run out of money, come home, because my love for you will never run out."

The son looked into his father's eyes and said, "Are you kidding me? I'll never run out of money and I'm never coming back home." Then he sped away.

Israel's Historical 'State of the Union'

As we continue in our series through the book of Hosea, which was written around 750 B.C., we join Israel¹ at the lowest period in their corporate life. Things have gone very wrong among God's chosen people. God has a problem with Israel.

Hosea 4:1-2 (ESV)

¹ *Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel,
for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.*

*There is no faithfulness or steadfast love,
and no knowledge of God in the land;*

² *there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery;
they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.*

Important Qualities Were Missing in Israel

God has a serious problem with the nation of Israel. Israel has a *massive heart problem*. There are important things, qualities for which God was looking that were missing in Israel. At the top of the list of what is wrong with Israel is a **lack of steadfast love and faithfulness**. The word translated 'steadfast love,' here is *hesed* in Hebrew.

Hesed is difficult to translate into English, however, 'merciful, loving-kindness' best captures the full meaning.² The word finds its deepest meaning within the context of an intentional, sometimes covenantal, personal, loving relationship that results in mercifully kind actions. Those kinds of actions and that kind of love were absent from the land of Israel.

There was no such "steadfast love" in the land. And if there is none of that in the land, then it is no surprise that there is **no faithfulness in the land**. No one is loyal and no one keeps their word. Disloyalty abounds in lying tongues and deceitful, murderous hearts. The land is bereft of any hint of faithfulness or true God-honoring, merciful, loving-kindness.

¹ The northern ten tribes centered in Samaria.

² R. Laird Harris, "698 חֶסֶד," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 305.

The third quality that is absent is '**knowledge of God.**' No one truly knows the LORD. The land had become so confused they were mixing worship of God together with worship of Baal. They were entering the holy Temple of God and worshipping a demon! This is the fault of the priests. The priests have ceased teaching Israel about who God is (4:4-6) and so there was a disastrous absence of knowledge of God in the land (4:6, 14).

Sinful Qualities Were Not Missing

Though there was an absence of faithfulness, steadfast love, and knowledge of God in the land, the land was not empty. There was plenty of other things in the land. The land was filled with swearing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery, and bloodshed upon bloodshed. In fact, God says, "They break all bounds." Their wickedness was beyond all bounds. This was the State of the Union in Israel. It sounds much like the State of the Union in which we live today.

How does a nation recover from this?

Israel stands on the brink of destruction. What must happen in order to turn the ship?

Some Things Must Be Known

In order for the ship to turn, in order for the nation to recover, the nation needs to know some things. God warns,

Hosea 4:6 (ESV)

^{6a} *My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;*

What you don't know can indeed hurt you. And again,

Hosea 4:12 (ESV)

^{14d} *...a people without understanding shall come to ruin.*

There are some things that must be known if there is to be any hope for Israel? What must Israel understand in order to avoid destruction? What must all people know in order to avoid ruin?

God's Wrath Against Sinners is Real

First, Israel must know in order to turn away from destruction is that the wrath of God is real. The book of Hosea testifies to the sad fact that God punishes unrepentant sinners. **The wrath of God against sinners is very real.** Israel was God's chosen people and yet he was

perpetually sending prophets to warn them to turn away from the things that would bring his wrath down upon them.

Many people find it hard to believe that God would ever be wrathful. We can avoid this error just by reading the Bible. However, when you get a true glimpse of how horrendously wicked evil really is, then how can we imagine him not being angry against sinners? When there are beheadings in the news every other week, it is inconceivable to me to imagine God not being angry with that kind of obvious evil. Especially evil are the recent reports that hundreds of Christians in the middle east have been beheaded, including women and children.

When kids walk into schools with automatic weapons and randomly kill their classmates, how can we fail to think that a holy and just God is not angry with that kind of evil behavior? We get angry and we're not even holy, how much more would the holiness of God detest such wicked behavior? When some reckless, thoughtless, selfish drunk plows into the side a family mini-van because he was too inebriated to see the red light and kills the entire family, how can we imagine God failing to be furious at that?

And what is more wicked than all of those evils is the evil of knowing that there is a God who is all-powerful, all-wonderful, all-wise, completely majestic, immeasurably valuable, and infinitely worthy and choosing to ignore him, forsake him, and turn away from him and choose to worship anything other than him and him alone. Listen to what God said to Israel.

Hosea 7:2 (ESV)

*² They do not consider that I remember their evil.
Now their deeds surround them; they are before my face.*

*¹² As they go, I will spread over them my net;
I will bring them down like birds of the heavens;*

*¹³ Woe to them, for they have strayed from me!
Destruction to them, for they have rebelled against me!
I would redeem them,
but they speak lies against me.*

Hosea 8:4b (ESV)

^{4b} With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction.

*⁵ I have spurned your calf, O Samaria.
My anger burns against them.*

*⁷ For they sow the wind,
and they shall reap the whirlwind.
The standing grain has no heads;
it shall yield no flour;*

*if it were to yield,
strangers would devour it.*

Hosea 8:13-14 (ESV)

*¹³ As for my sacrificial offerings,
they sacrifice meat and eat it,
but the Lord does not accept them.
Now he will remember their iniquity
and punish their sins;
they shall return to Egypt.*

*¹⁴ For Israel has forgotten his Maker
and built palaces,
and Judah has multiplied fortified cities;
so I will send a fire upon his cities,
and it shall devour her strongholds.*

How can a nation turn out of the path of ruin? The first thing Israel needs to know is that God's wrath is real. Israel will never turn away from her sins and return to God if she does not first know that God's wrath is real and that it is coming³ against all forms for sinfulness and ungodliness.

God Stands Ready to Receive Repentant Sinners

The second thing Israel needs to know in order to avoid destruction is that God stands ready to receive repentant sinners.

Hosea 5:14 (ESV)

*¹⁵ I will return again to my place,
until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face,
and in their distress earnestly seek me.*

The **distressful** situation the LORD put them in is intended to cause them to return to him. Yes, he caused their distress, but only in response to the sin of their turning away from him.

Hosea 6:1 (ESV)

*1 ...for he has torn us, that he may heal us;
he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.*

³ Col 3:5-6.

The LORD gets no pleasure from bringing distress upon any of his children (Lam 3:3). However, unchecked rebellion leads to far greater casualties than brief but painful loving discipline. This is another example of the tough love we saw a few weeks ago back in chapter 2. Here in chapter 6 we see it again.

The LORD **returns again to his place**, which means he withdraws from them. He puts distance between himself and them. However, he does not intend for this distance to be permanent. He only withdraws from them **until** (5:14) they do certain things. His withdrawal is temporary and conditional. It is only **until** they respond to his withdrawal appropriately. And what is the appropriate response? It is to repent and return to him.

Three Marks of True Repentance

The response he desires is repentance and it involves three elements. When God's people do three things, then he will once again allow them to enjoy the goodness of his presence. These three things are the marks of true repentance. Two of them are explicit and one is implicit.

First, they are to **acknowledge their guilt**. They must admit their sin and confess their guilt. They can't hide it, they must confess it. And since God is the one doing the talking here, of course he means that they must acknowledge their sins to *him*. When you've sinned against God true repentance begins by confessing your sins to him. When you've wronged someone, part of making it right is going to that person directly and asking for forgiveness. The first step in repentance is acknowledging and confessing your sins to God himself.

Second they are to **earnestly seek God's face**. They can't just go through the motions. They must *earnestly* seek his face. This means no fake piety. God knows when people are sincere and when they are not.

Hosea 7:14 (ESV)

*¹⁴ They do not cry to me from the heart,
but they wail upon their beds.*

This is what false seeking of God looks like. If you were standing outside the person's window you'd hear lots of moaning and wailing, and you'd think, "Wow, this person is really pious. He's all torn up about how bad things are. He's in there wailing on his bed." But God knows the heart and he says, "He's making a lot of noise, but he's not trying to get my attention. He's not crying to me from the heart. He just wants people to think he's religious." Loud crying without earnestly seeking God's face is not true repentance.

Third, and this one is implicit, they are **to turn away from their other sins**. This is implicit because if they are earnestly seeking God's face, then they necessarily are moving toward him and away from sin. When one is earnestly seeking the face of God, then one cannot actively

be seeking out sin and clinging to it. To determinedly set your face to seek the face of God necessarily means you must look away from all other sins.

In the words of John Bunyan's Pilgrim, "I am on my way to the Celestial City, and therefore I am fleeing the City of Destruction." To whole-heartedly seek one thing, necessarily means that one cannot simultaneously be seeking it's opposite. To go after righteousness obviously means to turn away from all unrighteousness.

When all three of these things are happening, then God will respond and draw near to his people. "*Draw near to God and he will draw near to you*" (James 4:8). If Israel is to divert this disaster which the LORD had pronounced against them, then they must acknowledge their sins, earnestly seek His face, and turn away from their other sins. **Every sinner needs to know that God stands ready to receive truly repentant sinners.**

I Desire Love, Not Sacrifice

The third thing Israel needs to know in order to avoid destruction is that what God really wants is their whole-hearted love, not legalist liturgy. God is not religious. He's not interested in elaborate religious ceremonies. He's interested in whole-hearted, steadfast, faithful love.

Hosea 6:6 (ESV)

*⁶ For I desire steadfast (hesed) love, not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*

God is not religious, he relational. He's not interested in external ceremony, he's desires internal affection. God is not primarily interested in outward conformity to laws, but inward conviction of divine love.

Amos 5:21-24 (ESV)

*²¹ "I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.
²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Isaiah 1:11-17 (ESV)

¹¹ "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?

says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of well-fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.
¹² "When you come to appear before me,
who has required of you
this trampling of my courts?
¹³ Bring no more vain offerings;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.
¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
¹⁵ When you spread out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
¹⁷ learn to do good;
seek justice,
correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow's cause."

David understood this. After committing adultery with Bathsheba and then plotting and executing the murder of her husband, David wrote this.

Psalms 51:16-17 (ESV)

¹⁶ For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

This point is the most important point for Israel to know. God desires faithful, merciful, loving-kindness, not ceremonial religious ritual. He yearns for Israel to perfectly love him, not perfectly perform a ritual that exists only because love for him does not.

Of course what is true for Israel is true for me and you.

God does not want your perfect church attendance. He wants you love him with all of your heart! He's not primarily concerned dutiful acts of dead religious devotion. He is concerned with delightful devotion with flows from a living love for him that fills our hearts.

Does the Lord have any contention with you this morning? How is it between you and him this morning? Is there steadfast love for God in your heart? Is your life marked by faithfulness toward God? Is your work life marked by true knowledge of God? Do your coworkers know by observing your actions that you love Jesus? Do your neighbors know you are a follower of Jesus? Do your words sound like the words of someone who is a follower of Jesus?

If not, then you need to acknowledge your guilt and confess your sins this morning. Make a renewed commitment today, right now, to **earnestly** begin seeking the face of God? What will that look like? From what other things will you need to turn away? What sins do you need to let go of in order to cling to Jesus?

God's wrath against sin is real.

Yet God's stands ready to receive repentant sinners. Repent and return to him.

His deepest desire is for your love, not your sacrifice. He does need all of your money, he wants all of your heart, 100% of it.

The book of Hebrews says, "*Without faith it is impossible to please God for whoever would draw near to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him*" (11:6)

What would keep you from knowing and loving a God who would willingly offer up his only Son to death, in order to give you life? What would keep you from drawing ever nearer to such a God? Why wouldn't you seek a God who promises to reward those who draw near to him—even those who don't deserve to draw near him, because in fact, it is only unworthy people to whom he extends the invitation?

Unworthy people like the youngest son we met at the beginning. If you were wondering what happened to him, it turned out just as the father knew it would. The son did run out of money, and he did so a whole lot faster than he ever dreamed he would. Things went south pretty quickly.

Sure, he had big fun for a little while, and then things became indescribably bad. The son despaired of even living. Then one day in a back alley gutter, as he lay next to dumpster waiting for the restaurant to empty their trash so he could get some food, he remembered

something his dad said on that last day, "Son, when your money runs out, come home, because my love for you will never run out."

That sentence brought this boy back to his senses. He had forgotten all about his father. But in his distress he remembered him. He decided it might be worth seeking his father's face. There was one thing this unworthy son knew about his father, he never lied. If his father promised to never run out of love for him, then that's a father he could live with.

The son, who was too weak to walk, looked up to heaven, prayed for forgiveness and for the strength to walk home. Suddenly, he felt slightly energetic. He got up and began limping home to his father.