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An Introduction to the Book of Hosea

Hosea 1:1-5, "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. 2 When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD." 3 So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. 4 And the LORD said to him, "Call his name Jezreel, for in just a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. 5 And on that day I will break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel."

There lies before us a treasure chest full of the richest spiritual blessings imaginable. Yet like most sea treasures when first discovered, we have first to get beyond the external dirt, grime, oxidation, and the like which typically covers the beauty and glory of the treasure. In the book of Hosea that

“dirt and grime” is the not-so-popular doctrine of the sovereignty of God which actively ordains difficulty and hardship in a person’s life unto their growth in grace.

We tend to think that God can work His glory through our failings, miseries, and trials. Yet God’s word is clear; it is the failings, miseries, and trials which God ordains to teach us the way of the Lord.

Lamentations 3:37-38, “Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded *it*? *Is it* not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?”

Isaiah 45:6b-7, “I am the Lord, and there is no other, the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these.”

1 Corinthians 15:9-10a, “For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am...”

Paul’s past was not an accident. It was a vital part of the outworking of God’s plan for his life.

However, this may be shocking! God ordains the bitter providences of life just as much as the sweet! In fact, it could be argued that it is the furnace of affliction which is the more effective of the two in bringing about spiritual fruit in our lives! *In The Hidden Smile of God*, John Piper put it this way:

The afflictions of John Bunyan gave us *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. The affliction of William Cowper gave us [two hymns] ‘There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood’ and ‘God Moves in a Mysterious Way.’ And the afflictions of David Brainerd gave us a published *Diary* that has mobilized more missionaries than any other similar work. The furnace of suffering brought forth the gold of guidance and inspiration for living the Christian life, worshiping the Christian God, and spreading the Christian Gospel.

There is a certain irony to the fruit of these afflictions. Bunyan’s confinement taught him the pilgrim path of Christian freedom. Cowper’s mental illness yielded sweet music of the mind for troubled souls. Brainerd’s smoldering misery of isolation and disease exploded in global missions beyond all imagination. (Piper, 2001, p. 19)

Truly behind every frowning providence there hides the smiling face of God! (Trinity Hymnal, 1999, p. 128)

Such is the glorious message before us in Hosea. That which shaped, moved, and drove him as a prophet was NOT a theophanic vision of God (as with Job, Isaiah, Paul, Jacob), BUT the bitterness of the calling he had in his marriage! Yet this is revealed later. Let us begin looking at the background of this prophetic work; the prophet himself, the date, and the religious setting of the book of Hosea.

The Background

In 2 Kings 14:23 we begin our examination of the historical context of the book of Hosea.

2 Kings 14:23, "In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel became king in Samaria, *and reigned* forty-one years."

This passage was given to introduce the wicked and evil reign of the northern King of Israel, Jeroboam II, the thirteenth king who reigned from 793-753 BC. His regency set the stage for the ministry of Hosea.

Hosea 1:1, "The word of the Lord which came to Hosea the son of Beeri, during the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, *and* Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel."

Though a prophet sent to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Hosea nevertheless dated his prophecy by the regency of both the southern kings of Judah and the most important northern king, Jeroboam II.

Recall that Jeroboam's regency spanned forty-one years coming to an end in 753 BC. In the south, Uzziah's regency began in 792 (about the same time as Jeroboam II). The last king referenced here, Hezekiah, died in 686 BC. Because of this time frame, it is believed that Hosea was called to the prophetic ministry at the end of Jeroboam/Uzziah's reigns. The prophet then ministered over the next thirty plus years serving God into the regency of Hezekiah which began in 729 BC.

That is why the prophecy seems to contain judgment on top of judgment on top of judgment (chapters 4-14). It wasn't written in a single sitting. Rather, it contains the oracle of the Lord which God gave to Hosea over the course of his thirty year ministry.

Now we have seen that at the advent of Hosea's ministry, both Israel and Judah were at the tail-end of a revival which flourished at the beginning of the 8th century BC. As such to understand the concern of Hosea we must be familiar with this time of prosperity. Jeroboam II was one of Israel's most illustrious rulers such that he ushered the northern kingdom into its golden age (as Uzziah did in the south).

Under Jeroboam's regency the northern kingdom enjoyed a sovereignty and independency which it had never known before. In fact, like his father before him, Jeroboam carried on the policy of aggressive expansion such that he was able to restore Israel's boundaries to what they were under Solomon.

Jeroboam was a gifted administrator who assumed power at a time when the pagan nations surrounding Israel either were weak¹ or preoccupied² with other matters. Israel at this time enjoyed a level of prosperity it had known only in the reign of Solomon. Yet the prosperity of the early part of the century did not last. Toward the end of Jeroboam's and Uzziah's reigns, Assyria began to emerge from its "dark age" to become a world power. This meant that the political, economic, and social freedom which God's people enjoyed over the past fifty years was quickly coming to an end. Furthermore, the people of God's flirtation with Baal (which we saw in Amos)

had become an obsession such that by the writing of Hosea (just fifteen years following the work of Amos), Israel had become a nation given to the worship and service of the Canaanite gods.

Hosea 4:7-8, “The more they multiplied, the more they sinned against Me; I will change their glory into shame. They feed on the sin of My people, and direct their desire toward their iniquity.”

As we’ll see, one of the key characteristics of Baalism/Canaanite worship was moral debauchery. Believe it or not, but this was the medium of the worship of the Canaanites. This resulted in a people who delighted in sin and the sinning of others. It is reminiscent of Paul’s words in Romans about the non-Christian.

Romans 1:32, “And, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.”

That was the spiritual state of the people to whom Hosea was called to serve as a prophet. They no longer blushed when it came to their sin. They openly and publically gave themselves to the grossest obsessions and abuses.

Hosea 4:11-13, “Harlotry, wine, and new wine [crucial elements in the worship of the Canaanite gods] take away the understanding. My people consult their wooden idol, and their *diviner’s* wand informs them; for a spirit of harlotry has led *them* astray, and they have played the harlot, *departing* from their God. They offer sacrifices on the tops of the mountains and burn incense on the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is pleasant. Therefore your daughters play the harlot, and your brides commit adultery.”

And yet it wasn’t just the people, as it was when Moses was on the mountain and God said, “Look at what your people are doing!” (Exodus 32:7) The rottenness and rebellion began with the leaders.

Hosea 4:9, 17-18, “And it will be, like people, like priest; so I will punish them for their ways, and repay them for their deeds... Ephraim [which is another name for Israel] is joined to idols; let him alone. Their liquor gone, they play the harlot continually; their rulers dearly love shame.”

Hosea 6:9-10, “And as raiders wait for a man, so a band of priests murder on the way to Shechem; surely they have committed crime. In the house of Israel I have seen a horrible thing; Ephraim’s harlotry is there, Israel has defiled itself.”

Truly, Israel was corrupt through and through; from the leadership, to the priests. Israel was corrupt from the prophets to the people; there was no fear of God before their eyes! The nation had not just fallen into sin; they had given themselves to it.

- Studying it!

- Feeding it!
- Maximizing it!
- Even becoming ministers of it!

As a result, by Hosea's time Israel no longer enjoyed the privilege of being a nation in covenant with God. They had crossed the line, proven unfaithful one too many times such that God now said this:

Hosea 9:15, "All their evil is at Gilgal; indeed, I came to hate them there! Because of the wickedness of their deeds I will drive them out of My house! I will love them no more; all their princes are rebels."

It was at this time, around 750 B.C. — and in this environment, the Northern Kingdom of Israel — that God raised up Hosea to be His voice to the nation. Now unlike Amos or Isaiah, we do not read of Hosea's formal call to the prophetic ministry. Rather we read of something that was just as profound in its impact in this prophet's life, his rotten marriage.

An Unfaithful Spouse

Consider with me a key concept in this book and in Hosea's calling; and unfaithful spouse.

Hosea 1:2-3, "When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, 'Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry, and *have* children of harlotry; for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the Lord.' So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son."

In the coming weeks we are going to talk about Hosea's marriage and the subsequent message God intended this to be for Israel and for us. Yet this morning, we first are going to consider this calling from the perspective of Hosea, and so the working of God's grace in the prophet's life as a result. We read of this passage and somehow miss the enormity of the calling and so the implication this had on Hosea's life. See, Hosea wasn't a superman. His prophetic calling, as it was with ALL the prophets, did not lessen the impact of the sin and misery of this life. We must see this; for we tend to think that the heroic figures of the Bible weren't ordinary men and women. They didn't struggle as do we when it comes to life.

How refreshing and encouraging it is to discover that on this point we are wrong. Think of it,

- Noah had a drinking problem.
- Abraham and Isaac struggled with lying.
- Jacob had a problem with deceit.
- Moses was a murderer!
- David was an adulterer, liar, and murder.
- Elijah struggled with fear.
- Habakkuk questioned God.
- Peter denied the Lord.

- The other 11 apostles shrunk back on the boat.
- James and John- the “sons of thunder”- had an anger problem.
- Timothy was tempted by youthful passions.

This no doubt is why Paul is such a beloved figure. Yes he boldly served God unto death, yet it came at a cost, a cost he wasn't quick to hide. For example in 1 Thessalonians 3:1 he admitted to being overburdened by worry concerning Timothy. In 2 Corinthians 12:28 he talked about the struggle he had in bearing so much concern for the churches. In fact the word Paul used to describe the struggles he had as a servant of God was *qlivyi*" (thlipsis- e.g., 2 Corinthians 4:17) which was a wine-making term used to designate the pressure needed to burst a grape. In response to his “thorn in the flesh” he prayed not once, or twice, but three times for its removal (2 Corinthians 12:8-10). He was one who knew what it was like to “kick against the goads” of God's providence (Acts 26:14). Ministry frequently found him weeping (Philippians 3:18; Acts 20:31). And though someday he'd be martyred for the faith, nevertheless the prospect of dying wasn't something he cherished (2 Corinthians 5:4).

Truly there was nothing easy about the service to which Paul was called to render to God. He wasn't carried to the sky in flowery beds of ease! Yet it would be through these difficulties that God would shape him. Listen to the exhortation God gave to Ananias who was charged to minister to the blinded Paul on account of conversion, God said this:

Acts 9:15, “...I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake.”

And that is why when we come to the book of Hosea and read of this prophet's calling to a difficult marriage, you must see that this did not leave him unmoved! It was God's intention to mold and shape not just Hosea, but the entire nation through the bitterness and strife of his marriage.

Think with me on this for a moment. In Christ's day, Jewish weddings had two parts prior to the ceremony/wedding feast:

- The Betrothal (referenced in Hosea 2:19-21).
- The Courtship (referenced in Hosea 2:14-15).

While these are not referenced here, nevertheless they would have been necessary for Hosea to be married legitimately. As a result we conclude that either Hosea was called to marry a former prostitute who later returned to her trade, or he is writing this text after the fact which meant that at some point in his life, Hosea was betrothed to a woman, he then courted her, married her, and so loved her. Yet she dove into sin such that she gave herself to the life of a prostitute (which at the time would most likely have been the prostitution associated with the temple virgins of the Canaanite religion).

As Hosea knew his marriage was ordained by God, he understood that God's initial call was to wed a harlot and so he wrote this.³ Either construction seeks to do the same, show that Hosea was not impassionate about Hosea (like one might be if they married someone so that they could get American citizenship). Truly, the man and the message of Hosea was molded and shaped by the

bitterness of God's providence by which the Lord called him to marry a woman who later would give herself to the life of a prostitute!

The whole book reverberates with the tragedy of this event. Read Hosea 2, 4-14! The pain, suffering, bitterness, and struggle of Hosea's marriage saturate the prophecy. You can't get away from it. David Hubbard described it this way:

The prophets were not newspaper reporters required to write all sides of the story. Nor were they scholars preparing theses that investigated all angles of their topics. They were messengers, shaped by their calls, their experiences and their reception of Yahweh's word to speak to a specific issue in specific ways. ¶ Hosea's marriage, marked as it was by tragedy and recovery beyond the tragedy, both deepened his understanding of divine passion, and narrowed the scope of his message to the single point of Israel's relationship to the covenant Lord... However we interpret the marriage, it is surely the single most important element in shaping the person and message of the prophet. It was both the centre of his proclamation... of the divine word and the source of his understanding of the divine experience of being rejected, having to judge and discipline, and then effecting reconciliation. What the commissioning visions did for Isaiah (ch. 6), Jeremiah (ch. 1), and Ezekiel (chs. 1-3), Hosea's marriage did for him. (Hubbard, 2009 , pp. 22, 29)

Now we must see that this doesn't weaken this prophetic work. To the contrary! The impact of Hosea's ministry in Israel and Judah was on account of his broken marriage! It was in this furnace that God forged the spiritual giant we call Hosea! It was in this furnace that God opened Hosea's eyes to behold His Lord and Savior. And lest you think that this is unique to Hosea, when it comes to His providence such is God's will for all His people.

Maturation

Notice with me, that another key concept in Scripture is that maturation comes through interpreted providence. At the outset it must be noted that in the life of Hosea, God used the bitterness of suffering to reveal His word both to the prophet as well as the nation. Now because the Canon is closed, we no longer look to the providence of God to reveal His word/will to us.⁴ But that doesn't mean that there are no intended benefits to the suffering God ordains. Truly, our calling is very similar to Hosea's, but whereas God used difficulty to REVEAL truth to the prophet today in our lives, God uses difficulty to REMIND us of the truth!

Matthew 16:2-3, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?"

Here Christ criticized the Scribes and Pharisees of His day that had become more adept at predicting the weather than understanding God's mind and will concerning the things of this life. A tragedy occurred in their day such that many looked to them for an answer as to the "Why?" and yet they did not have an answer! They had long since lost the ability to view the world through the eyes of God and they had forgotten God's commentary on the happenings of life.

They had become worldly, carnal, earthly, and so agnostic. They completely missed the role that God intended His word to play in our lives as we work out our salvation in time and space.

How ought knowledge of the Kingdom of God revealed in God's Word impact the way we view the world? Notice the following examples and exhortations from the Scriptures.

- Christ used a public tragedy to remind Israel of the coming judgment.

Luke 13:2-3, "And He answered and said to them, 'Do you suppose that these Galileans were *greater* sinners than all *other* Galileans, because they suffered this *fate*? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.'"

Don't miss a very important truth, tragedy does not reveal God's mind concerning the nations, rather it ought to remind us of God's mind.

Luke 12:24, "Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; and they have no storeroom nor barn; and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds!"

Christ saw in the survival of a flock of birds God's love, care, and concern for Israel. Which came first: (1) Creation, or (2) God's plan? God's plan! Wouldn't it therefore make sense that God so orders this world that in it we can be reminded of redemptive themes!

Matthew 6:28-30, "And why are you anxious about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is *alive* today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, *will He* not much more *do so for* you, O men of little faith?"

Brothers and sisters, when you consider the prairie and how it blossoms in the spring with beautiful flowers, are you reminded of God's love and care for you? You ought to be! In fact, Christ here indicted the Jews because they beheld creation and yet from it they were not reminded of spiritual truths! No doubt this is what Paul was getting at when he said this:

Colossians 3:1-2, "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth."

Truly that which characterized the Scribes and Pharisees of Christ's day is that they completely forgot the Kingdom of Heaven! Again, they had become earthly, carnal, and overly bound to this world. They did not see a sunrise and think of Christ (Luke 1:78). A sunrise simply meant another opportunity to buy, sell, and so increase their net-worth (cf. Amos 8:5-6)! In another place, Paul exhorted the Corinthians this way:

2 Corinthians 10:7a, "You are looking at things as they are outwardly..."

This is our problem today. Our eye-sight has become dull. Our world-view is secular, worldly, and so mundane. As such we do not see the glorious reminders of the Kingdom of God which are

housed both in God's creation and providence.

Michael Faraday

It is this very passion that led many Christian scientists in history in their studies. For example, Michael Faraday was driven by the passion to behold the glory of God in creation! He looked to science to remind him of God!

Psalm 8:3-4, "When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained; what is man, that Thou dost take thought of him? And the son of man, that Thou dost care for him?"

It wasn't just Hosea who was profoundly moved by the providences of his life, David too was changed when he gazed in faith one evening at a night sky. He reasoned from the lesser to the Greater and walked away a changed man! John Calvin was moved in his life by the words of Isaiah:

Isaiah 55:12, "For you will go out with joy, and be led forth with peace; the mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you, and all the trees of the field will clap *their* hands."

Because of this verse, when John Calvin saw the leaves of a tree fluttering in the wind, he understood them as clapping their hands in adoration of God.

Do you allow the things of this life to remind you of God's Kingdom? Christ did.

- He saw a dragnet and thought of the Kingdom (Matthew 13:47-50).
- He thought of the farming practice of sowing seed and thought of the Kingdom (Matthew 13:3-9).
- He thought of...
 - Medicine, Matthew 9:10-13.
 - Servants, Mark. 13:33-37.
 - Barren Trees, Luke 13:6-9.
 - Bread, John 6:31-38.
 - Children playing, Matthew 11:16-19.
 - Dinner guests, Luke 14:15-24.
 - Feasts, Luke 14:12-14.
 - A robbery/mugging, Luke 10:25-37.
 - A wedding, Matthew 9:14-15.
 - The banking system, Matthew 13:44.
 - The Military, Luke 14:31-33.
 - Commerce, Matthew 21:1-16.
 - Yeast, Matthew 13:33.
 - Coins and sheep, Luke 15:4-10.
 - Horticulture, Mark 4:30-32.

- Fishing, Matthew 13:47-50.
- Sewing, Luke 5:36.
- Wine, Mark 2:22.
- Wealth, Matthew 13:45-46.
- Salt, Luke 14:34-35.
- Sheep and goats, Matthew 25:31-46.
- Wicked judges, Luke 18:1-8.
- Unjust stewards, Luke 16:1-13.
- And much more!

And Christ saw in them glorious reminders of the Kingdom of God. Now while Christ may have used these things in order to reveal truth in His day, we need only look at these things to be reminded of the truth! That's what Paul did when it came to marriage. In his treatment of marriage, the Apostle saw immediately that marriage ultimately is a picture of a greater reality

Ephesians 5:32, "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church."

Do you see marriage in this way? Hosea did! When he considered his marriage, he did not view himself as a victim or a tragedy. He did not say, "Woe is me!" Rather, he considered the situation and saw in it:

- The glories of the faithfulness of God.
- The infidelity of man.
- The grace, mercy, and compassions of the Lord.
- The hard-heartedness of the sinner.
- The cost of redemption.
- And the heinousness of spiritual defection!

God brought this prophet to understand these truths and more on account of his difficult marriage.

Now the question of the hour is, "Do you look at providence like this? Are you looking to be reminded of the Kingdom of God in the everyday things that come your way?" God has given us thousands upon thousands of reminders of His Kingdom in every realm and walk of life. Our problem sadly is that we have long since stopped looking for them. Maybe we never knew we should! We are selfish such that we endure the bitterness of this life by faking it until we make it or striving simply to make it through another day not realizing that in and through all things God is proclaiming the greatness of His name. Yet so often we miss it because we are preoccupied by the things of this life!

Let us take from this glorious prophecy a commitment to lift our eyes in the midst of the most difficult calling and behold who ordained it and why! This is what Isaiah exhorted in Isaiah 40.

Isaiah 40:26, "Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these *stars*, the One who leads forth their host by number..."

Oswald Chambers speaking of this verse wrote this:

The people of God in Isaiah's time had blinded their minds' ability to see God by looking on the face of idols. But Isaiah made them look up at the heavens; that is, he made them begin to use their power to think and to visualize correctly. If we are children of God, we have a tremendous treasure in nature and will realize that it is holy and sacred. We will see God reaching out to us in every wind that blows, every sunrise and sunset, every cloud in the sky, every flower that blooms, and every leaf that fades, if we will only begin to use our blinded thinking to visualize it.

The real test of spiritual focus is being able to bring your mind and thoughts under control. Is your mind focused on the face of an idol? Is the idol yourself? Is it your work? Is it your idea of what a servant should be, or maybe your experience of salvation and sanctification? If so, then your ability to see God is blinded. You will be powerless when faced with difficulties and will be forced to endure in darkness. If your power to see has been blinded, don't look back on your own experiences, but look to God. It is God you need. Go beyond yourself and away from the faces of your idols and away from everything else that has been blinding your thinking. Wake up and accept the ridicule that Isaiah gave to his people, and deliberately turn your thoughts and your eyes to God. (Chambers, 1992, p. 29)

This is what Hosea was able to do when faced with a ruined marriage. Following his example, we must do the same. In the coming weeks there is much we will learn about God from Hosea. But this morning, let us take from this book the charge to behold God and His bigger plan in both the sweet and bitter providences of life.

End Notes

¹ Effective Assyrian intervention in Palestine ended with the campaigns of Adad-nirari III (809-782 BC), who at the end of the ninth century moved west and defeated the Aramaeans of Damascus, who had been harassing Israel since the end of Jehu's reign (ca. 816 BC; cf. 2 Kings 13:5).

² During the first half of the 8th century, the Assyrian nation was preoccupied both with Armenia and with internal strife.

³ It would be the same of a man who married a woman who later got aids. He could write ten years into his marriage, God called me to marry a woman with aids.

⁴ Psalm 19:1-4a is one of many which speaks of what we call "General Revelation"- that is the revelation of truth about the Lord which God has built into this world. Now that we have receptors for this revelation is apparent from Rom. 1:20. Truly, when we looked at this passage a while back, we saw that God created man with the capacity to think and reason from effect to cause such that all men, in light of the witness of creation, will be without excuse on the Day of Judgment (Romans 1:18-19). And yet, this is not the only way that God instructs His children. For on account of the fall, if a sinner is going to be saved, they need another type of revelation- which we call "Special Revelation"- which of course is God's word. Now notice it is God's intention to teach His children not only as they study God's word, BUT as they submit to it in the providences of life- as they allow it to bear upon their lives as they "sit in the house, walk by the way, lay down, and rise up!"

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on May 15, 2011. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.