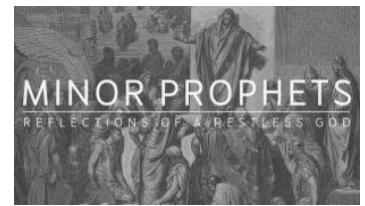


RELENTLESS LOVE: HOSEA, *Phil Strong*

Text: Hosea 1:2-11

August 7, 2016



Reflection questions

“What has been your experience of love? Would you be better served to ‘swear-off love’, or continue to pursue the love for which your heart longs? How have simply learned to be content with a cheap imitation of love?”

“To what circumstances and situations do you find yourself returning? Why do you keep going back? Is it for some distorted sense of self-punishment or hope of healing and restoration?”

“Are you convinced that you can’t be loved in your present condition? Do you assume that your present circumstances disqualify you from belonging to God... belonging with God? Can you imagine a transformative love of God so complete and so thorough that you could see yourself as the ‘beloved’ and not simply ‘damaged goods’?”

Teaching notes

The prophets never set out to “study” God, as if he were a monarch butterfly pinned to a foam board, but they sought to understand him, to experience him. They would not simply serve as a mouthpiece for God, but were somehow taken into his counsel. In the process, they became not only sympathetic toward the people, but sympathetic toward, God as well.

In today’s “Cliff notes” on Hosea, it would be easy for us to say that we have seen this made-for-TV series before (re-runs of humanity’s dilemma): God good, humanity evil. God has created us and offered us his list of demands and we have proven to be hopelessly disobedient and indifferent. We discover that even God has his limits and eventually judgment comes as God’s big **“I told you so.”**

But, in Hosea, we observe the actions of a God who does not simply make commands and then expect obedience, but a God who is “self-contained”, but “passible” (capable of feeling), apparently affected by what happens in the world.

Hosea and Gomer... your typical: boy meets girl, boy falls in love with girl (even though she has a dude’s name), girl becomes a prostitute, girl gets pregnant, boy asks for paternity test, girl meets other boys on “Match.com” and leaves aforementioned boy, boy pursues girl and buys her back with some silver and a bag of gluten free flour... we’ve heard it a thousand times, right? **One big happy dysfunctional family!**

Hosea’s name is a variant of **‘Joshua’** and **‘Jesus’** and it means “salvation” (‘Help, God’).

Hosea lived in the “northern kingdom”, which he refers to often as Ephraim (2 Kings 12). He served under one of the nation’s worst kings, Jeroboam II. The nation was in turmoil, on a number of fronts, and would eventually succumb to the prevailing superpower, Assyria, in 722 B.C.

In the first three chapters, we are provided with a glimpse into the inner-life of God. God tells Hosea that what he is experiencing at home is symbolic of his own rocky relationship with his lover, his bride, Israel.

God seemingly has two options:

1. Divorce Israel (legitimate right) and consider them helplessly incompatible. But, covenant says that the relationship is already stronger than any wrongs that will be committed against it, but it’s always the one who has been faithful who feels the pain of betrayal. It’s the one who attempts to “stay” who has to put in the heart-rending work of forgiveness and reconciliation.
2. Find a way to work through Israel’s infidelity and respond to her in such a way that inspires her to choose God over the other loves competing for her attention. He knows that continued threats of punishment and banishment fail within the heart of one who’s already convinced they can’t be loved in their condition. It seems that every self-destructive movement on their part is now personal sabotage and a challenge to us saying, “*I dare you to love me.*”

I realized that it’s hard for us to talk about God because to talk about God demands human language. Words carrying meaning and involve connotations and associations that often prevent us from being able to rightly describe our experience. So, when we say that “*God loves us*”, our assumptions go to our own human experiences and expressions of those realities.

Our hearts will never be satisfied with anything less than love and it’s not love if it cannot trace its roots back to God.

“*Beloved*” (worthy of love): the NT author’s favorite descriptor of us. We were created for love. It was to be God’s love for us that named us and identified us and conferred value upon us. This is not simply some amateur attempt at improving your self-esteem, but a profound conviction for establishing your identity. When you lose this identity, you become susceptible to other labels, other names, each meant to desensitize you to love.

I had a woman say to me once, “*At least this one doesn’t hit me*” (like that’s as good as it gets).

This God-love (“agape”) is a love that we have never seen before; a love belonging uniquely to God and emanating from his essence.

It is a love that is...

- pre-emptive; it always “goes first”. It’s a love that commits in advance and is never content to wait until the other becomes more loveable.
- awakened by a sense of value; because we assess it as valuable, it becomes precious to us.
- determined by the character of the “lover”. It is a love that transforms the “beloved”.

Augustine said, ***“In loving me, you made me loveable”***.

Our sin not only provokes his anger, but stirs his compassion.

Hosea 11:8 *“... how can I give you up? my passion is aroused...”* It is not consistent with love to sit by unmoved and unprovoked and just let evil happen. He’s supposed to care.

It is precisely at those places of our own infidelity and compromise that love turns failure into hope.

Hosea 2:14-15, 19-20 *“I want to take you back there. I want to remind you of who I am and who you are. I want to win you back”*.

Let me say, first, I think we often spend so much time trying to ‘soothe’ our conscience that we neglect the healing benefits of conviction: not shame or condemnation but a healthy sense of conscience.

I’m not sure that I really ever appreciated the extravagance of God’s grace until I first experienced the depth of my sin and the extent of the damage it had done to my soul. It’s a place that not only wounds us deeply, but can become the source of our healing. It’s the place to which God calls us to return, not so that we’ll show an adequate measure of regret, but so that God can display extravagant measures of grace! It’s the place to which we must return, but the place to which God must accompany us because if we go alone, we will either be *“overly critical”* or *“exceptionally lenient”*. It’s the place where God becomes vulnerable too: *“Do you love me?”* (John 21).

Hosea 3:1-5 God envisions a **“renewal of vows”** ceremony. ***“Remember this place?”***

Those words were not meant as some back-handed form of condemnation or shame, but as reminders of who she was, who he was and the possibilities for life that still remained because of love.

This is God’s way of saying, *“Knowing what I know now, I would choose you all over again.”* In this moments, our vows are less about romance and more about tenacious commitment. You can imagine that Hosea’s, *“I love you”*, meant something different now than it did when he first proposed. It’s a love that has been challenged by compromise and failure, but one that has been secured and stabilized through faithfulness.

“If you return to me...”

There is a form of misery that we experience which appears to be unparalleled: it’s the misery of “love-avoidance”; a refusal to permit ourselves to be-loved. It’s the internal conflict we experience when we know we could come home if we wanted to and the conviction that this is the life we deserve, which prevents our return.

“We accept the love we think we deserve”. Stephen Chobsky.

The return is not a renewed commitment to effort and compliance, but a surrender to love. The shift takes place, in our ability to form an identity based not on our own capacity for change, but on the love that is conferred upon us--- which compels the transformation we desire.

When the reality of God's love for you finally gets your attention, arouses your imagination and captures your heart, sin will lose its power over you.

This is the gospel. What always "moves" God is his love for us, not our love for him. *"This is love: not..."* (1 John 4:10). *"We have come to know and rely upon the love God has for us..."* (4:16).

You'll never have to use 'guilt' as a means of motivating people who have come to understand and have experienced this kind of love: they will have no choice! (2 Corinthians 5:14)

Jeremiah 31:3-4 *"I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness. I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel"*.

Fast forward almost (800) years to Jesus...

Romans 5:8 *"God demonstrates his love in this: while we were still sinners, ..."*

Hosea doesn't say, *"Let's get you tested and we'll have an agreed upon probationary period, and then, perhaps, you can come back in the bedroom."* The gospel says that it's actually God's holiness that makes us clean; it's his rightness that becomes the motivation for our own.

"The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many..."
Matthew 20:28

This is the story of a God who not only "comes up with the ransom", but who "becomes the ransom"; the one who steps in and so fully identifies with us that he can absorb upon himself all of the judgment that is built-into our sin and, so fully satisfy that in a way that we are no longer identified by that sin (name changer).

In such a Story, God becomes even more glorious. His grace becomes more remarkable than our sin.