

I Will Return To My First Husband

By G.V. Growcott

"I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her ... and I will give her the Valley of Trouble for a Door of Hope" (Hos. 2:14-15).

The book of the prophet Hosea is one of the most beautiful and powerful of the prophetic books. Hosea is the prophet of the love of God, the gentlest and tenderest of the prophets -- the John of the Old Testament. He speaks of the truest, and most patient, and deepest of loves in the face of the greatest of unfaithfulnesses.

He prophesied during the closing years of Israel's kingdom, just as Jeremiah and Ezekiel did later for the kingdom of Judah.

Like them -- only in an even deeper and more intimate way -- he enacted in his own life the sorrow and tragedy of his people.

To Jeremiah, God said, in Judah's last days --

"Thou shalt not take thee a wife, neither shalt thou have sons or daughters in this place. . ."

"For I have taken away My peace from this people, saith the Lord, even loving kindness and mercies" (Jer. 16:1-5).

Ezekiel's prophetic burden was more terrible than this. God said to him --

"Son of man, behold, I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes with a stroke: yet neither shalt thou mourn nor weep, neither shalt thy tears run down ... forbear to cry; make no mourning for the dead."

And Ezekiel says --

"At even my wife died, and I did in the morning as I was commanded" (Eze. 24:16-18).

But Hosea's task was yet more difficult, more personal, and more prolonged. He was commanded -- as a testimony of God's great, unmerited goodness and love to Israel -- to love, and marry, and nourish and protect, a faithless and licentious woman, who should abandon him but who should eventually, after long patience and kindness, be reconciled to him in faithfulness and truth.

Hosea prophesied during the reigns of Jeroboam II of Israel, and Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah.

Jeroboam II was the second last of Jehu's line, to whom God had promised four generations. Jeroboam's son Zechariah, who followed him, was murdered after a six-months' reign.

Hosea's period of ministry was about forty years -- the last forty years of the northern ten-tribed Kingdom of Israel, just as Jeremiah prophesied during the last, sad forty years of the Kingdom of Judah.

Hosea began his prophecy in a time of prosperity for Israel. The land had been in great distress before Jeroboam began his reign, but God in His pity for the sad condition of Israel, even though they were wicked, greatly strengthened and helped Jeroboam and enabled him to recover Israel's lost territory and defeat her enemies and even extend his rule over Syria to the north.

It was one more opportunity for Israel to recognize and appreciate God's goodness and love, and the wisdom of drawing nigh unto Him in faithfulness.

But Israel did not respond. Because of their apparent strength and stability, they could not believe the end was so near. In spite of God's help, they and their king intensified their wickedness and idolatry. God often blesses, as a last invitation to repentance and reform, before pouring out His judgments on sin.

Such was the background of Hosea's prophecy, as the powerful but evil reign of Jeroboam II drew to its close. Israel did not realize it, but this reign was to mark the end of any real security or stability for the nation. In the remaining twenty-five years of the Kingdom, six kings were to rise and fall, and the dark shadow of Assyria, to whom they had first turned as an ally, was to grow swiftly and terribly until it completely destroyed and blotted out their nation, and carried them away.

Israel had looked to Assyria as a friend and helper, but worldly alliances are always disastrous in the end.

Hosea begins his prophecy --

"Yet a little while, and I will avenge the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu, and I will cause to cease the kingdom of the house of Israel" (1:4).

Hosea's message sheds much light on the relationship between God's love for His people and their necessary chastening and disciplining.

While it manifests the great beauty and the transforming, appealing power of His infinite patience and affection, it clearly speaks in the strongest terms of the sorrows and bitternesses and hardships that must inevitably arise from disobedience and wickedness.

Its basic message is the great tragedy of Israel's blindness and unnecessary, self-caused miseries in the face of God's choice of them as the special recipients of His love -- a choice not as a matter of respect of persons, but as a witness and example to all the world of the beauties of His character and the glories of His purpose.

Even in judgment, its tone is sorrow rather than anger, and the severest condemnations always look forward to eventual reconciliation.

The book of Hosea contains many deep lessons on the subject of marriage and divorce -- deep spiritual principles of patience and kindness and hope, and faithfulness, and a love that bears and endures all things, and never fails.

The beautiful story of Hosea impresses us more than anything else could with the great depth of meaning in the words of Jesus to the Pharisees --

"Because of the hardness of your hearts, Moses suffered you to put away your wives."

"Because of the hardness of your hearts" -- because of your pettiness, your carnalness, your fleshliness, your smallness of mind and heart, your obsession with your own comfort and satisfaction and pleasure, your inability to comprehend the true beauty and meaning of unselfish love and sacrifice -- the true meaning and purpose of life --

"He that hateth -- disregardeth -- his life for my sake shall keep it unto life eternal."

Consider the lives of Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others -- living tragedies enacted for the manifestation of God's goodness and the bringing of many sons to glory.

These things teach us that our lives mean nothing except as they fit into the purpose of God, and contribute to that purpose. The lives of these faithful men of God were not tragedies when seen in light of their glorious eternal consummation, and the comfort and instruction and benefit they have brought to others.

Much more than we realize, our reasoning on many things is based on the hardness of our hearts. Let us let our minds dwell on this story of Hosea, which so wonderfully illustrates the divine wisdom of love and self-sacrifice and infinite forbearance, which to the mind of the flesh is foolishness.

In the great sweep of the divine purpose with mankind, our own petty little passing circumstances do not have a fraction of the importance that we in our self-centeredness attach to them.

All that matters in the few brief troubled days of our pilgrimage is the glory of God and the advancement of His gracious plan of eternal salvation for those that love Him.

Let us constantly, joyfully thank God we are permitted to play a part in that glorious plan. Nothing else has any importance.

"The beginning of the Word of the Lord by Hosea. And the Lord said to Hosea" --

"Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms, for the land hath committed great whoredom, departing from the Lord" (Hos. 1:2).

And she bore him a son, and the Lord said (v. 4) --

"Call his name Jezreel, for yet a little while and I will avenge the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu, and will cause to cease the kingdom of the house of Israel."

"And I will break the bow in the valley of Jezreel."

Jezreel is one of the fortresses commanding the valley of Megiddo, or Esdraelon. It is on the slopes of Mt. Gilboa, where Saul died, and it controls the gateway between the mountains down to the Jordan valley, the main entrance to Israel from the east. This is Israel's historic battleground, right back to the days of Gideon.

The "blood of Jezreel" that was soon to be avenged began with the treacherous murder of the faithful Naboth by Jezebel.

Jehu was raised up to destroy the house of Ahab for this wickedness, which he did at Jezreel, but because of his own subsequent wickedness and following in the ways of Ahab, all the bloodshed associated with Jezreel is held against him and his house, including his killing of Ahab's family.

Jehu had boasted, "Come and see my zeal for the Lord." He manifested a great zeal for vengeance and destruction, and condemnation of others, but such a zeal -- if it is not accompanied by righteousness and gentleness and mercy and tenderness toward the weaknesses of others -- is merely an ugly, hypocritical, Pharisaical manifestation of the evil of the flesh.

Jezreel has a double meaning, which comprehends both Israel's judgment and her redemption. Basically it means, "God will sow." It is the name of God combined with the root word related to seed, planting, and conception -- both animal and vegetable. It also comprehends the meaning of the "seed or offspring of God" -- the Fatherhood of God -- the family relationship. "We also are His offspring," as Paul told the Athenians -- both naturally, and also potentially in a spiritual sense, as John expresses it --

"Beloved, now are we the sons of God."

Jezreel also means "God will scatter" -- as seed is scattered, but with the idea of an eventual reaping and gathering --

"He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd doth his flock." (Jer. 31:10).

Hosea's own name means "Savior" or "Salvation" -- another form of Joshua or Jesus. He typifies God in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself. His life story is an exemplification of Paul's words concerning Christ (Eph. 5:25-27) --

"Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the ecclesia, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word."

"That he might present it to himself a glorious ecclesia, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should BE HOLY AND WITHOUT BLEMISH. "

Hosea portrays the glorious truth expressed by Paul to the Romans (5:8) --

"God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

"And she conceived again, and bore a daughter. And God said unto him, "

"Call her name Lo-Ruhamah -- ('Not having obtained mercy') -- for I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel."

"And she bore a son. Then said God, Call his name Lo Ammi -- ('Not My people') -- for ye are not My people, and I will not be your God" (vs. 6-9).

And so the basis of the allegory is laid in Hosea's wife and three children. The three names represent three successively increasing stages of divine abandonment -- Jezreel, Lo- Ruhamah, Lo-Ammi -- Scattered, Unloved, Rejected.

In spite of these pronouncements from God, so strikingly manifested to Israel in Hosea's own life, the chapter immediately continues (v. 10) --

"Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered;"

"And it shall come to pass that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are NOT My people, there shall it be said unto them, Ye ARE the sons of the living God."

"Then shall the children of Judah and the children of Israel be gathered together, and appoint themselves one head, and they shall come up out of the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel"

"GREAT SHALL BE THE DAY OF JEZREEL" -- Great shall be the day of the Seed of God --

"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will sow the house of Israel and house of Judah with the seed of man, and with the seed of beast. . ."

"As I have watched over them to destroy, so will I watch over them to plant, saith the Lord" (Jer. 31:27).

Chapter two repeats the same theme, with different figures and details, ending with the same assurance and promise.

While chapter one was based mainly on Hosea's children and their names, chapter two, under the allegory of his unfaithful wife, is a representation of God's infinite patience and love and kindness toward Israel, and their repeated unfaithfulness and corruption. The lesson is for us, for we continually fail and are so often unfaithful to the beautiful character of godliness --

"Plead with your mother, plead: for she is not my wife, neither am I her husband. . ."

"For she said, I will go after my lovers, that give me my bread and my water, my wool, my flax, mine oil, and my drink. . ."

"For she did not know that I gave her her corn, and wine, and oil, and multiplied her silver and gold" (vs. 2-8).

She attributed her prosperity to her own efforts, and her intimacies with foreigners.

All that she had, all that she could ever have, even her life itself, and her every breath, was of the love and mercy of God -- but she did not know. Hosea says later --

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge."

-- Lack of the knowledge of God -- lack of a realization of the universality of His love and goodness. Paul emphasizes this point to the Lycaonians --

"God left not Himself without witness, in that He did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17).

We take so much for granted, when we should be continually awed by God's goodness. We attribute so much to other causes, to our own efforts and accomplishments, when we should be in constant humble recognition that we of ourselves can DO nothing and ARE nothing, and ALL good is of God.

"She shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them: she shall seek them, but not find them ... Then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband, for then was it better with me than now" (2:7).

Here is the patience and longsuffering of God -- waiting till she learns by bitter experience that there is no good but in Him.

This is a divine characteristic to be marveled at in thankfulness, but not to be presumed upon. Paul says in warning --

"DESPISEST thou the riches of His goodness and forbearance and long-suffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to REPENTANCE?" (Rom. 2:4)

But still there must be divine longsuffering and patience in infinite measure, or none at all could be saved. This is the beautiful lesson of Hosea's personal allegory.

And this is the great lesson of the book for us -- the lesson of the unmerciful debtor -- the lesson that we have been given so much unmerited blessing that we should be eager and anxious to give all we can on our part -- that we have been forgiven so much that patience and mercy and love and longsuffering should be our joyful manifestation of thanksgiving toward God and desire to expand our hearts and minds and be like Him in the limitless pouring forth of goodness.

How small and cramped and ugly is the natural mind of the flesh! How vast and glorious and beautiful is the mind of the Spirit!

Any impatience, or bitterness, or unkindness, or condemnation of others, put us into the position of the evil, small-minded unmerciful debtor who was graciously forgiven a fortune but who without mercy extorted a few pence from his unfortunate neighbor.

Jesus' comment on the punishment of this evil man was --

"So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also to you if ye from your hearts -- FROM YOUR HEARTS -- forgive not every one his brother their trespasses."

It was from Hosea that Jesus drew those memorable words to the self-righteous, hypocritical Pharisees --

"Go thou and learn what this meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice."

The greatest of personal sacrifice is repulsive to God if it is in self-glory and harshness, and not in the spirit of humbleness and mercy and tenderness and an expanding love toward all mankind.

But in spite of God's great love for His people, they must go through a long and terrible night of suffering for their foolishness and sins.

Vs. 9-13 of chapter two describe Israel's Lo-Ammi period -- "Not My people" -- cast off, rejected, scattered and afflicted. No people has suffered like this people -- the chosen and beloved of God.

Then vs. 14 to the end describe, in pictures of great beauty, the various aspect of the ultimate victory and triumph of God's ever patient love for His people, as typified by Hosea --

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her" (2:14).

Once again God will deliver His people from Egyptian darkness and bondage. Once again will He take them apart to Himself in the wilderness, and renew the covenant, and prepare them for the possession of the land.

"And I will give her the valley of Achor for a door of hope" (v. 15).

Here is summed up the whole theme of the prophecy -- The valley of Achor -- the Valley of "Trouble" -- shall become a Door of HOPE.

All that they have passed through will be found to be the loving provision of God to lead them into hope.

"And she shall sing there as in the days of her youth."

The Song of Solomon is the song of the Bridegroom and the Bride. The Song of Moses and the Lamb, the great Song of the Redeemed, will be an antitype and memorial of when Israel sang in their joy of deliverance on the shores of the Red Sea.

"At that day thou shalt call Me Ishi -- ('My Husband') -- and not Baali -- ('My Lord')."

Here is a change of relationship.

Jesus said to his disciples, at the last supper --

"Henceforth I call you not SERVANTS, but I have called you FRIENDS."

Paul expresses the same thought in describing to the Galatians the glorious new relationship that the redeemed bear to God through Christ --

"We WERE in BONDAGE under the elements of the world, but God sent forth His Son to redeem them that were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of SONS."

"Wherefore thou art no more a SERVANT, but a SON."

In his enacted allegory, as we read in chapter three, Hosea, at God's instruction buys back to him his wife who had abandoned him and had sunk to the miserable position of a bond-slave, just as Israel had abandoned God and sold themselves into slavery by their sins.

"And in that day I will make a covenant for them with the beast of the field, and with the fowls of heaven."

"And I will break the bow and the sword and the battle out of the earth" (v. 18).

Here are the glories of the millennium so greatly needed today -- peace and harmony among all mankind, and among the whole animal creation.

"And I will betroth thee unto Me FOREVER, in righteousness, and in judgment, and in loving kindness, and mercy, and faithfulness" (vs. 19-20).

All things shall be made new again. All the estrangement of the past shall be forgotten in the final glorious reconciliation.

"I will hear, saith the Lord, I will hear the heavens, and they shall hear the earth, and the earth shall hear the corn, and the wine, and the oil, and they shall hear Jezreel" (vs. 21-22).

The curse shall be removed, the long silence of rejection and estrangement broken, and all nature shall be in tune and in intimate, harmonious communion together, and eagerly responsive to Jezreel - the redeemed Seed of God.

"And I will sow her unto Me in the earth" (v. 23).

She shall be the blessed and honored means whereby the whole earth shall bring forth the fruits of righteousness unto the glory of God --

"And I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy, and I will say to them that were not my people, Thou art My people; and they shall say, Thou art my God."

These first three chapters conclude the personal allegory of Hosea. Chapters four to fourteen are the more literal and detailed application to the nation of Israel -- their sins, the judgments to come upon them, and the ultimate reconciliation.

In chapter thirteen the prophet climaxes his message. After speaking of their long desolation by the four savage beasts of the Gentiles -- the lion, the bear, the leopard and the unnamed wild beast (vs. 7-8) -- he continues, in v. 14, with the wonderful prophecy with which Paul similarly climaxes his resurrection chapter, 1st Cor. 15 --

"I will ransom them from the power of the grave: I will redeem them from death."

"O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction."

Paul's application of this to the transformation of the faithful in Christ from mortality to immortality gives it a far deeper significance than just the political resurrection of Israel to which it primarily applies.

We are taught by this, as we are so often taught elsewhere, that as Hosea was an allegory to Israel, so Israel is an allegory to us.

Therein lies the great significance of the final words of the prophecy --

"Who is wise, and he shall understand these things? Prudent, and he shall know them?" (14:9).

Who IS wise?

God said sadly through Hosea --

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (4:6).

How much do we care about knowing these things? How much real, sincere effort have we put in this past week to learn and understand the lessons of God's Word through which we have been passing in our daily readings? To what extent have we meditated upon it and prayed for understanding?

Let us face these questions honestly. Are we truly ANXIOUS and concerned to learn more and more about God and His Word?

It is so easy to just go through the motions and think we are in the Truth, without ever having the real love of and yearning toward the knowledge of God which is essential to salvation. This is what marks off the true disciple from the common run of mankind.

These divine words are life. They are essential meat and drink. In them alone is the power of love and of holiness and godliness and of overcoming the flesh.

"WHO IS WISE: AND HE SHALL UNDERSTAND THESE THINGS?"