

Hosea mentions the four kings of Judah first, and then he mentions the king of Israel, the northern kingdom. Because they were all contemporary with Hosea, he mentions them all. He was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel, as the content of the book reveals.

Hosea was a contemporary with Amos, another prophet to Israel. He was also a contemporary with Micah and Isaiah, prophets to Judah. His ministry extended over half a century, and he lived to see the fulfillment of his prophecy in the captivity of Israel.

He can be compared to Jeremiah in the southern kingdom. Jeremiah warned his people of the southern kingdom that they would go into captivity, and he lived to see it. Hosea warned the northern kingdom that they would be going into Assyrian captivity, and he lived to see it. Jeremiah and Hosea have a great many things in common.

THEME

The theme of this book is a plea to return unto the Lord. I have a message entitled, "The Greatest Sin in All the World," which emphasizes the great theme of this book. I shall let it serve as the introduction to this marvelous prophecy of Hosea.

THE GREATEST SIN IN ALL THE WORLD

The accusation is often made that the present-day pulpit is weak and uncertain. Furthermore, it is charged that instead of being "a voice in the wilderness," the modern pulpit has settled down comfortably to become a sounding board for the whims and wishes of an indifferent people with itching ears. If the charge is true (and in many cases it is), it is because the pulpit is reluctant to grapple with the great issues of life. This hesitancy is born of a desire to escape criticism and a dread of becoming offensive to the finer sensibilities. More often it is due to a cowardly fear of facing the raw realities of life and wrestling with the leviathan of living issues. The pulpit quotes poetry and sprinkles rose water. It lives in a land of make-believe instead of saying, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

The theater, the monthly communication deal with instruments for reaching gloves off and grapple with

Not so the pulpit. The we come to this prophecy with the problems and issues behind the headlines is a pretty story, but we must stand the message of Hosea

The story behind the broken home. The person ground of his message. I speak to the nation from exactly how *God* felt, because

The home is the rock that for all peoples. God gave it to man at the very unit in the social structure of the physical universe. The building block of the unit block of society. The chain is determined by the individual any stronger than the home determines the color and the chain of a nation. The individual link is important

Home is where we live the home where we are psychologically when we go through our front. But it is within the walls masks and are really

Because of the strain thrown about it certainly rounded it with certain. One of these is marriage institution of marriage

The theater, the monthly magazine, and other agencies of communication deal with life stripped of its niceties. These instruments for reaching and teaching the masses take the gloves off and grapple with the problems that we face daily.

Not so the pulpit. The pulpit has avoided these issues. As we come to this prophecy of Hosea, we cannot avoid dealing with the problems and issues of life, for that is the story that is behind the headlines in the prophecy of Hosea. It is not a pretty story, but we must understand it if we are to understand the message of Hosea.

The story behind the prophecy of Hosea is the tragedy of a broken home. The personal experience of Hosea is the background of his message. He walks out of a broken home to speak to the nation from a heart that is breaking. He knew exactly how *God* felt, because *he* felt the same way.

The home is the rock foundation of society and has been that for all peoples. God has given the home to mankind. He gave it to man at the very beginning. It is the most important unit in the social structure. It is to society what the atom is to the physical universe. The little atom has been called the building block of the universe. Well, the home is the building block of society. The character and color of a building is determined by the individual bricks that go into it. No nation is any stronger than the homes that populate it, for the home determines the color and complexion of society. The home is the chain of a nation that holds it together, and every individual link is important.

Home is where we live and move and have our being. It is in the home where we are ourselves. We dress up physically and psychologically when we go out. We put up quite a front when we go through our front door and move out upon the street. But it is within the walls of the home that we take off our masks and are really ourselves.

Because of the strategic position of the home, God has thrown about it certain safeguards to protect it. He has surrounded it with certain bulwarks because of its importance. One of these is marriage. God has given more attention to the institution of marriage than He has to any other institution in

this world. Society did not *make* marriage; society *found* marriage. It is God who made marriage, and He gave it to mankind. Marriage rests upon His direct Word, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." God performed the first marriage ceremony. He gave the first bride away. He blessed the first couple. Marriage is more than a legal contract, more than an economic arrangement, more than a union of those with mutual love; it is an act of God. It rests upon His fiat command. Many folk think that all they need in order to get married is a license and a preacher. My friend, if you are going to have a successful marriage, you have to have God. If God does not make the marriage, it will go on the rocks.

God has given a drive to the race to reproduce within the framework of marriage. That is what makes the home. "The twain shall be one flesh." Before man walked out of the Garden of Eden, God gave him this institution. Beside the skins that Adam and Eve wore, the only thing they had was a marriage certificate from God. That is all. That is the only institution that came out of the Garden of Eden.

Marriage is a sacred relationship; it is a holy union. The New Testament sums up the mind of God on this when it says, "Marriage is honourable in all . . ." (Hebrews 13:4). Therefore, my beloved, marriage cannot be broken by a little legal act. It cannot be broken by a fit of temper. It cannot be broken by self-will. I personally believe there are only two acts that break a marriage—I mean a *real* marriage.

The first act is death, of course, which automatically severs the relationship.

The second act is unfaithfulness—unfaithfulness on the part of either the husband or the wife. That rips a relationship in two. In the Old Testament, the one guilty of adultery was to be dealt with in the harshest manner imaginable. For example notice the importance God attached to the act: "And the man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death" (Leviticus 20:10). For an unmarried girl accused of adultery

the law said, "But if th virginity be not found for the damsel to the door of her city shall stone her who hath wrought folly in Israel: house: so shalt thou" (Deuteronomy 22:20, 21)

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the marriage; society found marriage, and He gave it to His direct Word, "What if a man and his wife are not put asunder." He gave the first ceremony. Marriage is more than a legal arrangement, more than a social contract; it is an act of God. It is not a license and a preacher. My successful marriage, you have seen, it will go on

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unfaithfulness on the part of a man that rips a relationship in two. The penalty of adultery was to be put to death. For example, the act: "And the man who is married to his neighbour's wife, even he shall be put to death" (Leviticus 20:10). The man who is accused of adultery

the law said, "But if this thing be true, and the tokens of virginity be not found for the damsel: then they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her with stones that she die: because she hath wrought folly in Israel, to play the whore in her father's house: so shalt thou put evil away from among you" (Deuteronomy 22:20, 21).

There are a few words I think we should say here by way of explanation. There are some zealous Christians who use Romans 7:2, 3 as the basis for the extreme viewpoint that a divorced person who has a living mate can never remarry. Verse 2 says, "For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband." They forget that under the law the married person who was guilty of fornication was stoned to death and the innocent party under the law did not have a living partner. The guilty person was pushing up daisies through the rockpile. If that were enforced in Southern California today, we wouldn't have freeways because we wouldn't be able to get around all the rockpiles.

I am not sure but Paul includes desertion under the heading of unfaithfulness in I Corinthians 7:15: "But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace."

Another item concerning the law which needs amplification is the reference in Deuteronomy which seems to preclude the man from any charge of guilt. You may wonder why the woman is picked on—isn't the man guilty? Yes, but there are two things you need to bear in mind: one is that the word used is always the generic term, *anthropōs*, meaning mankind. We have the same distinction in legal terminology. I notice that some contracts read, "The party of the first part, if he . . ." when the person is really a she. The term is used for either one. Also we must remember that marriage is a picture of Christ and the church, and He is never guilty, but the church is guilty. The Scriptures do not teach a double standard, but I do think they teach a different standard.

Personally, I think that God has made woman finer than man. For this reason, when she goes bad, she goes farther down than a man goes. It is not that sin in one is worse than in another, but the results are far more detrimental. In my limited ministry, I have seen children overcome the handicap of a ne'er-do-well father, but I have never seen children turn out right when the mother has been bad. A sorry father is a serious handicap for a child, but a good mother more than compensates. Mother is the center of the home. Some time ago I heard of a woman who was asked to accept an office in a church organization. She refused the office and gave as her reason, "I am a missionary to the nursery. There are three pairs of eyes watching me, and I want to direct them to God." God has placed a mother in a home and made her all-important in that place.

Every woman was once a little girl very much like the description composed by Alan Beck, and which he has entitled, "What is a Girl?"

Little girls are the nicest things that happen to people. They are born with a little bit of angel-shine about them and though it wears thin sometimes, there is always enough left to lasso your heart—even when they are sitting in the mud, or crying temperamental tears, or parading up the street in mother's best clothes.

A little girl can be sweeter (and badder) oftener than anyone else in the world. She can jitter around, and stomp, and make funny noises and frazzle your nerves, yet just when you open your mouth, she stands there demure with that special look in her eyes. A girl is Innocence playing in the mud, Beauty standing on its head, and Motherhood dragging a doll by the foot.

God borrows from many creatures to make a little girl. He uses the song of a bird, the squeal of a pig, the stubbornness of a mule, the antics of a monkey, the spryness of a grasshopper, the curiosity of a cat, the slyness of a fox, the softness of a kit-

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ten. And to top it off, He adds the mysterious mind
 of a woman.

A little girl likes new shoes, party dresses, small
 animals, dolls, make-believe, ice cream, make-up,
 going visiting, tea parties, and one boy. She doesn't
 care so much for visitors, boys in general, large
 dogs, hand-me-downs, straight chairs, vegetables,
 snow suits, or staying in the front yard. She is
 loudest when you are thinking, prettiest when she
 has provoked you, busiest at bedtime, quietest when
 you want to show her off, and most flirtatious when
 she absolutely must not get the best of you again.

She can muss up your home, your hair, and your
 dignity—spend your money, your time, and your
 temper—then just when your patience is ready to
 crack, her sunshine peeks through and you've lost
 again.

Yes, she is a nerve-racking nuisance, just a noisy
 bundle of mischief. But when your dreams tumble
 down and the world is a mess, when it seems you
 are pretty much of a fool after all, she can make you
 a king when she climbs on your knee and whispers,
 "I love you best of all!"*

God shapes that little-girl charm into a fine and delicate
 instrument, a woman. But when a woman goes wrong, the
 tragedy is immeasurable.

The background of the prophecy of Hosea is the story of a
 fallen woman and a broken home. It is a story of that which
 must be contrasted to God's ideal of marriage and of woman-
 hood. God uses this to tell His own story.

In the hill country of Ephraim, in one of the many little
 towns not on the maps of the world, lived two young people.
 One was a boy by the name of Hosea, the other was a girl by
 the name of Gomer. They fell in love—it is the same story

*Beck, Alan, *What Is a Girl?* used by permission of the Reader's Digest.

which has been repeated millions of times, but never grows old. I don't think it is stretching the imagination to say that they fell madly in love with each other. Then for some unaccountable reason, Gomer went bad. She resorted to the oldest profession known to mankind. Hosea was broken-hearted, and shame filled his soul. He must have thought about his recourse to the Mosaic law. He could have brought her before the elders of the town and demanded the law be enforced. In that case she would have been stoned, for she had betrayed him. He would have been justified.

Does this remind you of another story that took place some seven hundred years later in that same hill country when a man by the name of Joseph was engaged to a girl by the name of Mary? The principal difference is that Joseph's information was wrong, and an angel came from heaven to correct it; but Hosea's information was right, for Gomer was guilty.

At this particular juncture the book of Hosea opens. "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" (Hosea 1:2). There are expositors who take the position that this is nothing but an allegory, that it did not really happen. Such trifling with the Word of God waters it down to a harmless solution which is more sickening than stimulating. Let's face it—God commanded Hosea to break the Mosaic law. The law said to stone her, but God said to marry her. The thing God commanded Hosea to do must have caused him to revolt in every fiber of his being, but Hosea did not demur—he obeyed explicitly. He took Gomer in holy wedlock, and he gave her his name. She came into his home as his wife. Listen to the Apostle Paul as he speaks of such a relationship: "What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh" (I Corinthians 6:16).

My friend, you may be sure that the tempo of gossip really picked up in that little town. Hosea's home became a desert island in a sea of criticism. It was the isolation ward in local society. A case of leprosy in the home would not have broken

off contact with Hosea!

Children were boys and one girl. A full story. And the nation Israel.

Jezreel was the son of Hosea and God will act directly to the heart of the nation. God's instruction to Hosea was it with hatred and says, "I'll judge. My judgment."

The second chapter never knew a father but she did not leave the home of Hosea. The people of the land try, "You will not

The third chapter "ple." If you put a child." What a message it is to everyone is a child no illegitimate children are. Do you think made union? Abortion through faith in men in His day are of your fathering God's children

My friend, and you an illegitimate become a child them gave he parents of God, even 1:12).

off contact with the outside world more effectively. Poor Hosea!

Children were born in this home. There were three—two boys and one girl. Their names, in their meanings, tell the awful story. And there is the larger meaning and message for the nation Israel.

Jezreel was the oldest. His name means "God will scatter, and God will avenge." The reference, God told Hosea, was directly to the house of Jehu. Although Jehu had carried out God's instructions to destroy the house of Ahab, he had done it with hatred and great personal vengeance. For this, God says, "I'll judge. I'll scatter Israel, but there will be mercy in My judgment."

The second child was Lo-ruhamah, which means that she never knew a father's pity. It was not that she was an orphan, but she did not know who her father was. What a scandal in the home of Hosea! God is saying through this circumstance to the people of the northern kingdom who had gone into idolatry, "You will not know My pity, for I am not your Father."

The third child was Lo-ammi—which means "not my people." If you put this in the singular, it would mean "not my child." What a message that was to Hosea's day! And what a message it is to our own day when liberal theology claims that everyone is a child of God. God says they are wrong. He has no illegitimate children. God says, "I know who My children are. Do you think that My children are the offspring of a man-made union? Absolutely not! A person becomes My child only through faith in Jesus Christ." And the Lord Jesus said to the men in His day who claimed to be the sons of Abraham, "Ye are of your father the *devil*." They could make no claim of being God's children.

My friend, are you Lo-ammi? Are you God's child, or are you an illegitimate child? Let me assure you that you can become a child of God—"But as many as received him, to them gave he power [the right, the authority] to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:12).

The story of Hosea's home is a sad one, and the story continues. Gomer left home. She returned to her former profession and became a common prostitute. Certainly God is going to say to this man, "Hosea, you have done all that you can. You tried to reform the woman, but it didn't do any good. Let her go." But no, God says, "Go get her and bring her back to your home." Hosea went after her. She refused to come back. He sent the children to plead with their mother. Still she would not return. Then, as women of this sort did in those days, she sold herself into slavery. Hosea went to her and *bought* her and brought her back to the home.

Oh, my friend, what a picture this is of our Saviour. He created us and we belong to Him. Then we were guilty of going from Him and giving our love, our affection, our time, to the things of the world. And while we were yet sinners, He came down to this earth and *bought* us in our ugly condition that He might make us His legitimate children. What love!

After this experience, did Gomer become a faithful wife? The record does not tell us. But we see Hosea, stepping out of a home scarred by shame and going before a nation with a heart that is breaking. His sorrow is intolerable, and with scalding tears coursing down his cheeks, he denounces the nation Israel, saying, "You have been faithless to God! I know how God feels, because I feel the same way. You have broken the heart of God." What a picture!

Hosea denounced the nation. He declared a verdict of guilty for the crime of all crimes. He said simply but specifically that their sin was as black as it could be and they could expect God's punishment. This people who had known God, whom He had redeemed out of Egypt, to whom He had said, "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself," turned their backs on God and made a golden calf! And still in Hosea's day they had not learned their lesson, for at that moment in the northern kingdom there stood two golden calves. The people had turned from the living and true God back to calf worship! Israel was playing the harlot. Their sin was the greatest sin in the world.

You may be saying, "You may be saying, 'sin.'" In one sense act, it is a state. We thank God, Christ you and I exercise true that unbelief remedy—for the reason in unbelief, you r

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You may be saying, "I thought unbelief was the greatest sin." In one sense unbelief is the greatest sin, but it is not an act, it is a state. We all are born in rebellion against God. But, thank God, Christ's death paid the penalty for our sin, and if you and I exercise faith in Jesus Christ, He will save us. It is true that unbelief is a terrible sin for which there is no remedy—for the remedy is to trust Christ. When you continue in unbelief, you reject the remedy.

There is another sin which you may consider the greatest in the world: it is sin against light. To have the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ and reject it is sinning against light. Frankly, I would rather stand before God's throne of judgment as an idolater from the darkest jungle of Africa, than as a church member who has repeatedly heard the gospel and rejected it. But this is not the greatest sin.

The greatest sin in all the world is sin against love. This is worse than all others, and this is the message of Hosea. Gomer was not only guilty of breaking the marriage vow, which was bad enough, but she sinned against the one who loved her. That is sin at its worst. My friend, to sin against God and the Saviour who loves you is worse than the animism and animalism of the heathen world. The sin of paganism is nothing compared to the sin of those who sin against God's love. It is deeper and darker than the immorality of the underworld and the demonism of the overworld.

Hosea knew what sin was, and he knew what love was. Sin against love aggravates sin.

Israel knew the love of God as no other nation knew it. She knew His deliverance, His redemption, His protection, His forgiveness, His revelation, and His love. Yet Israel turned to dumb idols and gave herself to them. This is sin at its worst.

However, God would not give her up. Love will triumph. Let me lift out just three verses from Hosea's prophecy which will tell God's story:

First, here is the charge: "Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone" (Hosea 4:17). The name "Ephraim" is synonymous

with the name Israel, and He charges Israel with spiritual adultery.

Then notice the great pulsating passion of the infinite God: "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together" (Hosea 11:8). God is saying that He can't give Israel up; He loves her too much. This is His reason for sending Hosea back to get Gomer a second and a third time. He wanted Hosea to know how He felt about Israel.

Finally, here is the victory: "Ephraim shall say, What have I to do any more with idols? I have heard him, and observed him: I am like a green fir tree. From me is thy fruit found" (Hosea 14:8). There is a day coming when Israel will turn back to God. This leads us to believe that Gomer finally did change and become a good wife and mother. We cannot be sure of this, but we can be sure that Israel will one day return to God with her whole heart.

Is there an application for you and me here? Does this shocking description of spiritual adultery fit the believer in our day? Yes, the church is described as the bride of Christ—"I have espoused you . . . that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (II Corinthians 11:2). And to the church at Ephesus the Lord Jesus said, "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil. . . Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love" (Revelation 2:2, 4).

My friend, it is not enough to be correct in your doctrine and be active in your service for Christ. These are important and have their place, but the essential thing is love. Have you left your first love? Do you *love* Him today?

The name Hosea means salvation; it is another form of *Joshua*, which is the Hebrew name of the Greek form *Jesus*. The church is the bride of the New Testament Hosea, but our Hosea is joined to a spiritual harlot!

In Revelation, chapter 17, is the most frightful picture in the Bible. It personifies the church and calls her the great harlot,

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Mystery Babylon. This is the trend which the organized church is following in our day. Oh, how many believers are covering up their frustration and their lack of reality in their spiritual experience by just being busy. It is nothing in the world but nervous agitation. Down underneath they cannot honestly say, "I love Him. I am true to Him." With hot tears our Lord accuses the church of being lukewarm. God pity the man who is married to a lukewarm woman. God pity our Saviour who is joined to a church that is only lukewarm. He says, "Oh, how I wish that you were either hot or cold!"

Let me be very personal and ask about *your* relationship with Christ. Has any cloud come between your soul and your Saviour? An incident is told of Spurgeon who suddenly stopped in the middle of the street he was crossing and prayed. When he reached the other side, his companion asked him, "Why did you stop to pray in the middle of the street?" Spurgeon's reply was something like this, "A cloud came between my soul and Christ, and I could not let it remain there even long enough to reach the other side of the street." Before the Lord Jesus put Simon Peter in harness, He asked the heartsearching question, "Lovest thou me?" This is just as poignant and pertinent now as it was that early dawn by the Sea of Galilee.

My friend, when you turn your back on the one who so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, you are not only doing something bad, you are not merely turning away in unbelief, you are committing the greatest sin of all. You are turning away from a God who loves you and died for you. There is no other sin equal to that.