Introduction to Hosea: God’s faithfulness

I’m excited in this lesson to begin introducing the message in the book of Hosea and the powerful message that is found there of God’s love and God’s covenant faithfulness for the people of Israel even in the midst of their judgment. In many ways I think Hosea is the most memorable of the Book of the Twelve because of this powerful metaphor that’s found in the book: the picture of the marriage between Hosea and Gomer as an image and a representation of the relationship between God and Israel, and also a reminder to us of what had gone wrong in that relationship that had caused God to come to this place where he was sending the prophets to warn the people of Israel that judgment was on its way.

We have seen from the message of the book of Amos that the first of the prophets that are found in the Book of the Twelve, and really the rise of classical prophesy in Israel, where we have these prophets who concentrate their ministry on the people, and who’s messages are written down and recorded for us in the Hebrew Cannon. All of that begins to happen because of the impending Assyrian crisis, and so we have a number of prophets who prophesy both to Israel and [to] Judah warning them that God’s judgment is going to come upon them at the hands of the Assyrians. Now the date that we gave to Amos is that the ministry of Amos appears to occur somewhere in the years 760 to 750.

Hosea is also a prophet to the Northern Kingdom, but he’s a younger contemporary of Amos; he is actually going to minister and to serve through the
time when the Northern Kingdom falls in the years of 722 and 721. So many of the things that Amos saw and prophesized about in advance, Hosea is going to continue to warn the people, but he’s also going to live through them. We mentioned that the book of Hosea is perhaps the most memorable of the prophets that are found in the Book of the Twelve; in many ways this book also presents for us some of the most difficult interpretive challenges. We won’t get into this much in the lessons on the video, but the Hebrew text and some of the Hebrew of Hosea is very difficult; and so as you go to commentaries, there’s often discussion of how we should translate certain parts of the book of Hosea, or even a more basic question: What does the text actually read?

There are also some difficult interpretive challenges that we are going to focus on a little bit more. I ran across a quote recently about the book of Hosea. Jerome, who is one of the leading Hebrew scholars in Old Testament scholars of early church, said this: “If in the interpretation of all the prophets we stand in need of the intervention of the Holy Spirit, how much more should the Lord be invoked in the interpretation of Hosea?” So if Jerome felt the need for the Holy Spirit, I definitely feel that, and as we approach any part of God’s word, we realize that we need the Spirit to open our eyes; not just to what it means, but to its relevance, its significance, its importance, and its application to our lives. So we’re going to take what Jerome says to heart and I am asking the Spirit to guide me and lead me as I teach these sessions on Hosea.

Nature of Hosea and Gomer’s Relationship

One of the interpretive challenges is just to understand the precise and the exact nature of the relationship between Hosea and Gomer. And one of the things that you will immediately encounter as you go to the commentaries is there is a great deal of discussion about how we should understand the relationship of the marriage that’s described as it’s particularly highlighted for us in chapters 1 to 3.
The book of Hosea, we have the marriage between Hosea and Gomer in 1 to 3, and then in chapters 4 to 14 we have more the preaching of Hosea to Israel reflecting on the fact, and explaining to the people, and indicting them, and explaining to them why they have been an unfaithful wife to Yahweh in the same way that Gomer was to Hosea.

But the initial command that the Lord gives to Hosea is found in Hosea chapter 1, verses 2 and 3: “The Lord first spoke through Hosea and said to him, ‘Go and take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.’” So the analogy between God and Israel and Hosea and Gomer is very clear to see there, but commentators and interpreters of Hosea have discussed what exactly is the nature of this marriage.

As we read that passage and we hear God saying to the prophet: I want you to go and marry an unfaithful woman; [and] that should raise some moral dilemmas in our mind. And the first reason for that is that some have noted in Leviticus chapter 21:7, in the instructions that are given to a priest, it says there, that a priest shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled. Neither should they marry a woman who is divorced from her husband, for the priest is holy to his God. Now, we understand that a priest had a unique role and a ceremonial position in the temple, and his service was related to all of that; but if God gives those kind of instructions to the priest who were his servants, how can God then say to a prophet like Hosea who represents him before the people: I want you to go and marry a promiscuous woman. So in light of that, there have been a number of different interpretations and understanding of this marriage of Hosea and Gomer that have arisen.

If we want to carry this over to a contemporary context, you can imagine what would happen at your typical local church if a pastor were to suddenly
become involved with a promiscuous woman who is known to have a bad reputation. Pastor’s wives get excoriated for a lot less serious things than that. So how could God ask a prophet who was supposed to represent him to marry an unfaithful woman?

**Interpretations of God’s Commands to Hosea**

Some people have argued, and you’ll see this in some commentaries, that what we are talking about here is simply a vision, an allegory, or a parable. Now in the book of Amos, we saw that in Amos chapters 7 and 9, God communicates His message to the people through a series of visions that were revealed to the prophet Amos. He saw a vision of a locus plague, vision of a fire, the vision of the plumb line, the vision of the basket of summer fruit, and then the vision of the collapsing sanctuary. Perhaps what we have going on here is simply a vision. Hosea sees the image of God commanding him to marry this promiscuous woman, and this simply takes place at a visionary level.

In the book of Ezekiel there are times when Ezekiel, who is living in Babylon, is taken by the Lord and shown visions of things that are going on in the land of Judah. Ezekiel wasn’t physically in Judah; it was simply a vision. Maybe that’s what we have going on here. In the prophet Ezekiel, in Ezekiel chapters 16 and 23, we also have examples of where the prophet gives an extended parable comparing the people of Israel, or the people of Judah, or the cities of Samaria and Jerusalem, comparing them to unfaithful wives. And [these are] very vivid, very graphic, very powerful passages. In one of them, the Lord finds his people as an abandoned baby in a field covered with blood because her father doesn’t want her. He raises this beautiful young girl. When she comes of age, he marries her and then she turns around and becomes unfaithful to him. So the prophet Ezekiel uses a parable describing the relationship between God and Israel as a marriage. Perhaps that’s simply what we have going on here.
At other times prophets carry out their message by performing dramatic acts, or sign acts. Perhaps the marriage of Hosea and Gomer is simply something that is acted out as a drama. So that’s one view of this. We’re simply talking about a vision, an allegory, or a parable.

Another interpretation is that Gomer was actually a cult prostitute. And one of the things that is going on in the book of Hosea is that the prophet is indicting them, or condemning them, in their faithfulness to the Lord in the fact that they have worshiped other gods. And particularly, they have worshiped, they have been involved in, the worship of the Canaanite god Baal and all of the fertility rights and the pagan things that went along with that: the worship of the Asherah, and some interpreters will simply say, or some interpreters will actually argue, that Gomer was a cult prostitute involved in one of the sanctuaries. However, there is nothing in the terminology, nothing in the description of her, no explicit statements in the book, that clearly identify her in that way; and so that’s probably not the most likely way to interrupt this passage.

Another interpretation is that instead of Gomer’s being a promiscuous woman who cheated on her husband, or who is a prostitute/adulteress, what we should understand [is that] this language is to be saying is that Gomer, like all of the other Israelites, was that Gomer was guilty of spiritual infidelity. And so often the terminology of adultery, or the language of committing immortality, acting as a prostitute, whoring oneself, is often used and it is used in the book of Hosea to talk about the spiritual infidelity of the people of Israel as they worship these other gods. And so we don’t actually have God commanding a prophet to marry a woman who is going to be explicitly unfaithful to him in the physical realm, but Gomer is unfaithful to the Lord like all the other Israelites: She’s a worshiper of Baal. We see Israel again as a promiscuous, unfaithful prostitute described in very graphic ways [such as] in Ezekiel 16 – 23. Perhaps Gomer is simply one
individual who represents what that’s all about.

Another interpretation, and this one may sound a little strange to us when we first hear it, is that we possibly see (and some interpreters have argued this) we possibly see Hosea in this book married to two different women. In Chapter 1 we have the relationship between Josiah and Gomer, [and] there’s a description of the children that are born to that relationship. But in Chapter 3, verse 1, the Lord said to me [i.e., to Hosea], “Go again; love a woman who is loved by another man,” and Hosea buys this woman out of her servitude to another man or [to] her father. And so the argument here is that this is not necessarily Gomer; we’re talking about another woman. And the love that Hosea shows to another woman, perhaps she’s taken as a secondary wife the way that Deuteronomy, Chapter 21, versus 15 to 17 would allow. There is nothing explicit in the text that identifies this woman as Gomer, so possibly we have Hosea being married to two different women. Again, strange to us, but something that would have been allowed under Old Testament Law.

Reflecting on Interpretations

Reflecting [on] some of these ideas that are trying to move beyond simply looking at this as an actual real marriage, Douglas Stewart in the *World Biblical Commentary*, a very gifted evangelical scholar, who has written an excellent commentary on minor profits, he’s going to talk about the relationship of Chapter 3 and Chapter 1 and how we should understand the marriage and the relationship of Hosea and Gomer; and he says this: “There are no data in Chapter 3 to prove that Gomer is to be identified with the promiscuous wife in Chapter 1 as often been suggested. Nothing in the text is actually stated about Gomer’s profession or fidelity. In the intriguing notion that Hosea married a prostitute at God's command, [this] is blinded by the fact that the marriage remained unconsummated. Since it cannot be proved that Gomer is the same wife described
in Chapter 3, nothing about Gomer's marital fidelity can be learned. That she is metaphorically a prostituting woman in Chapter 1, verse 2, cannot be taken as a literal statement or her professional practice. She is merely an Israelite, all of whom are prostitutes, all of whom who have broken Yahweh’s covenant.”

I want to put that out there as a possible interpretation of this book, but I think the most natural and vivid way, the thing that makes this metaphor especially powerful, is that we are talking about a real marriage. And if this is simply a metaphor or a parable or an allegory, I think the shock value of what this book is communicating loses some of its effectiveness.

**Extreme Circumstances to Better Convey a Message**

It is an incredibly surprising thing that God would ask one of his servants to marry this kind of woman. It does seem to go against what we see God’s instructing the priest to do in Leviticus 21:7, but that’s part of why the book is so powerful. The situation and the circumstance has become so dire in Israel that it's necessary for God to use these kinds of messages, and use these kids of extreme actions on this part of the prophet, to really convey to the people the seriousness of their message. If Israel needs to be informed, and needs to be reminded of their seriousness of their descent, what God thinks about their defection to these other gods, having a prophet married [to] a promiscuous woman would have been very effectively communicated [in] that message, conveying to them the anger, the betrayal, the hurt that God felt as he watched and observed what they were doing. An actual marriage communicates that in the most effective way possible.

In spite of all these other interpretations, the simplest and most natural reading, the way we preserve the real impact of what we see going on in this book, is that it is talking about a real marriage.
Gary Smith says this in the *NIV Application Commentary*, and this is where I would end up understanding this relationship. He says, "We believe it is best to accept a literal, historical interpretation and to conclude that Gomer was sexually involved with other men before and after her marriage with Hosea. That seems to be the most natural reading of the text. One of the things that supports this view is that if you think about the other prophets, there are a number of places where God will use the family of the prophets to convey something important to the people. Here are some examples: In Jeremiah, chapter 16, God commands the prophet Jeremiah not to marry and not to have children.

Sometimes we as pastors, or graduates of seminary, we're going out into minister and we think about a different or difficult context where God is calling us to minister. We think going to a part of the world—that’s going to be hard. We're not going to have an affluent lifestyle.

And think about some of the things that God asks the prophets to do in order to be faithful servants to him. "Jeremiah, I'm calling you to ministry," and he's called at a very young age. "I'm calling you to be my prophet! The people are going to hate you, they're going to oppose you, they're going to attack and persecute you, and on top of that, you cannot get married or have children because the situation that you're living in. You need to convey to these people that this is not a good time to have a family."

God is going to bring such devastation on the land of Judah during the time of Jeremiah's ministry that it would be better that people not marry. This is because husbands will be taken to war, families will be divided/separated, mothers and fathers will lose their sons and daughters because of the Babylonian invasion. This was a serious way of conveying that, vividly saying to the people, “Look at the terrible things that are going to happen”. In the same way God vividly used the prohibition for Jeremiah not to be married, God is using the marriage of Hosea in
the same way. When the people of Judah tried to understand why would a young man like Jeremiah not be married, and when he explained that, I think that caused the message to sink in further.

We also see with the prophet of Ezekiel in Chapter 24, that on the day that Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, on that day, Ezekiel’s wife died. God communicated to Ezekiel that he was not to show any outward signs of mourning as a message to the people. So here’s a prophet who has been faithful to God; he has responded to God's call. He preached the word to a rebellious people who had not listened to what he has to say. In fact, they kind of viewed his message with a great deal of cynicism. As a way of getting the attention these people, the Lord says to Ezekiel, "I am going to take your wife away and show your people that this is going to be a national disaster where you are not going to have a time of mourning of what happened. I don't want to you to show a physical or outward sign of mourning.”

I think at that point many of us might have said to the Lord: “OK, that’s the end; I want out of this occupation. I’ve tried to get these people’s attention; now you’re telling me you’re going to take away my wife so they will listen to what I have to say.” Now that’s a shocking thing. But what happened to the family had a powerful way to convey the message to the people. The same thing happens in the marriage of Hosea and Gomer.

We’re also going to see in chapter one the names of Hosea's children are going to have a symbolic significance, and this parallels very closely to what we see happening in the life and the ministry in the prophet Isaiah. He has two sons: One of them is named “Shearyashuv” (a remnant will return), and that child accompanies Isaiah when he goes out to meet Ahaz at the water works when he has an important message to convey to Ahaz at that time during the Syro-Ephramite war. That little child, that son, that name of that child had a message to
the king. Later on, Isaiah is going to have another son (Isaiah chapter 8), [and this is] my favorite biblical name, “Maher-shalal-hashbaz.” We don’t know how he got that on the back of his soccer uniform, but that name means “swift to the plunder, swift the spoil.” It was also a message to the people of Israel that God’s judgment was going to be swift; and the deliverance of God [is that] God will swiftly deliver the enemy.

There’s a mixed message in the names of both of those children. The names of Hosea’s children are also going to have a symbolic message, and they’re also going to have a mixed message. Because the message of the names at the beginning will be judgment, those names are reserved and turned around, and then they speak of the promise of restoration that God is ultimately going to bring to his people. So we have clear examples in other prophetic texts of how God uses the children, wives, families, and circumstances of the prophet's life as a dramatic way of conveying the message, trying to somehow get the attention of the people that will not listen to them. So it was not that surprising that God will ask Hosea something like this as shocking as it seems on the surface.

**Hosea and Gomer Represent God and Israel.**

Now when we come to the place where we recognize that, where it seems likely that we’re talking about a real marriage, there are some other interpretive questions; there are some other issues that come up. And part of this [is], as we look at verse 2 here, “Go and take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.” What exactly does this mean? And commentators have actually interpreted this in a couple different ways. Some would argue, and again as Gary Smith says, “The most natural reading is that we conclude the Gomer was sexually involved with other men before and after the marriage.” She is a woman of whoredom, and for Hosea to marry this kind of woman, people in his community would have
known about this; there would have been immediate shock value. How in the world could a prophet marry a woman like this? It needs to be against what we normally see in a marriage.

However, another interpretation of this, and again trying to deal with the moral dilemma of God’s asking someone to marry a woman and doing something that seems to be in violation of what we normally see in a marriage and in violation of spiritual leaders in Israel, is that some have taken this command to be proleptic, or to read this proleptically, and what that means is that when it says here that God commanded him to marry a wife of whoredom is that at the time that Hosea married Gomer, she was not unfaithful. God simply instructs him: “Go and marry this woman, this specific woman, Gomer.” But later on she becomes unfaithful in the midst of the marriage relationship, and as a result of that, Hosea realized later on, proleptically, that God was commanding him to marry an unfaithful woman at the time his marriage started. It wasn’t evident at that time because Gomer wasn’t unfaithful at that point in her life.

I’m not sure we can really resolve this. We want know certain details about this marriage that the text is not communicating to us. But it merges throughout with the marriage between God and Israel. And sometimes we see Hosea as the husband, other times we see Yahweh. So seeing that kind of human and divine level, let’s go to what’s said about the marriage in chapter 2, verses 2-4: “Say to my brothers, ‘You are my people,’ and to your sisters, ‘You have received mercy.’”

Hosea is to remind the people of their family covenantal relationship with God. “Plead with your mother and plead, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband. That she put away her whoring from her face and her adultery from between her breasts.” So in the same way that Gomer ultimately was unfaithful to Hosea, the Lord is telling the prophet Hosea to tell the people, “This is what you
have done to me.” Now, when we talk about Gomer, was she a prostitute, or was she simply an unfaithful wife? Again, the terminology doesn’t answer for us all the details that we would necessarily like to know. The two words that are used to describe her infidelity  

**na’aph** is the word for adultery. It’s talking about a woman who has committed sexual immorality against her husband. And remember the seriousness of that offense in the Old Testament. It was a capital crime. The other word, **zonah**, is a word that does not necessarily talk about someone that is a prostitute, someone who sells their sexual services or their body. It is a generic word for immorality and sexual promiscuity in general.

There’s a tradition where we talk about Hosea and his wife and Gomer’s being a prostitute. But the language may simply convey that she is an adulteress and a sexually promiscuous woman. The problem with Israel is that they are not simply promiscuous; they have not simply committed infidelity and adultery. It’s larger than that. They have done this on a recurring basis. It is something that has become a pattern in the relationship of the marriage and the relationship between God and Israel. So God tells Hosea to confront the people about their serial infidelity to him, and as that’s going on. The context on the backdrop of this is that Hosea has experienced this in his own marriage as well.

The sad part of this is God is calling on his wife even as he’s about to divorce her. And the prophets will talk about the exile being a time of actual divorce. Jeremiah 3: God has already divorced the Northern Kingdom, and he is about to do the same to the south. They need to wake up and realize what’s going on. They need to return to him. And so there is going to be a divorce that’s going on here, but God is calling the people back to repentance. If they do not repent, this what’s going to happen in verse 3: “Lest I strip her naked and make her as in the day she was born, and make her like the wilderness, and make her like a parched land, and kill her with thirst.” And so the Lord is physically going to
punish his unfaithful wife. And again, physical punishment, corporal punishment, was a part of culture of the Ancient Near East. We need to understand it against that backdrop. And that’s what God is going to do to his people.

**God Judges Israel to Transform Their Hearts**

The problem is that infidelity has become so ingrained in the life of Israel. It’s something that they can’t turn away from. They do not have a heart to turn back to their husband. And so what the Lord is going to do is that the Lord is going to use the judgment of exile as a way of ultimately changing the heart of his unfaithful wife, and bringing her to a place where she recognizes the futility of trusting in these other gods. And her heart has changed; ultimately she will love her husband.

Here’s the drama that’s working itself out. God says in verse 5 of chapter 2, “For their mother has played the whore, and she who has conceived them has acted shamefully, and she has said, ‘I will go after my lovers that give me bread and water, my wool my flacks, my oil, my drink,’” and so in spite of recognizing the blessings that God has given to them, the people of Israel attribute the produce, and the blessings, and the prosperity, and the agricultural products that God has given to them—they recognize them as coming from these other gods. And so God says, “I am going to use a purging judgment. Not to simply carry out my vengeance and my anger,” although God as a betrayed husband is angry and is physically going to punish his people, “but the purpose of this judgment and the purpose of all of the horrible things that Israel experiences in exile is ultimately to transform their hearts, to take away this insatiable desire to follow after other gods, and to give them a desire, instead, to follow the Lord. So, the Lord says in verse 6, “Therefore, I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her path. She shall pursue her lovers but will not overtake them. She shall seek them but not find them.”
And then here’s the change that’s going to come about: “Then she will say, ‘I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now.’” And so ultimately all of this judgment, again, is not simply to pour out God’s wrath and anger on the people. It is ultimately to transform their hearts. They cannot seek after God because their adultery and their promiscuity is engrained in their character. The deprivation of exile and the suffering of exile is going to make them realize, “We should’ve remained faithful to the Lord because he is the one who is the source to our blessing”.

God is going to do some pretty terrible things to his people. Chapter 2, verses 12: “I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees of which she said, ‘These are my wages which my lovers have given me.’ I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall devour them, and I will punish her for the feastings of the Baals. When she burned offerings to them and adorned herself with her ring and her jewelry and went after other lovers and forgot me,” declares the Lord.

But again, all these horrible things are not simply a jealous, vindictive husband punishing his wife; it’s ultimately to change her heart. It’s ultimately to create the love relationship between God and Israel that the Lord had desired with these people from the very beginning. And so here’s what it says in chapter 2, verse 14, as kind of the culmination of this between God and Israel: “Therefore, behold, I will allure her. And I will bring her into the wilderness, and I will speak tenderly to her, and I will give her vineyards, and I will make the valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time she came out of the land of Egypt.”

God is not just going to destroy his people, God is going to use what he takes away from them and bring them to a place where they realize: “It was futile of us to trust in other gods.” And in love he is going to draw them and allure them. And that’s going to be the thing that changes their hearts.
Beginning Message of the Book of the Twelve

And I believe that what we have here in these opening chapters of Hosea, it’s not just the beginning of Hosea’s message; it’s the beginning of the message of the Book of the Twelve. It’s that throughout the Book of the Twelve we have a people that cannot return to God, that do not listen to God during the Assyrian and the Babylon crises, and even during the Post-Exilic Period when they come back to the land and they’re supposed to be experiencing the blessings, [but] they only return partially. God is going to transform their hearts in the midst of all this judgment, pain, and adversity. And God is ultimately going to do a work of salvation that will establish the right kind of love relationship between himself and his people. And he will be their God, and they will be his people; and they will love him and obey him, and they will follow him. Israel can’t just fix themselves. Israel cannot simply say, “We’re not going to be Baal worshipers anymore.” They are devoted to these things. They have a heart that’s committed to sin, but God is going to transform them.

So we can work our way through the book of Hosea, and at the end of this, chapter 14, verse 3, after God has called the people to return, and they are not able to return, [God says], “I will heal their apostasy.”

We go to the prophet Joel, and Joel says, “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,” and giving people the Spirit will transform them.

Zachariah [says], “I will pour out on them a spirit of repentance.”

Malachi: “I will send the [eschatological] prophet Elijah, and he will turn the hearts of the fathers back to their children and the hearts of the children back to their fathers.”
There is a message of salvation that God is doing all of these works of judgment to ultimately transform the hearts of his people; and of the context of a marriage here, God is going to ultimately cause Israel to love him in the way that he had designed from the very beginning. The Lord says in Jeremiah, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with my hesed. Israel had not responded to that, and so God is going to increasingly do works of salvation; he is going to bring them out of exil; he is going to send Jesus to be their Savior to take care of their sin problem, and he is ultimately going to create a new covenant people that will be devoted to him in a way that we did not see in the Old Testament.

**Becoming God’s People**

Now, that does not mean that spiritual transformation had not been available to the people of Israel throughout the Old Covenant. God did not give the people of Israel the Mosaic Covenant and say, “Well, here are the laws, 613 of them: Do it!” God had provided enablement throughout the Old Testament to those who knew Him in a real and personal way for them to obey God. God had redeemed them out of Egypt; God had transformed their hearts through that, and as an individual Israelite responded in faith and obedience to the Lord’s commands, and believed and trusted in the Lord’s promises, spiritual transformation was available. I believe that there was a ministry of the Spirit. There was a regenerating ministry of the spirit even in the Old Testament that gave God’s true people the capacity and ability to obey God. The problem throughout the Old Testament, and you can go back to the wilderness generation, is that many of the people who were a part of the Old Covenant people of God, who were part of this national entity that was called Israel, that had been chosen as God’s people, they had never experienced that personal, individual transformation. And so God in the Minor Prophets, and here in the early chapters of Hosea as he’s talking
about this marriage, is promising to fix that problem.

When David had sinned and committed adultery with Bathsheba, in Psalm 51 he says, “Lord, create a new heart within me, and renew a right spirit within me.” I believe there that David is praying for the kind of spiritual transformation that God gave to every true believing Israelite. God gave them a new heart; God put his Spirit within them. And what David is saying there is, “Don’t just forgive me for my sin, transform my character so that I won’t be inclined to do that again.” The prophets are promising that God is going to do that on a national level for Israel. And the way that God is going to do this is that God is going bring them through all of the things they experience in exile. God is going to purge them in judgment. God is going to remove sinners from the land. The prophet Zephaniah will talk about [this], and then God is ultimately going to create a people who will love him.

If we are going to convince people to love God and to follow Christ, we have to help them to understand that God’s love and the love of Christ is something far greater than all of the other loves in their lives. And that’s what God was ultimately going to have to do for the people of Israel as well.

The transformed relationship, and the transformed marriage that is going to come about, is talked about in chapter 2, verse 16: “In that day, declares the Lord, you will call me ‘My Husband,’” and the Hebrew word there, *ish*, is the word for husband. The Hebrew word *ish* is “man” or “husband.” And you will no longer call me my *baal*, which is the Hebrew word that simply means “Lord” or “Master” or “Husband.” They’re not going to use the term *baal*, Lord or Master, because all of the associations they had with their previous commitments to the Baals. They are instead going to be devoted to the Lord, and they are going to say, “You are my husband, we love you, we are devoted exclusively to you, and to you alone.”
When God transforms the heart of the people and creates a love within them, that is greater than their love for idols, or wealth, or prosperity, or any of the other things in their lives. Then they will ultimately become the people that God wants them to be. So in the midst of this divine drama that is going on between God and Israel, and God’s divorcing his people in exile, and it is a divorce—God sets them aside—there is also the human drama that is going on that allows the people of Israel to see what is happening in their relationship with the Lord. There is the unfaithfulness of Gomer to Hosea; and so in the same way that Israel had repeatedly been unfaithful to the Lord, Gomer has repeatedly been unfaithful to her husband as well, and the resolution of that is what happens in chapter 3. In chapter 3 the Lord said to Hosea, “Go again, and love a woman,” and the ESV as I’m reading it here says, “Who is loved by another man.” I remember Doug Stewart and other commentators have noticed it doesn’t specifically mention for us the name of Gomer here, so possibly we’re talking about another woman, and this is simply being brought into the story as an analogy of God’s love and commitment to Israel. But as other commentators have pointed out, if this is not Gomer, it somewhat destroys the analogy and the illustration. Again, it takes away from the power of the story.

I think it’s best here to read this as talking about Gomer. And after she has gone after her illicit lovers, and after it seems that an actual divorce has taken place between Hosea and Gomer, whether she was married to another man or not, she may have simply returned to her father’s house after all these things. Maybe she has become the slave of one of her illicit lovers. Gomer, you know, [is] in this situation, [and there is] no reason for Hosea to do this, [but] Hosea goes, and it says he buys her for 15 shekels of silver, and then that restores the relationship to her.
Now it says in verse 3, “You must dwell as mine for many days. You shall not play the whore or belong to another man, and so I will also be to you [a husband].” So the relationship is immediately restored to what it had been before. She is going to have to live with him many days, but ultimately he will become her husband again. And Hosea and Gomer are going to be restored, and that speaks of how God will restore his relationship with the people of Israel.

When it says in the text that, ESV chapter 3, verse 1, “Go again; love a woman, who is loved by another man,” the Hebrew there literally says, “Who is loved by a friend.” (ra’ah) And so the friend there might not actually be another man, it may be talking about Hosea himself. And Hosea is the friend; Hosea is the one who loves her in spite of what she has done. And after he takes her back, and they live separately from one another, and then that marriage is restored, and the relationship is restored. This is a picture of God’s love for Israel. Chapter 3, verse 5: “Afterwards, the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God and David their King, and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days.”

And so God, throughout the Minor Prophets, is attempting to try and cause the people (he’s calling the people through the prophets) to seek him and return to him. They will not do that. But ultimately, through the judgment that God is going to bring about, God is not simply pouring out his wrath, God is not simply getting his “pound of flesh” because he is angry at his unfaithful wife, God is ultimately working to restore them and to produce this love relationship that will cause Israel to be perpetually faithful to him. The marriage of Hosea and Gomer was an effective illustration; it was a powerful way of demonstrating to Israel their need to return in the depths of God’s love for them.

Transcribed by Matt Moffet, Jon Sensi, Fred Frimpong, Mark Birch, Tyler Nordquist and edited by Hannah
Edited by Dr. Perry Phillips