



Authentic Living – Major Themes from the Minor Prophets When Promises don't last til Morning (Hosea 1 – 6)

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When you think of Old Testament prophets, most of us get this image of a man wearing sack cloth with a straggly beard and sandwich board that reads “Repent, the End of the World is near”. While at times that is exactly what they were doing, they did much more than that.

The prophets spoke a clear message to their congregations from God so they would not get sucked into the excesses of their culture. Instead, they encouraged people to be drawn into a walk with God in which they and their children would be overwhelmed by the blessings of God and live in a more profound way. Because that is what we all desire, I thought it would be good to spend the next 10 weeks looking at what some of these prophets said and find out how it could apply to us today. I think as we do this it will set us up for some things God is calling us to get involved in this fall. Our hope is that you will follow along in the Authentic Living devotional guide so you will get into the Word and find important truths from the Bible yourself. Then, come Sunday morning, we can look at the passages you have been studying. If you are in a small group, you can take the questions that have come out of your personal study and the couple questions from the bulletin and together with others in your small group (or with a friend over coffee) go deeper in your understanding of scripture and in your walk with God.

Why study the Minor Prophets?

The minor prophets are 12 books placed near the end of the Old Testament which are called *minor* prophets, not because their message or influence was small, but because their books were shorter in length (they will not take as long to read). Our desire is to give an overview of 8 of the minor prophets. Since these are God breathed scriptures, we feel they have specific insights that apply exactly to where you and I are living today. We are going to begin with the first of the minor prophets, Hosea (for 2 weeks). He was a prophet for over 50 years. He was a pastor of a church in Israel (northern Kingdom) during the reign of seven different kings. The time period was between 760-710 BC (200 years before the Leonidas of Sparta - movie '300') and his contemporary prophets/preachers were Isaiah, Micah and Amos. He lived long enough to prophecy about and see the invasion of Israel by the Assyrians. The book is a story about the pains of a broken marriage and a man of amazing love for his wife. It is a parable about God's love for Israel and us and how often we break his heart.

Who is Hosea?

As you have been reading Hosea's story, did any TV show come to mind? Another pastor I know said as he read about the messed up life of Hosea, he couldn't help but click onto the Jerry Springer web site to check out the kind of topics Springer had been wallowing in lately. Some of the program titles read like this:

August 28 - “Surprise, I'm Cheating.” - Angela will tell her longtime boyfriend that she's been cheating on him and now she's pregnant! Despite all this, she's confident he'll stay with her.

August 29 - "Give Back My Lover" - Will claims to love his fiancé, but he has some bad news for her. He's been cheating and now his mistress is pregnant!

August 31 - "Prostitution Sex Scandals" - Lisa has secretly been working as an escort to help pay for her wedding. She likes her new job and she's here today to tell her fiancé all about it!

Well, you get the idea. And those were the ones I could talk about in public. Actually, I was surprised to see how closely the topics of all those shows paralleled the story of Hosea. Gomer would have fit right in to the Jerry Springer setting. The show could have been called: "I Married A Prostitute." The byline would go something like this:

"Clergyman's wife cheats on him. His children belong to three other men. After selling herself to everyone in town, Gomer ends up as a slave. Her husband, Hosea, eventually buys her back for \$12.50. He claims that he knew she would be unfaithful to him in the beginning, but God told him to marry her. God also told him to buy her out of slavery and love her again."

The book of Hosea is the most shocking book in the Old Testament. Turn to Hosea 1:2 and look how the story began. Don't miss that this was the first time and these were the first words that Hosea heard from God. I think I would have said 'I am new at this prophecy thing, is there anyone else I can talk to, to be sure this is really God speaking to me.' It may have helped that Gomer was a beautiful lady (that is what her name means) but I think that not only was he obeying God when he followed through on what God asked him to do, but from day one he was smitten with her. But don't miss the fact that God said 'I want you to know the whole story before you start. She may be beautiful but she will be unfaithful and eventually end up on the streets as a prostitute.' Now while this may sound like a weird request to us, know that sometimes when God gave a prophet like Hosea warning of impending judgment it was so people would leave their sin and follow God again. At other times God would give the prophets words of love in an attempt to win back the affections of His people. However, sometimes words failed and so God resorted to a different kind of communication. He would give the prophet a message to act out. The prophet's actions would be a living drama playing out the message of God in a dramatic way. He told Isaiah to remove his clothes, all except for his underwear, and walk around as a living picture of the horrors of war and exile. He asked Ezekiel to lay on his side and eat a starvation diet, depicting the horrors of a coming war that would be inflicted on the people if they didn't change. Here, God used Hosea's marriage almost like a soap opera so that everyone would watch (and rumor about it). So as they saw the pain in Hosea's eyes as he preached and the struggle he had within his family, people would catch a small glimpse of how God felt as they 'messed around' with sin and played the adulterous spouse with the God that desperately loved them. What did God want them to know?

I. God's Love is Unreasonable

Hosea is a love story gone wrong. I bet as you read this passage and as I am speaking this morning many of you understand the craziness behind Hosea's love for his wife. The wonder and problem with love is that it doesn't always make sense. If love made sense it wouldn't be love. The point of this passage is that God's love is unreasonable. The thing that God asked Hosea to do didn't make sense. But then again, God's love for Israel did not make sense either. The question of the book (the question that God

wanted those watching the soap opera of Hosea's life to ask) is not why God asked Hosea to marry Gomer? The question is why would God love (and marry) Israel? Why would God commit himself to a people who He knew would be unfaithful to Him. Why would He take them through the desert, give them the promised land, knowing that in the future they would grab onto different god's, worship idols and do the very things He repeatedly asked, begged and told them not to do? If God was going to make a commitment to a nation, why wouldn't He choose a nation He knew would be faithful? Why wouldn't He choose people who would be grateful for His love and thankful for His blessings? Why wouldn't He select those who would be inclined to follow His laws and appreciate the wisdom of His ways? According to our way of thinking, God is unreasonable and His choice in love doesn't make any sense at all. For if we were God, we would choose to only love those who would love us back. But God chose the cast of the Jerry Springer show to love. II Timothy 2:13 puts it this way '.. if we remain faithless He will still remain faithful..' As you look at your life and at times your actions, aren't you glad that God's love makes as much sense as Hosea's did? Can I remind you that just as God's love for Israel wasn't based on their actions but on God's unflinching love for them, God's love for you and I also isn't based on what we do. It is just His unreasonable, wonderful love for us. Despite the fact that we all have sinned (and keep on sinning) as Romans 3:10,11,23 says 'There is no one who is living right, not even one... they have all taken a wrong turn... and utterly incapable of living the glorious life God wants for us... but out of sheer generosity He puts us in right standing with Himself'. (The Message).

Singer Steven Curtis Chapman puts it this way: "In The Gospel, we discover we are far worse off than we thought, and far more loved than we ever dreamed." You and I know our hearts far too well and at times we wonder how in the world God could put up with us let alone love us. In Hosea's story, He reminds us again that He loves us, He really, really loves us. And while it doesn't make sense, it is none the less wonderfully and completely true.

II. God's Love is Not Blind

It wasn't long until things started to fall apart in Hosea's home. He would come back from a weekend preaching campaign and find his wife had been off 'with her friends'. And then Hosea 1:3 says they had a son. When Hosea asked God what he should call him God said call him Jesreel. It was an allusion to something that had happened in Israel's past where a murder had been committed to steal Naboth's vineyard and the resulting judgment of God. It would have been like a German family calling their child Auschwitz or a white South African family calling their son Soweto. Then, Gomer would disappear for days, even weeks on end only to come home pregnant. Not once but twice. So Hosea tried to care for her, pretend things were okay and he raised the kids by himself. He tried to answer their questions, knowing full well what the people whispered as he got up to preach. And then one day she simply left with one of her lovers. Hosea heard that she went from lover to lover finally ending up working in a brothel. He cried himself to sleep night after night.

How he was doing? Well, when it came to naming his daughter God's suggestion (and he agreed) was 'no mercy', for just as God was having trouble constantly forgiving

Israel, he had run out of the ability to feel merciful to Gomer. And the next child (who was also not his child) was called 'Nobody' because Israel was becoming a nobody to God as Gomer was becoming a nobody to him. As you read this passage last week could you see 2 things happening? The first was that Hosea's heart was becoming more and more broken. We keep thinking and acting like our actions only concern ourselves. Let me tell you that when someone commits adultery, it breaks your spouse's spirit and it devastates your children. And even if you don't get caught, it robs you and your spouse of the depth of love that is only possible in a marriage where faithfulness is practiced. When you gamble, when you play with pornography, when it comes to... (you fill in the blank), sin has this way of hurting those closest to you. The ones you love the most. We need to read this passage and know that not only will those things hurt those we love but they will break the heart of God. When I was struggling with something a number of years ago, I made a list of what it would cost those I loved, if I chose to play with a specific sin. And as I read that list, it helped bar the door from opening again.

Secondly, as Gomer played with this sin, it slowly but surely cost her dearly. For while her sin may not have initially appeared to be hurting her, sin always demands payment and it is always demands more payment than we thought we would have to pay. I am sure she never set out to become a prostitute, she just wanted to have fun with no restraints. No one sets out to become an alcoholic, drug addict or the person who broke up their marriage, but if we play with sin it will slowly strangle our lives, hurt those we love and ruin our future. While this may sound like tough things to say in church, the church is not one of those places where the customer is always right. God, through the prophets and his word, tells us how to live and expects us to live that way.

In the second chapter of Hosea, we see that while God is Love, He is not Blind when it comes to sin. Here God describes what He will do to His unfaithful people: "Therefore I will block her path with thorn bushes; I will wall her in so that she cannot find her way. She will chase after her lovers but not catch them; she will look for them but not find them. Then she will say, 'I will go back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off than now'" (Hosea 2:6-7). Hosea 8:7 predicts "You sow the wind .. and reap the whirlwind". God says "I will stop being a protective cover for you if you want to sin... I will let the consequences of sin be your experience". So like Gomer, many times we have to learn the hard way that God's way is the best way. We waste our lives and our love on many other things until we have been abused long enough that we say 'I will go back to my God, for I was better off before.

So let me stop for a moment and ask you a simple question: Is there something in your life that you are doing (think about it) that is presently or has the potential to take you off the course that God has for you and cause those you love and yourself pain? If there is, God would say for you to do business with it before it is too late and Hosea would say to do it for those you love.

III. God's Love is Unconditional

Eventually her lifestyle began to take a toll; her lovers left her, her boyfriend/pimp now making her ply her trade on the street. Then this lady of beauty and talent for whom

lovers lined up before is so broken, she can't turn tricks any more. So her pimp takes her down to the slave market to sell her. They strip her naked – stand her on a box abused and without hope, terrified about what will be next and the bidding starts. The bids are pitiful, no one seems to want her until a weak voice joins the bidding and it isn't long before she hears the word sold. She is afraid to look up, but there was something about the voice that she recognizes. Then it struck her, that believe it or not, it sounded like Hosea. She began to cringe waiting for the strike of his fist or the words she so truly deserved after all she had done to him. But instead she felt a coat gently being placed over her shoulders and a gentle hand to help her off the slave box. As she looked up she sees him trying to smile, tears running down his cheeks. For you see when God told him to do the ridiculous (Hosea 3:1 - to go and buy her back) he hadn't waited a minute. As foolish as it may have seemed to others, he still loved her. And as she looked at him he said "You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will behave the same way toward you." (Hosea 3:3). I think he wanted to use God's words on her as well: "And now, here's what I'm going to do: I'm going to start all over again. I'm taking her back out into the wilderness where we had our first date, and I'll court her. I'll give her bouquets of roses. I'll turn Heartbreak Valley into Acres of Hope. She'll respond like she did as a young girl, those days when she was fresh out of Egypt." (Hosea 2:14-15 – The Message) And love bloomed again. And there children experienced such a change that the son called 'no mercy' was now 'Compassion' and the son named 'not my people' became known as 'my people' for love had touched their home and God did a miracle among them.

With this story God wants to remind you and I of His unconditional love that makes no sense at all. He is dying (He did actually die) so He could offer you a second chance at forgiveness and a new start. Why? because despite how we treat God, His love miraculously doesn't change and doesn't stop. Even though Hosea 6:4 often describes us (and Gomer) in that 'Our promises last no longer than the morning mist', it is hard to comprehend that He waits for us to say 'Come let us return to our Lord'. (Hosea 6:1)

I have a picture on my bulletin board which reminds me that Hosea's story is still possible today. A number of years ago a fellow pastor came to me and said he was going to resign. A week after this happened I had a dream (this doesn't happen often) but in the dream the Lord seemed to tell me to ask him one simple question. 'When you resign will I have a mess to clean up?' As I asked him he began to weep for he had been having an affair. He was a friend, he was a pastor, but he let his mind play with sin until it took him captive and he said "I reached the point where if you told me I would lose my right arm if I had the affair I would have agreed to it". The good thing was that he was glad to get caught and wanted to do business with God. So the next Sunday I stood with him as he resigned again, only this time he spoke the truth and asked the church and his wife to forgive him. It was a tough day followed by months of struggle but 7 months later I presided at a service of recommitment and renewal of their vows. And not only did he pastor again, but he is very happily married with 3 beautiful daughters. God forgives and gives second chances.

Perhaps as you have listened to Hosea's story you have seen yourself in the story. Perhaps you have been the spouse or the child who has unfairly had to pay the cost for

someone else's sin. I pray that as in Hosea's case you will find God caring for you and those you love and as scripture says, He will heal the broken hearted and be a father to the fatherless. But perhaps you have been fooling around with things that have the potential to or have already started to, eat away at your life and the lives of those you love. Perhaps you have been fooling yourself that sin doesn't have consequences. Or perhaps you feel that what you have done is unforgivable and that God could no longer love you.

Please know that God placed this scripture here for all of us, for we all need to ask for forgiveness and ask for new starts. Then with God's help, we can make a new path to walk into the future with. Hosea's story tells us clearly 'if we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleans us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9), and that God's arms are always wide open, waiting for us to come home. God is waiting to restore you and possibly to restore that which has become broken by that sin. He is waiting like Hosea for you to say you will come home. Will you?

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