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## **A man made for a happy domestic life**

*Please read Hosea 1:1-2*

**W**hen the average well-brought-up young man leaves home and starts out into life, there are few things that he desires. He has passed through the stage of wanting everything his friends have got, and he now thinks about those matters that he sees as essential to his happiness—such as a good, secure, satisfying job which is reasonably well paid; a comfortable, if not lavish, home; a loving wife and agreeable children.

Hosea probably had similar ambitions when he set out into adult life. We know nothing about his circumstances. He does not appear to have been a priest, nor, like his contemporary Amos, a shepherd. In fact, we know nothing at all about him except that he had a great and very deep love for God and for his people.

In the eleventh chapter of his prophecy it is God who is

speaking, but we sense that the prophet shares the longings of his Lord:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
 and out of Egypt I called my son ...  
 I led them with cords of human kindness,  
 with ties of love;  
 I lifted the yoke from their neck  
 and bent down to feed them (Hosea 11:1,4).

We can see, then, that Hosea was someone who, to all appearances, was 'made for a happy domestic life'. Yet this was not to be; God had other plans for him. Right at the very beginning of his ministry, the Lord called him to do something which was to bring him, and his family, a great deal of unhappiness. However, before we discuss this in more detail, we need first to consider the times in which he prophesied.

### **God called Hosea to be a prophet**

At the very beginning of his book we read, 'The word of the LORD ... came to Hosea son of Beeri' (1:1). He received authority to proclaim God's Word. Just as the word of the Lord came to Joel (Joel 1:1), Micah (Micah 1:1) and Zechariah (Zechariah 1:1), so it also came to Hosea. God called Hosea to pass on the message of the Lord to all the people.

However, the message of Hosea's prophecy did not merely apply to his own generation. The fact that his prophecy is quoted many times in the New Testament proves that. Hosea 1:10 is quoted in Romans 9:26. Hosea 2:23 is quoted in 1 Peter 2:10 and Romans 9:25. Hosea 6:6 is quoted in Matthew 9:13 and in Matthew 12:7. Hosea 10:8 is quoted in Luke 23:30 and in Revelation 6:16. Hosea 13:14 is quoted in 1 Corinthians 15:55.

From this list of quotations we can see that this prophecy not only spoke to Israel 2,500 years ago; it is the eternal Word of

God, and it has great relevance for the people of God in all ages, including our own.

### **God called Hosea when things were bad in the land**

The Lord called Hosea to warn the people of God's impending judgement upon them because of their immorality. This was going to be a very difficult task for the prophet because he loved his land dearly. Henry Cook says, 'Israel was his motherland, and always when he speaks there is a sob in his throat.'

The word 'Hosea' means 'salvation'. It is another form of the name 'Joshua'.

We are told in Hosea 1:1 of the various kings in whose reigns the prophet did his work. If we add up the total length of time these men reigned, then it would seem that Hosea prophesied over a period of some thirty-eight years. (The precise length of the reigns of the kings of Judah and Israel can often be confusing because some of their reigns overlapped.)

By the time God called on Hosea to speak up, the land had been divided into two: Israel lay to the north and Judah to the south of the country. Many years before the time of our prophet, after the death of Solomon, God divided the land as a punishment for the sinfulness of the people. Although God's people still lived in both parts of the land, there was a deep division among them, and this was never to be healed.

Hosea belonged to the northern kingdom. Of the other writing prophets, only Amos lived in that part of the country, and even he came from the southern kingdom. The north was also the area where Elijah and Elisha had done their work some eighty years before the time of Hosea. However, the utterances of these earlier prophets were never collected into a book.

The southern kingdom was called Judah and just two and

a half tribes inhabited it. The other nine and a half tribes (commonly called ‘the ten tribes’) were in the north. The northern kingdom went under various names. It was usually called ‘Israel’, but, as we noted in the introduction, sometimes it was referred to as ‘Ephraim’ (after the most powerful of the tribes living there) and on other occasions it was called ‘Samaria’ (after the name of its capital city).

However, the fact that God’s people were divided into two nations was not the greatest problem that Hosea had to cope with. It was the character of the kings who reigned during his period of office, and their influence on the people, which caused him so much distress.

In Hosea 1:1, four kings of Judah are named, but only one from Israel: ‘The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Joash king of Israel.’ Most of these kings were unhelpful, and some were positively wicked. Although Uzziah was a friend of the southern kingdom prophet Isaiah, he was not wholly a good king. He came to the throne when he was sixteen years old and reigned for fifty-two years (2 Chronicles 26:3). He started well, and did many things that were right in the eyes of the Lord, but his popularity and his success caused him to be too proud. Therefore, as a punishment, he was struck with a terrible leprosy which plagued him for the rest of his life (2 Chronicles 26:21).

The second king mentioned, Jotham, did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just like his father, Uzziah. However, his zeal petered out when it came to doing something about the heathen altars in the land. Just like so many people today, he did not have the courage to tackle the things that were really a stumbling-block to the people. Although he did do some useful

rebuilding work on the temple, he did not try to confront the real issues that were afflicting his kingdom.

Ahaz, the third king, was an out-and-out unbelieving man. It is recorded of him that ‘He did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD’ (2 Kings 16:2–3). This is how he behaved: in order to appease the heathen gods he gave his own son as a human sacrifice (2 Kings 16:2–3), and he turned away from the worship of the Lord and started to engage in the immoral worship of northern Israel (2 Kings 16:4).

The fourth Judean king mentioned, Hezekiah, was a very much better king: he *did* love God. Unlike his predecessors, he set to work to rid the land of everything that had been used in pagan worship. It is written of him, ‘Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel ... He held fast to the LORD and did not cease to follow him ...’ (2 Kings 18:5–6).

The fifth king mentioned reigned in the northern kingdom of Israel. He was Jeroboam, the son of Josiah (sometimes called Jeroboam II). He was also on the throne for a long time, which is why only one king of Israel is mentioned during the period of Hosea’s prophecy. The land prospered during his reign but, sadly, he continued in the evil footsteps of the first Jeroboam: ‘He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit’ (2 Kings 14:24).

Heathen idol-worship was rife in Israel. The land was filled with shrines to the fertility gods, or Baals, and asherahs, dedicated to female deities, were found in many places. However, the condition of the land was not the greatest evil that Hosea had to endure.

### **God called Hosea to do an exceedingly difficult thing**

Hosea received a most puzzling message from God. He was a

fine, upright, moral man, and the words of Hosea 1:2 must have come to him, as they do to us, like a bombshell. The Lord said to Hosea, 'Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD.'

Getting married is not something which anyone should undertake lightly, or thoughtlessly. The marriage service tells us this, and so does common sense. There are so many marriage breakdowns in these days that everyone should be doubly careful to whom they link themselves in marriage, which is, or ought to be, for life. However, here we see God telling Hosea the woman he was to marry. The amazing thing is that she was the most unlikely kind of person for a religious man, or any believer, to wed. God describes her as 'an adulterous wife'.

We cannot be certain whether Gomer already had children when Hosea married her, or whether the words, 'children of unfaithfulness', refer to children who were yet to be born. However, we can imagine how Hosea must have felt when he received this message. Quite clearly, from the way he writes, he had a heart filled with love, but on the very first occasion that the Lord began to speak to him, he told him to marry a woman whom God himself describes as an adulterous woman. Therefore, if Hosea obeyed God and married her, he could be certain that he would have a very trying time ahead of him, because it was not sensible to start off married life with someone who had such an immoral history.

Maybe Hosea thought that if he obeyed God then everything would go well with him and his marriage would run smoothly. On the other hand, he may have remembered Joseph, who did what was right, yet ended up in prison for maintaining his integrity and moral purity. If we had been in Hosea's position, what would we have done? We should probably have thought

that we had misheard what the Lord was calling us to do, because we know that he requires us to live a godly, moral life, obeying his commandments, including the one which says, ‘Do not commit adultery.’

God often told his prophets to do strange things. Elijah had to pour four large jars of water over his sacrifice on Mount Carmel before lighting the fire under it (1 Kings 18:30–35). Ahijah tore his new cloak into twelve pieces and gave ten of them to Jeroboam (1 Kings 11:29–32). Ezekiel had to do numerous things which seem peculiar to us (e.g. Ezekiel 4:1–6). Strange though this instruction from God must have seemed to him, Hosea obeyed and married Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, despite the anxiety, and maybe even the taunts, of his friends. (We are given these little biographical details, of her name and parentage, to show us that these were real people, who actually lived.) Notwithstanding the doubts he must have had about the matter, Hosea did as God commanded him, and in so doing he opened up his life to many years of misery.

### **God used Hosea to demonstrate his displeasure with his people**

Why did God go to such lengths to get his message over to the people? Why did he not simply use preaching to bring the land to its senses? Calvin concludes that it was because the ‘diseases of the people were incurable ... [and] the state of things was almost past recovery’. Therefore God chose Hosea to undergo this indignity so that the people could see how their God was suffering because of the spiritual adultery of his people.

They had been saved from the bondage of Egypt. They had been led, as a nation, through the desert and brought to the promised land. But instead of showing love, and persevering in commitment, to their God who had done so much for them,

they had turned their backs on the one true God and had prostituted themselves to other, false, gods.

There are many ways in which God's people today have been guilty of spiritual adultery. We have to confess that we are no better than Israel of old. When we consider the situation of Hosea, we are forced to realize how sinful we are in turning for our pleasure to other 'gods', those of our own day and age, and turning our backs on the Lord God who loves us and cares for us.