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# HOS 1-3 : THE MARRIAGE OF GOD AND HIS PEOPLE

*No. EE21*

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The Lord did not handle his prophets with velvet gloves. Isaiah had to walk the streets of Jerusalem barefoot and without proper clothes (Isa 20:2-3). Daily Ezekiel had to lie on his side over a period of 430 days - probably for a few hours at a time, and also in public (Ezec 4:4-6). And Hosea had to marry a prostitute (Hos 1:2).

Why? Old Testament prophets not only prophesied as preachers or writers, but often had to perform symbolic acts of prophesy for all to see.

## SOMETHING MORE ABOUT HOSEA AND HIS PROPHECY

□ We have a good idea of where and when Hosea worked as prophet. His prophecies were directed at the Northern Kingdom of the ten tribes, just before it was destroyed (1:1). It is even possible that he was still active at the time of the Assyrian exile in 722 BC. What eventually became of him, we do not know. This means that Hosea was a contemporary of Amos, who also preached to the ten tribes, as well as Isaiah, the prophet of the Southern Kingdom.

It was a time of prosperity, but also of terrible religious and moral decadence. Most of the last kings of the North (also known as Israel or Ephraim) were murdered by their successors. In fact, immediately before the exile there were six kings in 30 years.

□ In these times Hosea had to marry a prostitute. Her name was *Gomer*. They had three children to

whom Hosea had to give special names that tied up with his prophetic message against the sin of Israel.

The first, a son, had to be named *Jezreel*. The word means "dispersed", to indicate that Israel would be scattered among the nations (1:4).

The second child, a girl, had to be named *Lo-Ruhamah*. It means "without mercy" (1:6).

The third, again a boy, had to be named "*Lo-Ammi*". It means "not my people" (1:9).

□ Gomer left Hosea and went back to her immoral ways. In Chapter 3 Hosea was instructed by the Lord to go and find her and reinstate her in his home. By this time her life was in such a shambles that he had to buy her back on the slave market - for about 170 gram of silver and some food.

All indications are that Gomer did not leave Hosea again (3:3).

□ As mentioned above, the first three chapters are devoted to symbolic acts of prophesy. The relationship of the nation with God was the same as that of Gomer with Hosea. They were sinners when God initially adopted them, and the road they travelled with Him from then on was indeed a bumpy one. They lapsed into ever increasing sinfulness, unfaithfulness and apostasy. That is why they were to be "scattered". They would be "without mercy". And the Lord would reject them as if they were "not his people". Eventually they were taken into exile.

□ Yet the exile would not last forever. The relationship of the Lord with his people would be restored. As was the case with Gomer, He would fetch them again, as it were, from the slave market. And now the children would have different names - names without the negative prefix, *lo* (1:11-12).

The girl would henceforth be known as *Ruhamah* - "mercy".

The youngest son became *Ammi* - "My people".

The eldest would, however, remain *Jisreel*, because his name not only meant "scattered", but also "planted" (like seed being sowed by scattering).

## A GLORIOUS PROMISE

□ It is most significant that each of the first three chapters of Hosea concludes with a glorious promise (1:10-12; 2:14-23; 3:5). The Lord was going to accomplish something wonderful among his people. This depraved, immoral and unfaithful lot would become his beloved people - with hearts that were faithful to the covenant.

□ Of all the glorious things promised at the end of the chapters, 2:16-20 must surely be the climax, and especially verses 19-20. Let us therefore concentrate on these two verses, which address four aspects of what the Lord intended doing. Let us consider the nature, duration, character and practical effects of his grace.

- Firstly, as regards the *nature* of what the Lord was going to do, it would be done in terms of a *covenant* (18) - more specifically a *marriage covenant*. In verses 19-20 the word "betroth" appears three times. And in Biblical times the engagement was as binding as the marriage itself.

- Secondly, the *duration* of the covenant would be *for ever* (19). This implies that the parties would remain impeccably faithful to each other. Exactly how the Lord was going to accomplish this was at that stage still a secret. But some time later He would reveal it through two other prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel: He would regenerate every one of his people by changing their hearts (Jer 31:33; Ezec 36:26).

- Thirdly, as to its *character*, the covenant would have three components (19-20).

The covenant would be based on *legal* principles. It would be a covenant of "righteousness" and "justice", without a trace of unjustness, immorality or underhandedness in its outworking.

It would be a *loving relationship* through and through - permeated with "love" and "compassion".

The Hebrew word *chesed*, translated here as "love", is wonderfully rich in meaning. It points not only to God's unwavering and determined devotion to those with whom He is in a covenantal relationship, but also to his merciful grace.

It would be an *everlasting* covenant. The mutual commitment between God and his people would be one of unbreakable "faithfulness". God would never let go of his people. Nothing would ever separate them from his love.

- In the fourth place this marriage covenant would have wonderful *practical effects*. One single word sums it up: the people would "know" God (20; ESV; NASB; NKJV). This Hebrew word speaks of a personal, intimate and loyal love relationship with God. They would walk with Him in understanding, love, faith and loyalty. And there would be a reciprocal delight and pleasure between them.

## THE REALISATION

□ This promise was realised in part in those who returned from the two exiles. Admittedly there was no formally organised return of the northern tribes from Assyria, as was the case with Judah. But without doubt some did return in small groups.

□ However, these promises were in reality only fulfilled after the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit - in other words in the new covenant. We have a clear New Testament mandate for this statement. Paul says so in Rm 9:25-26, and so does Peter in 1Pt 2:10.

This means that this unbelievably precious promise in Hos 2 is applicable to the true New Testament church throughout the ages. If then my church is indeed a true New Testament church, I may say in all humility, but in exultation: my church is in a marriage covenant with the Lord. It applies to us collectively and to each member individually - every one of us who has been planted into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit.

- As we are in the time of betrothal or engagement (2Cor 11:2-4) in our relationship with Christ, the culmination of the relationship is still to come somewhere in the future. The wedding feast of the Lamb is yet to be.

But that does not mean that our present relationship with Christ is an inferior one. No! It is a firm fact that every single one of the principles that we have discussed holds good even now. It is only incomplete in the way we experience it.

- Furthermore, does the New Testament not repeatedly assure those of us who are united to Christ by true faith that He has laid hold of us *for all eternity*? We only need to read the joyous words of Rm 8:28-39 to realise this.

- Is it not so that the New Testament time and time again comes back to the elements of the covenant as promised in Hos 2?

The *legal basis* for this covenant was put in place unshakeably by Christ. He died as our penal substitute. And His perfect obedience is credited in God's books to all who believe. Truly, the church stands and falls by justification through faith alone.

Furthermore, at the heart of our relationship with God is his determined *loving mercy* in Christ. And our rock-like security is rooted in his *faithfulness*.

- And finally, do we not experience *life-changing effects* in our lives through our participation in this covenant? What is more precious and influential in the life of a disciple of Christ than the fact that we know Him and walk with Him?

□ Some of you may now ask, "How do we know that we are a *true church*? You put such emphasis on this qualification, over and over. And one can see why."

The answer is simple, but it cuts to the bone. *Are we experiencing that which is promised here?* We are, after all, not playing games; we are dealing with stark realities. Let me put it like this, loud and clear:

*if you are still a stranger to what is being discussed here, you are not yet part of what the Holy Spirit promises through Hosea!*

## A SINGLE APPLICATION

The image with which Hosea works here - in fact the image that controlled his entire life and prophetic ministry - is that of marriage. If then we ask what the image teaches us about the way we ought to live, we can say that God's Word makes it clear that one of the reasons why marriage was instituted, was that it should be a reflection of the covenant in Hosea 2.

Let there be no doubt about this: *Our marriages as people who are bound to Christ in terms of the covenant of grace, must display the characteristics at which we have looked. Covenant! Loyalty! Permanence! Love! Companionship! Intimacy!*

May God help us as we pursue this grand and lofty calling. To the extent that we are successful, we will enjoy the privileges of marriage - this most excellent gift from God to mankind. But even more important, we will fulfil the purpose for which we have been created and regenerated - *we will glorify the Lord our God!*

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- Nico van der Walt subscribes to the historically respected and internationally recognized 1689 Baptist Confession - like most Reformed Baptists worldwide - as well as the Confession of Sola 5, an association of God-centred evangelicals in Southern Africa.

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