

Scandalous Grace – The Book of Hosea

God Loved a Wayward Woman

Hosea 1

Mark Vroegop

“The word of the LORD that came to Hosea, the son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel. When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, “Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD.” So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. And the LORD said to him, “Call his name Jezreel, for in just a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. And on that day I will break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel.” She conceived again and bore a daughter. And the LORD said to him, “Call her name No Mercy, for I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them at all. But I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the LORD their God. I will not save them by bow or by sword or by war or by horses or by horsemen.” When she had weaned No Mercy, she conceived and bore a son. And the LORD said, “Call his name Not My People, for you are not my people, and I am not your God.” Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” it shall be said to them, “Children of the living God.” And the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head. And they shall go up from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel.” (Hosea 1, ESV)

In American culture, a scandal is often identified with the suffix “-gate.” Of course, this all started with the political intrigue and crimes connected to the break-ins and cover-up during the Nixon Administration in the 1970s. Watergate became much more than the name of five buildings in the Foggy Bottom area of Washington D.C. The name has been associated with scandal for the last 40 years.

It seems that a story becomes a scandal as the issue, whatever it is, has “gate” connected to it. Let me give you a few:

- Irangate – also known as the Iran-Contra affair during the Reagan administration that involved the sale of arms to Iran to fund rebels in Nicaragua
- Bridgegate – the lane closures near Fort Lee, New Jersey, for political payback by staffers of Governor Chris Christie
- Bountygate – the financial rewards to players on the New Orleans Saints for injuring other players
- Deflategate – the deflating of footballs by the New England Patriots during the 2015 AFC Championship against the Indianapolis Colts

Now I could give you more: Travelgate, Spygate, Lochtegate, Troopergate, and Travelgate to name a few. Scandals are everywhere. They are highly public. And there are usually lessons that outlive the controversy. For instance, “who knew what, and when did they know it?” or “the cover-up is worse than the crime.” Or “New England always cheats.”

Scandals are shocking. But they are also telling. And that is why we are studying the book of Hosea.

Why Hosea?

Today, and continuing until our Missions Spotlight that we call REACH, we are starting a seven-week series on the minor prophet book of Hosea. If this story were to hit the news and the tabloid media today, it might be called Gomer-gate.

The book of Hosea is the prophetic message from God to Israel through the scandalous story of a man who marries a woman who is unfaithful to him. Actually, that’s too whitewashed. It is the enacted prophesy as God communicates and illustrates His relationship to Israel based upon the way Hosea loves a wife who goes wayward and becomes a prostitute.

It is a glorious and gritty book. Hosea highlights the scandalous nature of God’s grace. That’s why the title for this series is “Scandalous Grace.”

Now I’m going to give you some background on the book in just a moment, but you might wonder why we are studying a book about the nation of Israel during the 8th century BC. Let me give you four reasons:

- 1) Hosea helps us remember the beauty of God’s grace by feeling the scandal of it. This book is filled with both prose and poetry. Its aim is to speak to your mind and your heart.
- 2) Many believers are unfamiliar with the twelve minor prophets (Hosea – Malachi), and there are really valuable lessons for us to learn. We shouldn’t skip these helpful books.
- 3) Hosea addresses the painful problem of spiritual adultery, an issue that did not end after the prophets went off the scene. This is an issue that we need to carefully consider and feel deeply. And there are similarities to Israel’s culture and ours with which we need to wrestle.
- 4) Hosea foreshadows the gospel in multiple ways. We can read it through the lens of the New Covenant and renew our love for the work of God’s scandalous grace in our lives.

I hope that this book often makes you stop and say, “What? Whoa!? Wow!” My prayer is for you to see the seriousness – the scandal – of your sinfulness, but also see the greatness of God’s love.

God chose to deliver the message to a wayward people through an illustration of a husband’s love for a wayward woman. The enacted metaphor delivers a powerful message. It invites us to feel what God feels. This book invites you and me to enter into the drama and to see this as more than Gomer-gate. It is Mark-gate. Sarah-gate. John-gate. Paul-gate. Susan-gate. You-gate. This is our scandal.

The theme for Hosea is really the theme of every person who has experienced God's mercy. Here's the summary for chapter one:

God gives grace to wayward people because He is God.

Let me unpack that in three sections: 1) Wayward People, 2) Under Judgment, 3) Find Grace. And as we do, let's be sure to keep putting ourselves into this story. Resist the tendency to read this from a distance. Enter the story of scandalous grace.

1. Wayward People

The book of Hosea is written to warn and win back a people who are straying from their relationship with God. Verse 1 helps us understand the setting in which this book was written and the situations that it addressed as they related to the people of God.

The book begins with "The word of the Lord came to Hosea." This is frequently how the minor prophet (called "minor" because their books are smaller) start. Joel, Jonah, Micah, and Zephaniah all start this way. It indicates that what follows is a message from the Lord Himself. God delivers a message through this book. The prophet's name is Hosea, and we know very little about him beyond this book. Interestingly, his name means "help" or "helper" and comes from the word for salvation, from which the name Joshua and Jesus are also derived.¹

We also learn that his ministry took place during the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah in Judah and Jeroboam in Israel. The book's setting is during the 8th century, prior to the birth of Jesus. The nation of Israel had been divided 200 years earlier into two kingdoms: Israel in the North and Judah in the South. The listing of the kings helps us know the kind of environment in which the people were living.

If you wanted to read the back story, take some time this week to read 2 Kings 15-20 or 2 Chronicles 26-32. In general, Judah was more spiritually faithful. Three of the four kings listed in verse one are regarded as faithful and righteous kings. Ahaz was the exception.

Israel (sometimes called Ephraim in Hosea), however, was in trouble. Jeroboam is listed as the king of Israel, and he reigned for 41 years (2 Kings 14:23). He was an evil but successful king. He extended the reach of the nation, fortified the capital city of Samaria, and built a prosperous economy. But the nation was filled with injustice, spiritual hypocrisy, and idolatry. The thirty years that followed Jeroboam's death were times of political turmoil and assassination. There were six kings in thirty years.

To the East was the rising power of Assyria. This would have been the time in which Jonah went to Nineveh, calling the city to repentance. Eventually Assyria invaded the Northern Kingdom, and in 722 B.C. Israel was taken into exile, and the land was resettled by foreign people, the future Samaritans.

¹ McComiskey, Thomas E. "Hosea (Person)," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1000.

Hosea's ministry takes place in the years preceding the Assyrian invasion. And his primary message is to call the people back from the brink of their spiritual apostasy before they fall into God's judgment. The book is a collection of his messages to wayward Israel, mostly in poetic form.

If you were looking for an outline of the book, it could be broken down into three sections:

- Part 1: Hosea's Life (Ch. 1-3)
- Part 2: Hosea's First Warning (Ch. 4-11)
- Part 3: Hosea's Second Warning (Ch. 12-14)

Hosea 1:2-3 introduces us to the enacted prophesy of Hosea's marriage to an unfaithful woman named Gomer. Rather than simply declaring the prophetic message, God uses the illustration of a prophet and his relationship with an unfaithful wife to become the platform for this message. In so doing, it personalizes and elevates the power of the message. One commentator said this: Hosea . . . turned his life into a sanctuary where God's holy love was to be known.²

Now it does not seem that Hosea is commanded to marry a woman who is immediately unfaithful. Rather, the marriage moves from covenant fidelity to unfaithfulness. But it gets worse, because the text is really clear. Hosea's wife falls into the worst kind of unfaithfulness: prostitution. The metaphor is designed to make you wince. As we'll see next week, Hosea is not only forced to deal with the unfaithfulness of his wife, but in order to bring her back, he must buy her back. Just let that thought sink in. He had to buy his own wife back.

Hosea is going to take a wife of whoredom. But he will also bear children with her, so while he's trying to bring her back home, there are children who are being born. Sweet children who need a mother. Just think of what her unfaithfulness did to their home. Think of the questions from the kids. Think of the looks from the neighbors. Think of the pain, the sorrow, and the outrage.

Why would a married woman with children become so wayward? What is she after? What does she want? How can she do that? These are the questions underneath Hosea's life. These are the questions that are meant to be asked.

And there is a reason. God chooses this metaphor on purpose.

Verse 2 makes this unmistakably clear: ". . . for the land commits whoredom by forsaking the Lord." There is a helpful record what was going on in Israel at the time in 2 Kings 17.

"And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had practiced. And the people of Israel did secretly against the LORD their God things that were not right. They built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. They set up for

² Hubbard, Thomas E. *Hosea: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 24, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 21.

themselves pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, and there they made offerings on all the high places, as the nations did whom the LORD carried away before them. And they did wicked things, provoking the LORD to anger, and they served idols, of which the LORD had said to them, "You shall not do this." Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets." But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God. They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them that they should not do like them. And they abandoned all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves metal images of two calves; and they made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal. And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings and used divination and omens and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only." (2 Kings 17:7–18, ESV)

This is how wayward they were. But while all of this is factually true, Hosea helps us to understand it – even appreciate it – at a much deeper and more intimate level. God could have used any metaphor, any illustration to make his point clear. But he chose a wayward wife because I think he knows that we will “get it” a lot better. It is as if God says, “Do you ‘feel’ this?”

The waywardness of Gomer and the faithfulness of God is designed for us to make a connection between how God’s people so often treat God. Like a really good piece of music or art, this book is not designed to merely move you through with your eyes or ears. It is aiming for your heart. A good piece of music is not just what you hear; it is what you feel. God wants us to have some idea of what He feels.

Somewhere in your mind, you need to mark this down for three reasons. First, we need to ask the Lord to help us feel our way through this text, rather than just read it and study it. Too many of us can easily uncouple our hearts from what we know. And that should scare us to death. Second, we should feel how outrageous sin is to God. The people of God had been rescued from slavery in Egypt. They were brought to the promised land. They were given so many blessings. And yet they worshipped the blessings, and it was not a small matter. It was spiritual adultery. Third, we should feel our hearts swell with gratitude to Christ because He was the one who bought us back with the price of His own blood.

We were, and are, the wayward people.

2. Under Looming Judgment

The second observation about God giving wayward people grace is the reality of the judgment that they face. Their waywardness is a problem. But moving outside of God’s favor is frightening.

To make that point very poignant, verses 4-8 record God’s instructions to Hosea about the names of his children. Just like the metaphor of marriage, these names are designed to illicit a reaction from us. It is tragic and uncomfortable.

In verse 4 we find that the first son is to be named Jezreel. Now you need to think of this name as if I were to name him Benedict Arnold or Nixon or Vegas. The name would carry a lot of baggage. Jezreel was a well-known place for battle and bloodshed.³ Maybe “Armageddon” would be a good name to get the same feel. But the verse makes the point clear by saying “I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. I will break the bow {their trust} . . . in the Valley of Jezreel. In other words, the clock is ticking. Judgment is not far off. Armageddon is coming.

In verse 6 we find that Gomer conceives again and bears a daughter. Her name is “No-mercy.” Some commentators suggest that the lack of reference to Hosea (“bore him a son”) may mean that this is a child born of her prostitution. We don’t know for sure. But what is promised here is frightening: “. . . I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel to forgive them at all” (v. 6b). Judah is still favored by God, and it seems that God attempts to provoke Israel to godly jealousy.

Take note of the second half of verse 7 because it will become the theme. God saves His people by His own power. He saves them by Himself, not by what they are prone to trust in – bow, sword, war, horses and horsemen. Part of the problem with the people of Israel is the worship and trust of the gifts over the Giver of the gifts. This is not a new problem or one that has retired. Remember what Paul said in Romans 1.

“Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.” (Romans 1:24–25, ESV)

Verse 8 is equally devastating. The next child that she bore was called “Not my People.” And then God makes a stunning statement: “. . . you are not my people, and I am not your God.” This hurts. At least it should. “My people” was the chosen term of endearment, affection, and relationship between God and His people. It is used seventeen times in the book of Exodus alone.⁴ This marks the severing and the breakage of God’s relationship with His people.

God is separating Himself from His people because of their sin. The covenant made at Mt. Sinai has been broken. The people, like Gomer, have played the harlot, and God says “I’m done” and “It’s over.”

Now this would not only be expected, but it would be fully justified. Judgment should come. The covenant was broken. God should be done. And if the story ended there, it would not be unfair or unholy.

³ Dearman, J. Andrew. *The Book of Hosea, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 93.

⁴ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1624.

Is that how you see God and His holiness? I fear that some of us see God through such grace-filled eyes that sometimes we fail to realize the weight of our sin. Who would blame a man for walking away from a marriage to a prostitute after two illegitimate children and years of unfaithfulness?

Now I'm happy to tell you that this story doesn't end here. But make no mistake, God is not obligated to redeem Israel. God is not obligated to save any one. Our sin deserves eternal punishment. It is not only a miracle that God saves; it is a miracle that He saves anyone. Wayward people under judgment find grace because He is God.

3. Find Grace

This chapter is a summary of what we'll find in the book of Hosea, but in the gospel as well. And it all begins with the word "yet." Oh, what a word! Despite all they had done. Despite the shame and the pain of being rejected. Despite the undeserving nature of God's love and compassion, He still chooses to go after them.

But notice what God says next: "the number of children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea . . ." (v. 10). What is that? For many of you, that promise should sound familiar. It is the Abrahamic Covenant, the covenant where God walks through sacrifices, signifying that He is the one who keeps the covenant. In other words, God's faithfulness to His people does not ultimately depend on them. Their only hope is God's faithfulness. Wayward people are only brought back because of God's faithfulness, not their own. Salvation comes *from* God, and it is *by* God.

Additionally, there is a great and paradoxical transformation that takes place. In the very place where it was said "You are not my people," they will be called "children of the living God." The place of judgment became the place of restoration.

Do you see any foreshadowing of the gospel? On the very hill where Jesus was punished, we were set free. Here's how Paul said it in 2 Corinthians:

"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV)

Here's how John saw it in Revelation:

"And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain. . . And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation," (Revelation 5:9, ESV)

And that is not all. Hosea envisions a day when the kingdom is unified in a new messianic age with one leader. That leader, of course, is Christ.

The people of Israel may be rebellious, but God will one day rescue them. They may be exiled, but God will bring them back. They may be deceived, but one day, God will open their eyes. The people of Israel may have bad and wicked hearts, but one day, God will change that.

And do you know the amazing thing about this story? The scandal of God's grace is most evident in the cross. The sinless Son of God died for rebels. The obedient King of Israel was executed for wayward people. The omnipotent Savior was crucified for the crimes of wayward people.

The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is His new creation
By water and the Word:
From heav'n He came and sought her
To be His holy Bride;
With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life He died.

Jesus did that for you! He is Hosea, and you are Gomer. No matter how far you ran, He ran after you. No matter what you've done, Jesus paid your debt. And no matter where your wayward son, or friend, or daughter, or dad, or mom is, Jesus can buy them back. God gives grace to wayward people because He is God.

His mission through Christ is scandalous grace.

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