

HOSEA – GOD’S FATHERLY COMPASSION

We all have fathers. How did you – how do you get on with your father? Some of you like me will have grown without a father – he died when I was 3. But those of you who grew up with a father will know something. Earthly fathers are imperfect. I drive my children crazy at airports when I become hyperactive, run around and embarrass them. I lose them because I walk too fast, do my silly walk because I am excited. I also run around on the plane trying to take videos from every exit window and when we land, I always want to get the bags off the conveyor as quick as possible. For some, it doesn’t stop at embarrassment but cold distance, verbal abuse or even physical abuse. But no earthly father is perfect. Tragically, for many of us our earthly fathers spoil the image we have of God the Father. I hope our reflection today will rectify that (a lot of it also applies to mothers). [Pause and think of what attributes you might have subconsciously placed on God from your father] So let’s start. We often talk about God the Father but how seriously do we take him? Have you ever thought how God the Father feels about mankind? The prophet Hosea gives us a rare insight into God’s beating fatherly heart of love for us. Listen to God himself speaking:

*“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.
But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me.
They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images.
It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them.
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.
“Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?
Swords will flash in their cities, will destroy the bars of their gates and put an end to their plans.
My people are determined to turn from me.
Even if they call to the Most High, he will by no means exalt them.
“How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim?
My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.
I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim.
For I am God, and not man-- the Holy One among you.
I will not come in wrath.
They will follow the LORD; he will roar like a lion.
When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west.
They will come trembling like birds from Egypt, like doves from Assyria.
I will settle them in their homes,” declares the LORD.”*

I’ll first give some background on this wonderful chapter, what has been called “one of the greatest passages of the Old Testament”, then I will explain it verse by verse and finally we consider its implications for us. Remember how I told you of the division of the kingdom after Solomon died [map]. Hosea prophesied in the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 8th Century BC (sometimes called “Ephraim” after the largest tribe), when there was ease and prosperity under King Jeroboam II, but as we know this was followed by instability and finally Assyrian invasion. In 721 BC many citizens of Israel were deported or scattered. Hosea’s book accuses prosperous Israel of sins against God – especially worship of idols – and threatens this very punishment, although a promise of blessing for a faithful remnant thereafter recurs. Let’s look at our passage verse by verse:

*"When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.*

[picture of Red Sea] Remember the Exodus? God the Father recalls how, out of his love, he rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. He parted the Red Sea and saved the Hebrew slaves from the Egyptian army. Israel is his son whom he "calls" meaning he adopted the nation permanently. The son is a child, totally helpless without God.

*But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me.
They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images.*

[picture of a Baal] Like a rebellious teenager, Israel flaunted the goodness of the Father, tossing it back in his face. God's calling via the prophets was ignored and Israel ran away. Despite all they knew of God's fatherly kindness and concern, they offered sacrifices to powerless blocks of stone; Canaanite gods like Baal.

*It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms;
but they did not realize it was I who healed them.*

[picture of child walking] Listen to the sadness here. We see Father God teaching their son Israel to walk and healing his wounds when he fell. Or God, like a father, sitting by the bedside of his sick child keeping watch through the night, waiting for the fever to ease. The child is unaware of this immense love and care.

*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.*

[Father feeding child] God the Father has been a leader of his son Israel, but not a dictator. He guides them by love, and tells them how to live "the best possible life" as in the Proverbs and the Law he gave them. God lifted Israel's burden of slavery in Egypt (the yoke) and he graciously fed them in the desert with manna – and now with "milk and honey" in Israel.

*"Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?
Swords will flash in their cities, will destroy the bars of their gates and put an end to their plans.*

[sacking of an ancient city] God, exasperated, considers no longer protecting Israel. He prophesies that due to disloyalty, Israel will go into exile to Assyria. Prosperous Israelites probably found it hard to take Hosea seriously because they felt secure in their fortified cities. But God is saying this will not prevent the enemy breaking through, devastating the whole country, and leading away the people captive. Their futile "plans" will end in slavery or death.

*My people are determined to turn from me.
Even if they call to the Most High, he will by no means exalt them.*

Again we hear a catch in the throat as Father God's exasperation is tinged with agony and pain at Israel's revolt. They just won't repent! Calling to the "Most High" will be useless.

*"How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I treat you like Admah?*

*How can I make you like Zeboiim?
My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.*

God had every reason to justly punish his son Israel, as he did Noah's generation in the flood and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim with burning sulphur. But we now witness the Father's inner turmoil, as four times he asks himself "How can I". In sorrow and love, God questions his resolve to allow Israel to be annihilated. And this is the key; God has a "change of heart" due to his compassion; the passionate, unconditional love of the father for the child.

*I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim.
For I am God, and not man-- the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath.*

God relents from devastating Ephraim in his wrath, leaving a possibility of renewed life. We know from history that the prophesied invasion did still occur. Nevertheless, there will be a remnant which is saved and redeemed. God emphasises he remains committed to his son Israel; the "Holy One among you".

*They will follow the LORD; he will roar like a lion.
When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west.
They will come trembling like birds from Egypt, like doves from Assyria.
I will settle them in their homes," declares the LORD.*

Hosea foresees scattered communities of Israelites around the Mediterranean that now return home. The relationship of father to son will be restored. The lion is God the redeemer who "calls" them, destroying their enemies and leading them to repent. These saved "children" will faithfully follow the Lord and tremble in fear at his lion's roar, rather than arrogantly disobeying him. God with fatherly care settles the Israelite "children" back in their homes.

Although written to Israel, the prophecy is crucial also for us Christians, who are "heirs together with Israel" (Ephesians 3:6) of God's promise – we are God's people, in other words. In simple terms, this passage is the Gospel! It tells us how even after we reject his love, God mercifully brings us back into relationship with him. Let me explain:

God the Father adopts mankind and gives us good gifts. The rescue of Israel from Egypt reminds us of God's Fatherly kindnesses, nurture and provision to all humanity. We should thank him for all of creation and the good things we derive from it. But we don't recognise his handiwork. In Romans 1 Paul says "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-- his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him." And it's still true today [Ipod]. What's worse,

We rebel, like unruly teenagers. The image of Israel straying from God shows how we all turn away from God again and again, as Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. In face of God's provision, we oppose the sin of self, the sin that we tell ourselves it is all done by us and for us. Remember sin breaks relationships – with God and with one another. It is self centred and destructive. We all have "Baals" to which we sacrifice, that have take his rightful place at the centre of our lives – what is yours, house, job, children, wealth, fame?

God's fatherly compassion wants to forgive although his holy justice is to punish. In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), God as in Hosea is the forgiving father despite the fact his son was rebellious. Another example is how days before his death, Jesus, like God the

Father in Hosea was filled with maternal anguish over the fate of Jerusalem, a city that was to be destroyed by the Romans in 55 AD “how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing”.

God the father acted to save us even before we repented, as “all his compassion was aroused”. His agony over humanity’s rebellion ultimately led to his son Jesus “the lion of Judah” coming to earth, as we will celebrate at Christmas. I see Hosea’s “Holy one among you” as prophesying this incarnation of Jesus, and most graphically as Jesus taking humanity’s just punishment on the cross. There, God the Father restored the relationship with us his children that was broken in the Fall. Neither the hurt nor the rejection nor the ingratitude nor the rebellion could keep God from his beloved people. Such love is truly unfathomable. Think of the just punishment that should await us, exiled forever from his presence, in hell. Think of God’s mercy in sending Jesus – at what a cost to himself!

Listen to the “Fatherly compassion” in these famous passages: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . .” (John 3:16). This is love: not that we loved God, but he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:10). Romans 5:8 that you see on the wall “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”. And finally “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

He took the initiative, we can just be grateful! If we have faith in Jesus we, like Israel in the Exodus are “adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will” (Ephesians 1:5). And we have a model, Jesus, who was “called out from Egypt” as a child, who did not stray from God’s laws and fulfilled the task laid out for him.

So today we have seen **God as a perfect Father**. Compassionate, merciful yet just, nurturing, providing, patient, steadfast, committed . . . compare that with the views you might have from your own fathers.

Let me ask, do you know God as your perfect Father today? Is your heart committed to him? Even if you are a Christian, do you know him truly, or is his image distorted by that of your earthly father? Your heavenly father is waiting . . . longing to love you, to teach you, to have you know him better, and experience his great love. Are you ready to come home to him?

Prayer:

I believe there are some here today who have never had a personal relation with God the Father. Today is time to come home to the father’s arms.

There are some who have ongoing difficulties in relationships with their fathers, or their mothers that they might be healed in the light of God’s perfect fatherhood for us.

For parents here, that we might be the parents of our children God wants us to be.