

HOSEA—WEEK 2

FAILURE AND FORGIVENESS



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is “The Prophet Hosea” by James Tissot (1836–1902)
On display at the Jewish Museum, New York*

This section starts out sounding like it’s about Gomer, but then seamlessly switches to talking about Israel. First, she’s chasing lovers, then she’s sacrificing to the Baals. God promises punishment and then glorious reconciliation. It’s written so that much of it could be describing Gomer or Israel.

It’s both. If the analogy weren’t so obvious, this would be confusing.

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1 Hosea 2:2–5 (ESV)

“Plead with your mother, plead—
for she is not my wife,
and I am not her husband—
that she put away her whoring from her face,
and her adultery from between her breasts;
lest I strip her naked
and make her as in the day she was born,
and make her like a wilderness,
and make her like a parched land,

and kill her with thirst.
Upon her children also I will have no mercy,
because they are children of whoredom.
For their mother has played the whore;
she who conceived them has acted shamefully.
For she said, ‘I will go after my lovers,
who give me my bread and my water,
my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.’”

In Hosea’s day, the children of adultery and prostitution were shunned. “Illegitimate” was the nice term for them.

But if their mother stays married, they live as normal sons and daughters, not as b____s (even if her husband isn’t their father, which seems to be the case for Lo-Ruhamah and Lo-Ammi). Needless to say, the children are likely to be highly motivated to get their mother to mend her ways.

This sounds like Hosea is writing to Gomer’s children. If she doesn’t straighten up, they will bear dreadful consequences.

But this is prophecy for Israel. So, who is Hosea’s audience? Who is analogous to the kids?

It’s the Israelites who have stayed true to the LORD. While many have been led astray into Baal worship, not everyone has abandoned the faith.

But if Israel is conquered, all will suffer.

Holding children accountable for the way they were conceived is unfair and just plain mean. But holding whole nations accountable for the actions of a few, especially if the few are their leaders, is normal, even unavoidable.

That’s why the image of children lecturing their mother about her harlotry—which, come to think of it, is pretty bizarre—is perfectly appropriate here. When Hosea says, “Plead with your mother, plead,” he’s urging the righteous to not stand idly by while evil runs amok.

“Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing.”
— John Stuart Mill

This point is especially relevant right now. The Iranian people have been suffering incredibly for the sins of their leaders. Even liberation from that nightmare may involve a time of even more pain.

Just as in ancient Israel, by not doing the right thing, a small minority can cause widespread pain.

2 Hosea 2:6–8 (ESV)

*“Therefore, behold,
I will hedge up your way with thorns,
And wall her in,
So that she cannot find her paths.
She will chase her lovers,
But not overtake them;
Yes, she will seek them, but not find them.*

*Then she will say,
‘I will go and return to my first husband,
For then it was better for me than now.’
For she did not know
That I gave her grain, new wine, and oil,
And multiplied her silver and gold—
Which they prepared for Baal.”*

Like an unfaithful wife who *will chase her lovers, but not overtake them*, Israel’s unfaithfulness to the LORD will be frustrated. But what specifically is this referring to?

Israel is being a fair-weather friend. The people worship the LORD as long as times are good. But let it not rain for a while, and they’ll start hedging their bets by offering gifts to some silly Baal rain god. Let their national security become uncertain, and they’ll even form unholy alliances.

But these things don’t work; God makes sure of that. He frustrates these wrong-headed moves.

So then Israel will be like the wayward woman who says, *“I will go and return to my first husband, for then it was better for me than now.”* The grass looked greener on the other side, but it wasn’t.

Next comes the tricky bit. *For she did not know that I gave her grain, new wine, and oil, and multiplied her silver and gold—which they prepared for Baal.* What’s that all about?

Israel blames the bad times on God, but they take the good times for granted. They don’t realize that all their blessings are from the LORD. So they offer the fruits of those blessings to Baal.

If God can get past that, His patience really is infinite.

“The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.”

This piece of secular wisdom depicts our sinful nature with amazing fidelity. Notice the word “always.” This popular adage doesn’t just say that the grass is greener on the other side; it says that it’s always greener. Even secular wisdom recognizes that this attitude is universal—all the people, all the time.

And, of course, it’s wrong—obviously wrong. That’s the point. We’re being mocked. By believing the grass is always greener on the other side, we display the lunacy of sin.

We like to laugh at Israel’s blindingly stupid actions. Fair enough, but save a few chuckles for yourself. Our sinfulness is no less goofy than Israel’s.

We don’t just take our blessings for granted.

We take the attitude that they’re not good enough.

3 Hosea 2:6–8 (ESV)

*“Therefore I will return and take away
My grain in its time
And My new wine in its season,
And will take back My wool and My linen,
Given to cover her nakedness.
Now I will uncover her lewdness in the sight of
her lovers,
And no one shall deliver her from My hand.
I will also cause all her mirth to cease,
Her feast days,
Her New Moons,
Her Sabbaths—
All her appointed feasts.*

*“And I will destroy her vines and her fig trees,
Of which she has said,
‘These are my wages that my lovers have given
me.’
So I will make them a forest,
And the beasts of the field shall eat them.
I will punish her
For the days of the Baals to which she burned
incense.
She decked herself with her earrings and
jewelry,
And went after her lovers;
But Me she forgot,” says the LORD.*

These things sound awful, but not *that* awful. They’re just disciplining punishments—embarrassments, festivals canceled, vineyards ruined. Something is holding back God’s wrath.

Read the passage again. God’s hurt and pique are clearly on display. You can feel the hurt but also the love. Israel always seems to want to learn lessons the hard way, so God takes them to the woodshed.

Like the loving father that He is, He’s punishing them but not disowning them.

You can feel the Christ in this passage too. This infinitely patient and loving God, who disciplines Israel but never gives up, is the kind of God who would sacrifice Himself to save His people.

The whole Old Testament points to Christ, though obliquely. It doesn’t make simple announcements of what’s coming. That wouldn’t teach. Instead, the Old Testament teaches the concepts needed to understand God’s incredibly creative plan of salvation. Those foundational principles are:

- 1) God created everything and is all powerful.
- 2) God created us in His image.
- 3) We trashed that image when we fell into sin.
- 4) God loves His little image bearers anyway; so He doesn’t quit on us.

While the Old Testament makes all four points, points three and four take the most time to teach. We hate point three, so God explains it, over and over, using differing object lessons.

Point four is just plain complicated. In Hosea, God displays the next step in this glorious set-up for the New Testament—He wants to save us. It’s a lesson on God’s love, which is beyond our comprehension.

You can’t explain that kind of love; you have to show it to people.

4 Hosea 2:14–18 (NKJV)

*“Therefore, behold, I will allure her,
Will bring her into the wilderness,
And speak comfort to her.
I will give her her vineyards from there,
And the Valley of Achor as a door of hope;
She shall sing there,
As in the days of her youth,
As in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt.*

*“And it shall be, in that day,”
Says the LORD,
“That you will call Me ‘My Husband,’
And no longer call Me ‘My Master,’
For I will take from her mouth the names of the Baals,
And they shall be remembered by their name no more.
In that day I will make a covenant for them
With the beasts of the field,
With the birds of the air,
And with the creeping things of the ground.
Bow and sword of battle I will shatter from the earth,
To make them lie down safely.”*

Now to lure her back. In the previous passage, the LORD deliberately frustrated Israel. Her chasing after other lovers got her nothing but failed harvests and canceled festivals.

Now God provides all the delights she thought she’d get elsewhere. That ought to get her attention. Israel’s eyes should be opened, and she’ll see what true love is.

“And it shall be, in that day,” says the LORD, “that you will call Me ‘My Husband,’ and no longer call Me ‘My Master.’”

God is using Israel’s unfaithfulness to take their relationship to the next level.

The cross kicks this up another level, but in a curious twist, the language moves in the opposite direction. Post cross, God’s love is so obviously great that *“My Husband,”* isn’t the usual term.

We’ve gone from failing to recognize God’s love to taking it for granted. We’re so used to it that we forget that He’s still *“My Master.”*

That’s why it’s so important to declare *“Jesus is Lord.”* We need to be extra clear about those things we tend to take for granted, lest we forget.

5 Hosea 2:19–23 (NIV)

*“I will betroth you to me forever;
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice,
in love and compassion.
I will betroth you in faithfulness,
and you will acknowledge the LORD.
“In that day I will respond,”
declares the LORD—
“I will respond to the skies,
and they will respond to the earth;
and the earth will respond to the grain,
the new wine and the olive oil,
and they will respond to Jezreel.
I will plant her for myself in the land;
I will show my love to the one I called ‘Not my loved one.’
I will say to those called ‘Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’;
and they will say, ‘You are my God.’”*

Forever. *“I will betroth you to me forever.”* That’s where this is all headed. Then everything will be right. *“I will respond to the skies, and they will respond to the earth; and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and the olive oil, and they will respond to Jezreel. I will plant her for myself in the land.”* (“Jezreel” means “God plants” here.)

The earth, the sky, and the planting will all combine to work the way they should.

And this new, permanent relationship will be one of grace and love—of a people and their God.

Does that point to Christ or what?

The end of this passage points to Christ even more. *“I will say to those called ‘Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’; and they will say, ‘You are my God.’”* The Israelites understood this figuratively—that Israel will be restored, and the name of Gomer’s third child, *“Not my people,”* will no longer be their name.

But God had something far more glorious up His sleeve—saving the whole world. You don’t have to be speaking figuratively to label the gentiles *“not my people.”* Paul picks this up in Romans 9.

What if God ... called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea: “I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people; and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one,” and, “In the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘children of the living God.’” — Romans 9:22–26 (NIV)

When the covenant expanded to include the gentiles, Hosea 2:23 was fulfilled literally.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever regretted doing nothing in the presence of a wrong?
2. When have you made a big mistake by thinking that the grass is greener on the other side?
3. What's the greatest act of love you've witnessed?
4. Have you seen a badly broken relationship healed?
5. Christ fulfilled many prophecies. What's your favorite?