

A TRAGEDY OF THE PARSONAGE

Second in the line of Hebrew prophets was Hosea, a native of the Northern Kingdom. He was the only important literary prophet the ten tribes of Israel ever produced. How Hosea came to be influenced by the prophet from the south is not known. Had Hosea been among the crowds that were present when Amos delivered some of his addresses? Or was it possible Hosea had learned of Amos only by speaking with those who had heard him? Whatever the answer, it is certain the words of the prophet from Judah had made an indelible impression upon Hosea.

Haunted by memories concerning the martyrdom of Amos, and meditating day after day upon those stirring prophetic messages, Hosea too began to see the tragedy of a nation plunging blindly into ruin. The abuses he had observed at the holy places of Ephraim troubled him. He became deeply conscious of the timeliness of Amos' words and the need for a national awakening to avoid the threatening calamity.

The reign of Jeroboam II in Israel was an era of peace, plenty, prosperity, and luxury. In Samaria and in Jerusalem the people indulged in the kind of living that weakened and debauched them. They drifted thoughtlessly into ease, extravagance, and oppression. A true prophet of God was able to see signs of decay, evidences of poison in the blood stream, and inevitable calamity ahead for the stupid people.

It was during these years of anarchy, bloodshed, revolt and the breakup of a nation that Hosea the prophet preached in Israel. He was called upon to deliver God's message to a people who had very little concern for spiritual matters. They had not listened to Amos. They were not disposed to give heed to Hosea. Dissolution, decay and death were all around him. Anarchy, chaos, feuds, and broken covenants were visible on every side.

On every side the young prophet faced social conditions that made his heart sick. The general feeling made for laxness and looseness in personal behavior. The rulers set poor examples for the people. Property had little value, for no person could be sure of his right to keep it. The courts were corrupt. Judges made their living from bribes and excessive fees wrung from helpless people who sought to hold on to their property and their rights. Conspiracies and plots were so common that the people did not dare trust any group. Literal bloodshed, highway robbery, murder and organized vice were visible on every hand. The priests were the instigators of rackets. In an unstable world the people had come to lose their self-reliance.

Family life had gone to pieces. Regard for the sanctity of the home and the marriage vow had been lost. The false worship and foreign cults had broken down the old standards of morality and faithfulness. It is a tragic hour when men and women lose the sense of the sacredness of home relationships. Drunkenness with all of its attendant evils was fast breaking down the home life and debauching the minds of the people.

Sin ruled in all their hearts. The priests had failed in their high duty of leading the people to know God's Word and His requirements for them. They had actually led the people into sin and had made sinning attractive. Moral and ethical requirements were eliminated. The licentious rites, taken over from rank paganism, led the worshipers to such excesses that all thought of purity and spiritual living was out of the question. The so-called "hold women" were kept at the central sanctuaries as temple prostitutes. The people rapidly became degenerate. Family life was rotten. Husbands would go out in sinful debauchery only to find their wives and daughters as guilty as they were. Hosea looked upon an unspeakable tragedy in the land.

I. The Man.

By contrast with Amos, the mountain shepherd, Hosea was a man of the farm. He was accustomed to think in terms of grain, threshing floors, yokes, plows, heifers,

vineyards, new wine, flax, olive oil, fig trees, etc. It is probable that his farm was located near the southern edge of the fertile plain of Esdraelon, known as the granary of Palestine. His prophecies reflect the typical reaction of an upright man from the country toward abuses carried on in the cities.

The mantle of Amos fell upon the shoulders of Hosea. The stern, relentless preacher of the law was followed by the tender-hearted preacher of love. Amos was concerned with the ethical and the moral in religion. He was a great lover of justice and truth, and a tremendous hater of injustice and sham. But Hosea was concerned with the spirit in religion, and gave forth a message of love and grace. One might say that Hosea dealt with the roots of religion, while Amos dealt with its fruits. Hosea went to its source in the heart, while Amos treated its surface outworkings in every-day life. Amos was the inflexible preacher of righteousness and judgment to come; Hosea was the tender-hearted preacher of outraged love. Amos appealed to the reason; Hosea appealed to the affections. The message of Amos was one of justice and righteousness; while that of Hosea was one of grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love.

One man after another had usurped the throne of Israel, after murdering his predecessor, until nine kings had been dethroned and murdered by their successors. In two hundred fifty years Israel had eighteen kings from ten different dynasties, every one of which came to an end in violence and death. These were the darkest days that Israel had so far experienced, but the blackest hour of their history was just a little in the future. It was too plain to Hosea that the end of the Jewish state was near. He saw his beloved country dancing on the edge of doom, and knew that his countrymen were sporting with disaster.

Such was the stormy period in which Hosea lived. He was compelled to witness the suicide of the nation he so much loved. Heartbroken and wounded over the sins and the sorrows of his nation, and spurned and rejected by his people, who thought him to be mad, he sought comfort and consolation elsewhere.

It was now that he dreamed of a happy home with the woman he could love and trust, and who in return, would love and comfort him. Never did a young man more keenly feel the need of the sympathy and companionship of woman than did this young poet-preacher of Israel. Then it was that he met a young woman whose name was Gomer. From the very first he admired her greatly. Before long he was deeply in love with her.

II. The Marriage.

Soon Hosea and Gomer were married, and the halcyon days of a poet-preacher's love began. They were young and happy. Hosea thought that there was every promise of a delightful married life. He would now have a companion, one who would share his difficult career. Thus built up, Hosea looked into the troubled future with a glad heart. The morning of nuptial bliss seemed now to be dawning. Gomer might have been one of the happiest women in Samaria. To her much was given, and from her much was naturally to be expected.

In due time, one day this young wife presented the young prophet with their first baby, a fine little boy, to whom Hosea gave a name symbolical of the evil times. He called him Jezreel, which meant "vengeance". This little boy was to be a living prophecy of what was coming upon Israel. But Hosea was a happy man. The baby might portend evil for Israel, but surely not for Hosea and Gomer.

Gomer was in and of the gay and easygoing social life of her time. She did not share the purposes of her patriotic and religious husband. She doubtless felt herself neglected. At times she perhaps threw it into his face with petulant tears that he

cared more for his preaching than he did for her. She began to tell herself, and to allow others to tell her, that she was being made a martyr. Martyrs who are conscious of their martyrdom are always burdens grievous to be borne. More and more she gave herself to the gay life of her time. Therefore, Hosea often lay awake at night longer than was good for him. Often he went about his task with an even heavier burden than that of his decaying nation resting upon his heart. Tempestuous years slipped by until two other children were born into that troubled home, the one a girl, the other a boy. The girl he named "Unpitied" or "unloved." The boy he named "No-Kin-of-Mine." We can see that he named these children in bitterness and brokenness of heart. His wife had been unfaithful to him, and the children born in his home were not his own. Did ever human nature stoop lower than that of Gomer?

Gomer was ensnared by the wild orgies of Baal, deserted her husband and her children, and became a prostitute in the temple of Baal. When Hosea came home and found that she had gone off with other lovers, his dream of a happy home was shattered, and his heart was completely broken. We can picture him putting the children to bed that night. Henceforth, he must be both father and mother to them. He hears their childish prayers; then they fall asleep. But there is no sleep for him. He watches in bitterness through the night.

Strange to say, Hosea did not abandon Gomer in her lowest degradation. He hated her glaring wrong, but he loved her still. In the bitterness of his soul, one can hear him groan, "O Gomer, how can I give you up?" No doubt the people said that Hosea was a fool for showing any concern whatever for so unworthy a wife.

In the course of time, like a common slave, Gomer stood exposed for sale in the open market. Amid the jeers of the people, Hosea went down into the slave market where his wife was exposed for sale to redeem her. Down into the haunts of sin and shame he went. There in a place surrounded by vile men who traffic in human souls was the prophet's bride of other years. Her eyes, once homes of beauty and winsomeness, were bleary; her face was parchment-like, and her features pinched. She cringed and crouched at the sight of her frantic lover and husband. Choking sobs suddenly convulsed her frail, dissipated body. Without a word Hosea drew her to his breast and quietly watched her cry.

Then the surly slaver called for bids upon her. Hosea could not stand it any longer. The compassion of his old love swept over him. His pity burned a purifying, consuming flame. He had forgotten her sin, he had forgiven her shame. He saw her, not the degraded thing that she was, but the lovelier bride of happier days. Up to the block he went. He put down the price demanded, fifteen pieces of silver and a homer and a half of barley, which was the price of a slave. He took her back home, and tenderly sought to restore her to virtue, and to regain her love and affection. How did it all end? We do not know. Here the author drops the curtain. Gomer may have softened under such unbelievable love. She may have become a good woman. Again, she may have resisted that love and have died as she had lived.

III. The Message.

After Hosea had moved out into the sunlight of God's truth, the Holy Spirit moved him to write this account of the tragedy in his home.

Hosea brooded over his broken nation and his broken home; but out of these bitter trials God began to speak to him in a new way. As he contemplated his ruined home, there was given to him a new revelation. He saw that his own tragic experience with Gomer was a picture of the experience that God was then having with Israel. God had been a husband to Israel, but she had played the harlot with the Baals.

In the early days God had entered into a marriage covenant with Israel, but Israel

had not kept her plighted troth. She had broken that marriage bond, and had bowed to the Tyrian Baals. Hosea said the whole land had committed "whoredom, departing from the Lord." God had cherished Israel, and had made her the object of His special love and blessing. He and Israel had given each other their plighted troth, "I will be their God, and they shall be My people," said the Covenant. But, like Gomer, Israel had left her first-sworn Lover for profligate lovers--the filthy heathen deities. Israel, like Gomer, had played the harlot and all purity and decency and honesty had gone. The sacred marriage vow was broken; love was outraged; Israel was joined to Baal, the foulest and filthiest of the heathen gods.

The state of the prophet's unhappy people had become as bad as bad could be. It had been difficult much of the time to tell whose wife Gomer was; she was first with Hosea, then with some other man. So it was with Israel. She had so mixed the worship of Baal with the worship of Jehovah that it was difficult to say which received the most of her devotion. Hosea had come to see that his own pity for Gomer was but a faint similitude of the yearning love of God for His erring people. Great sorrow had made his heart gentler; bitter tears had made his spiritual eyesight clearer. From the black tragedy of his home life, Hosea had discovered the secret of God's unconquerable love for faithless Israel.

What are some of the lessons which Hosea learned from his dreadful experiences that we can learn from his recorded message?

1. We must know God, if we are to be saved from the sins which will work our undoing. The trouble with Israel was, "There was no knowledge of God in the land." God was not in their thoughts, therefore not in their deeds. There was plenty of attractive ritual and much sacrificing, but no mercy or justice or love. God must be enthroned in our thinking if He is to be in our living.
2. The terrible nature of sin.
Sin had ruined Hosea's home and his nation. In both cases, it was the cause of the estrangement and the defilement.
3. The amazing love and persistent mercy of God.
Hosea made the grand discovery that "God is love." He found that in spite of the sins of Gomer, which had blighted his home and broken his heart, he could love her still. And if he could love the unworthy Gomer still--and he knew he did--he saw how God could yet love Israel--and that He did still love her. This was the love that will not let us go. Hosea knew what we know--that nobody except God can completely satisfy the human soul.

Before the devotion and love of Hosea we stand amazed. It is not easy to see how anyone could love so deeply. It is surely one of the most marvelous love stories ever written. But there is one that surpasses it. That is the story of One who came to share our lot and to deliver us from our bondage. He bought us back at the price of life laid down. "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed." Let us never resist that marvelous love!