

A TRAGEDY IN THE PARSONAGE

Hosea 1

Hosea, the son of Beer, was a native of Samaria in the Northern Kingdom. He probably was reared on a farm, for he showed acquaintance with the life of the countryside. Having received an education, Hosea was familiar with the literature which recorded the history of his people. He became the only important literary prophet the ten tribes of Israel ever produced. He loved his people, among whom he had grown up, so much that the thought of their evil ways and of the punishment they were inviting upon themselves was a perpetual sorrow to Hosea.

The mantle of Amos fell upon the shoulders of Hosea. It is almost impossible to imagine a greater contrast than between these two prophets. Amos was the inflexible preacher of righteousness and judgment to come, and Hosea was the tender-hearted prophet of love. How Hosea came to be influenced by the prophet from the south is not known. Had Hosea been among the crowds which 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 that the words of the prophet from Judah had made an indelible impression upon Hosea.

Haunted by memories of 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 need for a national awakening to avoid the threatening calamity.

On every hand the young prophet faced social conditions that made his heart sick. The people had drifted thoughtlessly into ease, extravagance and oppression. There was great laxness and looseness in personal behavior. The rulers were poor examples for the people. Property had little value for nobody could be sure of his right to keep it. The courts were corrupt. Judges made their living principally 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. Even the priests were instigators of rackets.

Moreover, family life had gone to pieces. Regard for the sanctity of the marriage vows and the home had been lost. The false worship and foreign cults had broken down the old standards of morality and faithfulness. Drunkenness with all of its attendant evils was fast breaking down the home life and debauching the minds of the people.

Religious conditions proved that sin ruled in the hearts of the people. The priests had failed in their duty of leading the people to know God's Word and His requirements for them. These priests had actually led the people into sin and had made sin very attractive. 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 "holy 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 probably 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. Heartbroken over the sins of his nation, and spurned and rejected by his people, who thought him to be mad, he sought consolation elsewhere.

It was at this juncture that Hosea dreamed of a happy home with a woman whom 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 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.

Hosea probably did not know very much about Gomer's history or character. Love often causes thoughtless people to ignore such considerations. Nevertheless, Hosea loved her devotedly and was willing to take an oath of allegiance that was to continue all through his life. 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 joy seemed to be dawning. Gomer might have been one of the happiest women in Samaria and certainly much was expected of her.

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 symbolic of the evil times. He called him Jezreel. That was the name of an ancient battlefield and 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. Hosea thought: "This little boy will bring us closer together. This baby will lay one hand on my heart and one on that of Gomer, and we shall understand each other better and love each other more because of him." But here again he was doomed to disappointment.

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. Even though Gomer may have been a pure and worthy woman when Hosea married her, she had since become

entangled in the web of immoral life about her and had become an adulteress after the birth of their first child. By that time Hosea had discovered that Gomer was very indifferent about the worship of God, that she was very selfish, and that she was primarily concerned about self-enjoyment.

Tempestuous years slipped by until two other children were born into that troubled home, the one a girl, the other a boy. The girl was named "unpitied" or "Unloved." The boy Hosea 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?

In spite of all that Hosea did to make his home pleasant, his wife was never happy. First of all, she did not love God. Then she did not like Hosea's quiet home, his occupation, his preaching or his Sabbath keeping. As time passed everything about her home grew distasteful. Her husband, his religion and even her children became boresome to her.

One day Hosea came home and discovered that Gomer had left with a licentious paramour. His dream of a happy home had been shattered, and his heart was broken. The little children were sitting disconsolately by the door, tired and hungry. Weary though he was, Hosea set about the task of preparing a meal for the three little ones. Unskilled in the art, he littered up the kitchen in the operation. Eventually, after long and blundering effort, the children were fed, pacified and put to bed. After they had fallen asleep, Hosea paced the floor, thinking about the little children and what would become of them. In his distress he turned more than ever to prayer. As he prayed he began to learn some things which, without this sorrow, could never have come to him. He received a vision of the love of God for His people in a new and wonderful way. His very tears became a telescope through which he saw deeper into the heart of God than perhaps any other man in the Old Testament.

Not only did Gomer desert her husband and her children, but she was ensnared by the wild orgies of Baal and soon became a prostitute in the temple of Baal. Oh, the depths to which some people go!

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 could 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 was offered 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. Down into the haunts of sin and shame he went to redeem her. There in a place surrounded by vile men who trafficked 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!