

You Married a What?

Prophets sometimes do strange things.

For three years, Isaiah embarrassed people by walking the streets dressed like a prisoner of war; for several months, Jeremiah carried a yoke on his shoulders. The Prophet Ezekiel acted like a little boy and "played war," and once he used a haircut as a theological object lesson. When his wife suddenly died, Ezekiel even turned that painful experience into a sermon.¹

Why did these men do these peculiar things?

These peculiar tilings" were really acts of mercy. The people of God had become deaf to God's voice and were no longer paying attention to His covenant. The Lord called His servants to do these strange things — these "action sermons" — in hopes that the people would wake up and listen to what they had to say. Only then could the nation escape divine discipline and judgment.

But no prophet preached a more painful "action sermon" than Hosea. He was instructed to marry a prostitute named Gomer who subsequently bore him three children, and he wasn't even sure the last two children were fathered by him. Then Gomer left him for another man, and Hosea had the

BE AMAZED

humiliating responsibility of buying back his own wife.

What was this all about? It was a vivid picture of what the people of Israel had done to their God by prostituting themselves to idols and committing "spiritual adultery." Since God's people today face the same temptation (James 4:4), we need to heed what Hosea wrote for his people. Each of the persons in this drama — Hosea, Gomer, and the three children — teach us important spiritual lessons about the God whom Israel was disobeying and grieving.

1. The children: God is gracious (Hosea 1:1-2:1)

The times (Hosea 1:1). Hosea names four kings of Judah and only one king of Israel, Jeroboam II. The kings of Judah, of course, belonged to David's dynasty, the only dynasty the Lord accepted (1 Kings 11:36; 15:4). The kings of Israel were a wicked lot who followed the sins of Israel's first king, Jeroboam I, and refused to repent and turn to God (2 Kings 13:6).

After Jeroboam II died, his son Zechariah reigned only six months and was assassinated by his successor Shallum who himself was assassinated after reigning only one month. Menahem reigned for ten years; his son Pekahiah ruled two years before being killed by Pekah who was able to keep the throne for twenty years. He was slain by Hoshea, who reigned for ten years, the last of the kings of Israel. During his evil reign, the nation was conquered by Assyria, the Jews intermingled with the foreigners the Assyrians brought into the land, and the result was a mixed race known as the Samaritans.

What a time to be serving the Lord! Murder, idolatry, and immorality were rampant in the land, and nobody seemed to be interested in hearing the Word of the Lord! On top of that, God told His prophet to get married and raise a family!

The marriage (Hosea 1:2). Here we meet a bit of a problem

YOU MARRIED A WHAT?

because not every Bible student agrees on the kind of woman Hosea married. Hosea either married a pure woman who later became a prostitute, or he married a prostitute who bore him three children.²

In the Old Testament, prostitution is symbolic of idolatry and unfaithfulness to God (Jer. 2-3; Ezek. 16; 23). Since the Jews were idolatrous from the beginning (Josh. 24:2-3,14), it seems likely that Gomer would have to be a prostitute when she married Hosea; for this would best symbolize Israel's relationship to the Lord. God called Israel in their idolatry; He "married" them at Mt. Sinai when they accepted His covenant (Ex. 19-21); and then He grieved over them when they forsook Him for the false gods of the land of Canaan. Like Gomer, Israel began as idolaters, "married" Jehovah, and eventually returned to their idolatry.

If Hosea had married a pure woman who later became unfaithful, then the phrase "wife of whoredoms" in 1:2 has to mean "a wife prone to harlotry who will commit it later"; but this seems to be a strained reading of the verse.³ But could God ask His faithful servant to marry a defiled woman? Why not? We might as well ask, "Could God permit Ezekiel's wife to die?" Though marrying a prostitute might not be the safest step to take, such marriages were forbidden only to the priests (Lev. 21:7). Salmon married Rahab the harlot who became the great-grandmother of King David and an ancestress of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:4-5).

The names (Hosea 1:3-9). As with Isaiah's two sons (Isa. 7:3 and 8:3), and numerous other people in Scripture, Gomer's three children were given meaningful names selected by the Lord.

The first child, a son, was called *Jezreel* (Hosea 1:4-5), which means "God sows" or "God scatters." Jezreel was a city in the tribe of Issachar, near Mt Gilboa, and is associated with the drastic judgments that Jehu executed on the family of Ahab

BE AMAZED

1 Kings 18-19.) Pagan worship involved sensual fertility rites; and for these rites, both male and female temple prostitutes were provided. In a literal as well as a symbolic sense, idolatry meant prostitution.⁶

Since the people were acting like prostitutes, God would treat them like prostitutes and shame them publicly. He would no longer claim the nation as His wife because she had broken the solemn marriage covenant and consorted with idols. According to Hebrew law, adultery was a capital crime, punishable by death; but God announced that He would discipline Israel and not destroy her.⁷

Unfaithfulness to the Lord is a serious sin, just as unfaithfulness to one's mate is a serious sin. The man who says he's 90 percent faithful to his wife isn't faithful at all. As Israel was tempted to forsake God for idols, the church is tempted to turn to the world system that hates God and wants nothing to do with God.

We must be careful not to love the world (1 John 2:15-17), be friendly with the world (James 4:4), become spotted by the world (1:27), or conform to the world (Rom. 12:2). Each believer and each local church must remain true to Jesus Christ the Bridegroom until He returns to take His bride to the heavenly wedding (2 Cor. 11:14; Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 19:6-9).

Ingratitude (Hosea 2:5b-9). Instead of thanking the true God for His blessings of food, water, and clothing, the nation thanked the false gods and used those gifts to serve idols. What ingratitude! God provided rain for the land (Deut 11:8-17), but the Israelites gave the credit to Baal, the rain god. It is God who gives us power to earn wealth (8:17-18) and to enjoy the blessings of life (1 Tim. 6:17), and we must thank Him and acknowledge His goodness. What wickedness it is to take the gifts of God and use them to worship false gods!

God had every right to abandon His people, but instead, He chose to discipline them. The nation would chase after false

YOU MARRIED A WHAT?

gods, but Jehovah would block their paths and confuse their plans so that they would stumble on the way. He would take back His gifts and leave the nation as naked as a newborn baby and as barren as a desert

It's remarkable how many times God's people are admonished in Scripture to be thankful. I've noted at least fifteen places where we're commanded to "give thanks to the Lord," and Psalm 100:4 and Colossians 3:16 both admonish us to be thankful. Both Jesus and Paul set the example by giving thanks often to the Lord for His blessings. One of the first steps toward rebellion against God is a refusal to give God thanks for His mercies (Rom. 1:21). *God will not allow us to enjoy His gifts and at the same time ignore the Giver, for this is the essence of idolatry.*

Hypocrisy (Hosea 2:10-13). The people still enjoyed celebrating the Hebrew festivals, but in their hearts, they gave the glory to Baal and the other false gods that they worshiped. Unfortunately, the same sin was being committed by their brothers and sisters in the temple in Jerusalem (Isa. 1). How easy it is to attend divine services and go through the motions of worshiping God when our hearts are really far from Him (Matt 15:7-9).

But the truth would eventually come out for God would judge His people and expose their hypocrisy. He would take away their blessings and abandon them to their sins, for one of the greatest judgments God can inflict on any people is to let them have their own way. God is holy and will not permit His people to enjoy sin very long or to live on substitutes. Eight times in the Bible we read, "Be holy, for I am holy"; and God means what He says.

3. Hosea: God is love (Hosea 2:14-3:5)

The three children have taught us about the grace of God, and Gomer has taught us about the holiness of God. Now Hosea

BE AMAZED

will teach us about the love of God.

"Hosea takes his place among the greatest lovers of all the ages," wrote Kyle M. Yates. "His love was so strong that the vilest behavior could not dull it... Gomer broke his heart but she made it possible for him to give to the world a picture of the heart of the divine Lover."⁸

God's love promised (Hosea 2:14-23). The repeated "I will" statements in these verses assure us that God has a wonderful future planned for the Jewish people. Let's note His promises.

He begins with "*I will allure*" (v. 14). God doesn't try to force His people to love Him. Instead, He "allures" (woos) them as a lover woos his beloved, seeking her hand in marriage. Certainly God spoke tenderly to His people through His Word and through the manifold blessings He bestowed on them in their land. Just as He led her through the wilderness and "married" her at Sinai, so God will meet His beloved in the wilderness in the last days and lead her into her land and her glorious kingdom.

The next promise is "*I will give*" (v. 15) as the Lord guarantees a return to their land and a restoration of their prosperity. Once again, the Lord changes the meaning of a name, this time, "the Valley of Achor." To Israel, the Valley of Achor ("trouble") was the place where Achan stole from God and brought shameful defeat to Israel's army (Josh. 7), but that memory would be erased from their minds. The valley would become "a door of hope" through which Israel would enter into a new life. The experience would produce singing, as when Israel escaped from Egypt and saw her enemies defeated before their very eyes (Ex. 14-15). "And Sharon shall be a fold of flocks, and the valley of Achor a place for the herds to lie down in, for My people that have sought Me" (Isa. 65:10). This is an Old Testament version of Romans 8:28, for only the Lord can take defeat and shame and turn it into victory and glory.

YOU MARRIED A WHAT?

God's third promise is *"I will take away"* (Hosea 2:16-17). God declares an end to idolatry among His people. They would have a new vocabulary and the "baals" would never be named again. "Ishi" means "my husband" in Hebrew and "Baali" means "my master." Both terms were used by Jewish wives when addressing their husbands; but in the future kingdom, every Jew will call God "my Husband," for the divine marriage relationship will be restored. Israel will no longer prostitute herself before idols, but will love and serve the true and living God.

God's fourth promise is *"I will betroth"* (vv. 18-20). God's wooing of Israel will result in her yielding to Him and entering into a covenant relationship that would never end. This new covenant will include a restored creation (see Gen. 9:1-10; Rom. 8:18-22) and peace among the nations. Among the "wedding gifts" will be such blessings as righteousness, justice, love, compassion, and faithfulness — everything that Israel had lacked during her years of separation from her Husband, Jehovah God.

The fifth promise is *"I will respond"* (Hosea 2:21-22, NIV), (KJV, "I will hear"). These two verses describe a tremendous cosmic conversation in which the Lord speaks to the heavens and the earth and they respond to each other and bring blessings to God's people. The heavens send the rain, the earth brings forth the produce, and the Lord sends His rich blessings. It's the picture of a restored universe where sin and death no longer reign (Rom. 5:12-21).

The final promise in this text is *"I will plant"* (Hosea 2:23, NIV). The word "Jezreel" means "God sows." The image is that of God sowing His people in their land the way a farmer sows seed. He says to them, "You are My people!" They respond, "You are my God!" (NIV) This relates back to the names of the children that God in His grace had changed.

God's love pictured (Hosea 3:1-5). This is another "action

BE AMAZED

sermon" as Hosea reclaims his estranged wife and brings her home to himself. Gomer had left Hosea and was living with a lover, another picture of the way Israel had treated the Lord. Hosea had to buy her back at a cost of fifteen pieces of silver (half the price of a slave, Ex. 21:32) and about ten bushels of barley. This was not an exorbitant price, but she had cheapened herself by her sins. We need to remember that God has purchased us at the tremendous cost of the precious blood of His only Son (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Hosea 3:3 suggests that Hosea didn't immediately enter into intimate relations with Gomer, but waited awhile to make sure she would be true to him. It's also possible that he wanted to make sure she wasn't pregnant with another man's child. But even this has a spiritual message attached to it Israel today, though purchased by their Messiah (John 11:47-52; Isa. 53:8), has not yet returned to the Lord.

Israel today is without a king because she rejected her King and therefore has no kingdom. "We will not have this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14). "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15). She has no prince because there is no reigning dynasty in Israel. All the records were destroyed when the Romans captured Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and nobody can prove to which tribe he or she belongs.

The Israelites have no sacrifice because they have no temple, altar, or priesthood. They don't have a pillar (image) or a household god (teraphim), because idolatry was purged from their culture during the Babylonian Captivity. (Like the Gentiles, they may have other kinds of idols in their hearts!) They lack an ephod (Ex. 28:1-14), because they have no high priest. The only High Priest God will acknowledge is the interceding Son of God in heaven.

But there is an "afterward"! Israel won't stay "without," for she will see her Messiah, repent of her sins, and say, "You are my God!" They will enter into that blessed relationship in

YOU MARRIED A WHAT?

which the Lord says, "You are My people!" This will occur in "the latter days" when the messianic King sits on David's throne and judges righteously (Matt. 19:28; Luke 1:32-33).

The key word is "return" (Hosea 3:5), a word that's used twenty-two times in Hosea's prophecy. When Israel repents and returns to the Lord, then the Lord will return to bless Israel (2:7-8). God has returned to His place and left Israel to herself (5:15) until she seeks Him and says, "Come, and let us return to the Lord" (6:1, NKJV).

This is Hosea's message: "O Israel, return to the Lord thy God.... Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto Him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously" (14:1-2).

That prayer is good for any sinner, Jew or Gentile. To summarize:

God is gracious, and no matter what "name" our birth has given to us, He can change it and give us a new beginning. Even the "valley of trouble" can become a "door of hope."

God is holy and He must deal with sin. The essence of idolatry is enjoying the gifts but not honoring the Giver. To live for the world is to break God's heart and commit "spiritual adultery."

God is love and promises to forgive and restore all who repent and return to Him. He promises to bless all who trust Him.