

The Doctrine of Grace in the Book of Hosea

Malcolm H. Watts

We know little about the prophet Hosea, who was evidently a young man when the Word came to him. He appears to have ministered as a prophet for some thirty years (probably 755 - 725BC) during one of the darkest periods of Israel's history.

Hosea lived to see four kings in the Northern Kingdom murdered – Zechariah, Shallum, Pekahiah and Pekah. The ruin of the kingdom was the climax to all the tragedies which overtook God's ancient people. It was, of course, a judgment: a consequence of the spiritual and moral decline in that favoured but ungrateful nation.

Hosea, whose name means “salvation”, preaches on this theme throughout his prophecy; and while he exposes national apostasy and threatens inevitable punishment, he holds out to the people gracious promises, especially to those who are penitent and believing. Also, he looks forward to the day when a spiritual kingdom would be established under the one Head, whom he describes as ‘David their king’ – which clearly refers to great David’s greater Son, our Lord Jesus Christ (Hosea 3:5; Jeremiah 30:9; Ezekiel 34:23,24; 37:22,24).

An analysis of the book is not easy to make; but perhaps the following divisions may prove helpful. In the first three chapters we are shown God’s relationship to Israel, and, of course, to all His true people in the spiritual sense. A symbolic action on the part of Hosea shows God’s wonderful love, and highlights that love in contrast with Israel’s unfaithfulness.

Then, in the section from chapter 4 to the end of the book, we have a number of threatenings and promises. In chapters 4-10, there are threatenings of judgement against the people, the priests and the princes. Chapters 11-14 mainly contain promises of mercy (despite the people’s sins) and promises that a people restored unto God would know His richest blessing.

In this article we shall be considering only the first main section,

God's relationship to His people, symbolised by Hosea's marriage to Gomer (chapters 1-3).

Hosea is commanded to take "a wife of whoredoms" or "harlotries" (Hosea 1:2), that is, an unchaste, unclean woman, by whom he was to have "children of whoredoms", later named as Jezreel, Loruhamah and Loammi (1:4,6,8). As a result of her unfaithfulness, Gomer experiences separation from Hosea (2:1-5). But in spite of all this, Hosea's love for her continues; and refusing to put her away or have her put to death, as legally he could have done (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22), he "bought her" (Hosea 3:2), presumably from her lover (see: 3:1) for "fifteen pieces of silver", half the price of a slave (Exodus 21:32), that in the future she may be chaste and pure, in an abiding union with her true husband (Hosea 3:1-3). Then, as he determined before, saying "I will hedge up thy way with thorns, and make a wall that she shall not find her paths" (2:6), he brought upon her great trouble and sorrow; and, according to his earlier words "and now will I discover her lewdness" (2:10), he exposed her for what she was and convinced her of her wickedness and folly. After this, he dealt kindly with her even as he promised: "Behold, I will allure her", that is, draw her by my love, "into the wilderness", some quiet and solitary place, "and speak comfortably to her", literally "speak to her heart." (2:14) Thus Hosea fulfilled the desire he had expressed – "I will betroth thee unto me for ever" – and he brought Gomer into the blessing of an everlasting contract, a covenant which would stand and never be broken. (2:19).

Is all this to be regarded as parable, vision, or history? Calvin seemed to think it a kind of parable. Hosea, he says, assumed a character and the whole event was a dramatic parable. But there is no real indication of this in the text, and the names given both to Gomer, and then to her children, militate against this view. The narrative reads as historical fact.

Is it all a vision? Jeremiah Burroughs, the Puritan, thought so. In his famous Puritan Commentary on Hosea (now republished), he maintains that all these events appeared to Hosea in a vision. But this suffers from the same defect as the former view, and it also fails to explain the intensity of the prophet's feelings, which come through the text and narrative.

Is it, then, history? Thomas Scott and many other commentators believe that it is. The prophet, he says, 'was called to his prophetic office in a very remarkable way.' Certainly the words, "Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms..." find parallels elsewhere in the prophetic books where they can only be understood literally (Is. 7:3; 8:1; 20:2; Jer. 13:1; 18:1,2; 19:1,2; Ezekiel 4:1,2; 5:1). We take this to be the most consistent and therefore the most acceptable view.

How should we then view and understand these first three chapters? It seems to me that we are to discover in them a revelation of the doctrine of grace. If we see in Gomer a picture of people fallen and in shame, and if we see in Hosea the God of all grace lamenting over their miserable and wretched state, desiring and effecting their spiritual recovery, then, I believe, we shall gain insight into the mind of the Holy Spirit and discover a rich vein of truth in this part of God's Word.

Total Depravity

First of all, total depravity is taught here, especially in reference to Gomer as "a wife of whoredoms." (1:2) This indicates she was a woman particularly known for her departures and for her uncleanness. It is a similar expression to that found elsewhere in the Old Testament – "a man of blood" – which denotes a man particularly distinguished by cruelty and given to crimes of violence and murder (2 Samuel 16:7). The problem in Gomer is the problem in all mankind, in that their hearts of all sinners are false and wicked through and through. It was Gomer's deceitful heart that led her to depart from her lawful husband, even as it is the deceitful hearts of sinners that incline them to leave the true and the living God to go "a whoring" after other objects of their choice. (Psalm 51:5; Jeremiah 17:9; Hebrews 3:12)

Departing from Hosea, she gave free play to her corruptions (she played the harlot). Even so, sinners, turning away from God, throw off all restraint, sinning with a 'high-hand' (Numbers 15:30; Genesis 6:5; 2 Peter 2:14). Gomer, representing sinners, was in love with her sins. (Proverbs 21:10; John 3:19, 20)

In ancient times, harlots covered and adorned themselves (Proverbs 7:10) and used fragrant perfume (7:17) to make what was essentially loathsome, acceptable. Similarly, sinners will go to great lengths to hide their vile and dreadful sins, but whatever they do, it makes their sins no less odious. (Proverbs 28:13; Matthew 23:14, 25, 27). Did not Gomer have a conscience about what she did? It does not appear so, just as sinners have no conscience over how they behave. The apostle Paul tells us that this is all part of their depravity, even their "consciences" are "seared", literally, "cauterized", so that they are deprived of sensitivity, deadened. (1 Timothy 4:2)

Hosea looking upon Gomer, surely hated what he saw in her. It was to him a great grief and a provocation. And is it not so when God looks upon men and women in their fallen state, seeing their wretchedness: is He not profoundly disturbed by what He sees in their hearts and lives?

Unconditional Election

Amazingly, Hosea “loved” Gomer, even in her heinous sin; and he went and “took” her, according to chapter 1 and verse 3. The Hebrew word for “take” in verse 2 and 3 is the word used for “choosing” a bride. (Genesis 4:19; 6:2; 11:29; 12:19) This action of his finds a parallel in God’s eternal, sovereign and free election. (Matthew 24:22, 31; Ephesians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13)

We observe that the initiative was definitely with Hosea. He went and took Gomer. And so it is in election. The initiative is not with sinners; the initiative is with God, who, before time began, chose to love a fallen people and then loved the people of His choice – “I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.” (Jeremiah 31:3)

Josiah Conder expressed this truth in the following words:

“Tis not that I did choose Thee,
For, Lord, that could not be;
This heart would still refuse Thee
Hadst Thou not chosen me.”

The prophet’s choice was of one individual, his choice was personal and particular. Divine election, of course, is not of a single person, but of countless millions, and yet it is still very special and it does concern individuals. Hence, we read of “the elect lady” (2 John 1) and God says in His Word, “Jacob have I loved” and mention is made of “Rufus, chosen in the Lord.” (Romans 9:13; 16:13) It is not an election of a class or a group, but of certain specific men and women.

For Hosea, his choice meant that Gomer would be his for all time. God’s purpose in His electing love is the same: namely, that sinners beloved might be saved and be for Him and to

with Him for evermore. So the Scriptures teach: “He hath chosen us...that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.” (Ephesians 1:4).

The unconditional aspect of election is to be drawn from the fact that Hosea saw in Gomer, and in her ways, nothing pure or lovely which might have attracted him. Why did he then love such a woman? He loved her simply because he would love her. That is exactly how it is with God. The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the Lord loved you... (Deuteronomy 7:7, 8) That is why it is called, not the election of merit, but “the election of grace.” (Romans 11:5)

Limited Atonement

Did Hosea buy all the female slaves in Israel? No, he did not. He purchased only Gomer, upon whom he had already set the love of his heart. Presented to us here is the doctrine of Limited Atonement or Particular Redemption, that God in Christ died only for the elect – He purchased, not all sinners of mankind, no, not even potentially, but His beloved people whom He had chosen. (John 10:15, 17, 18; Ephesians 5:25). As Scripture plainly says, “Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation. (Revelation 5:9) Hosea was particular in his redeeming activity, and likewise God has been particular in His.

Redemption is the act of “buying back” or “recovering by means of a stipulated payment.” It presupposes prior possession; and, just as Gomer originally belonged to Hosea but he found it necessary to pay a price for her freedom (Hosea 3:1,2), so, by virtue of election, God’s people were His from all eternity, but, when lost in sin and degradation, He was moved to buy them back with the precious blood of His Son. (Job 33:24; Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 1 Peter 1:18, 19)

Hosea paid “fifteen pieces of silver” for Gomer (Hosea 3:2), but, in the book of Psalms, we read: “the redemption of their soul is precious.” (Psalm 49:8) Truly, not one of us can give a ransom for another. God’s redemption through Christ is far above human price and can never be accomplished by such ordinary means. It is “redemption through His blood.” (Ephesians 1:7)

So we see it plainly: as Hosea was particular in his redeeming activity, so likewise God has been particular in His. He has redeemed His people from death, the grave, judgement, and hell.

Irresistible Grace

Irresistible grace, or effectual calling, is also taught in this wonderful portion of Scripture.

After securing her freedom, Hosea came and spoke to Gomer, even as he said he would: “I will allure her (that is, lovingly and tenderly persuade her)...and speak comfortably to her (using words which wonderfully comfort her heart).” (Hosea 2:14) It points to the way God, in conversion, “draws” His people and “makes them willing.” (Genesis 9:27; John 6:44. Psalm 110:3a)

Hosea’s words to Gomer are recorded for us: “Thou shalt abide for me many days; thou shalt not play the harlot, and thou shalt not be for another man: so will I also be for thee.” (Hosea 3:3) We should note the force of his words, “thou shalt ... thou shalt... thou shalt...” These were not weak and empty declarations, but prophetic words, indicating that Gomer’s recovery would certainly take place. This is true of God’s special call to elect sinners. This call, to be distinguished from the general call of the gospel, comes to them “not...in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance (1 Thessalonians 1:5; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:4). It achieves the divine intention. It proves irresistible. It is always effectual.

In the prophet’s approach to his beloved Gomer, there was a convicting force, as he convinced her of previous wrong-doing – “Thou shalt abide with me many days; thou shalt not play the harlot...” (Hosea 3:3; cf. 2:6-13); and revealed to her his willingness to pardon and receive her – “Thou shalt not be for another man: so will I also be for thee.” (3:3; cf. 2:14-18). The result was that she was humbled and consoled, and so affected in her heart that she embraced her ever-loving husband in a covenant never to be broken. It is even so in conversion or, to state it more accurately, in effectual calling. As the Shorter Catechism says, “Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.” [Question 31] There is a branch of it which we call ‘humiliation’, involving conviction of sin, but it is followed by enlightenment and persuasion and the end result is that sinners are brought into a spiritual relationship with the Son of God.

Final Perseverance

Ponder those words of chapter 3, verse 3 – “thou shalt not be for another man: so will I also be for thee.” They show that Hosea would be faithful to her, and bound to her. It is explained further, and very beautifully, in chapter 2, where the prophet is declaring what he will do –“I will betroth thee unto me for ever... I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord.” (verses 19 and 20). He promises a union in marriage which will be as permanent as it is blessed. The Lord promises no less. The marriage contract with Him is an everlasting one and although there may come afflictions, temptations and even desertions, nothing shall ever separate them from Him (Romans 8:38,39). Kept, guarded and preserved by the Lord Himself (Psalm 37:28; 66:8, 9; 97:10; 1 Timothy 1:12; 1 Peter 1:3-5), all His chosen redeemed and called people shall endure to the end. (Job 17:9; Matthew 10:22; Hebrews 12:2) Not one of them will be lost, but all of them will be saved – and saved for evermore.

“The work which His goodness began,
The arm of His strength will complete;
His promise is Yea and Amen,
And never was forfeited yet.

Things future or things that are now.
Not all things below nor above,
Can make Him His purpose forgoe,
Or sever my soul from His love”

Augustus Montague Toplady, 1740-1778