

Persistent Love

Marriage tips from the life of Hosea and Gomer

A study of Hosea 1-3

Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

By looking at the kings listed in opening verse (1:1), we can deduce that Hosea was an active prophet for at least 30 years, starting somewhere between 785 and 750 BC. By this time, the nation of Israel was divided in two kingdoms, Judah and Israel, both ignoring the Lord. The LORD's words through Hosea paint a very sad picture: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed... they have deserted the LORD to give themselves to prostitution ... A spirit of prostitution leads them astray; they are unfaithful to their God" (4:1-12). And yet, even in this condition, the LORD continued to love them deeply.

The first 3 chapters of Hosea's book contain a biography of Hosea's life, particularly focused on experiences at home. "When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, 'Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness'... So he married Gomer" (1:2, 3). Was this a test of obedience? Would the Lord really want a man of God to marry such a woman? Some Bible scholars doubt that it really happened. They feel more comfortable suggesting that the prophet's marriage was really a vision or a dream or should be understood allegorically or as a parable. Is this weakening of the text necessary? Or could it reflect the sheltered existence of such scholars? Prostitutes are real people. They also dream, cry and can love. Is it so ungodly to offer Gomer the possibility of a stable relationship? The children of prostitutes also need security and a home. Personally I see no reason why the marriage of Hosea and Gomer should not be taken literally as a description of what really happened. This painful love story provides some very helpful insights to help us in our own marriages, homes and spiritual development.

Hosea is considered a prophet to the northern kingdom, which had departed from the LORD through idolatry. But the LORD's message through Hosea projected a complete restoration: "The people of Judah and the people of Israel will be reunited, and they will appoint one leader" (1:11). The joy and pain lived between Hosea and Gomer find a clear parallel between God and the nation of Israel. At times the LORD uses Hosea's domestic difficulties to help Hosea understand how He feels about

Israel, and sometimes the opposite: Hosea learns to understand and treat his wayward wife as he sees how the LORD loves and deals with wayward Israel. On occasions it is difficult to see if the text is dealing with Gomer or Israel, with Hosea or the LORD Himself. Frequently, the terms and expressions aptly apply to both. The use of themes such as love, marriage, children, infidelity, pain and restoration add force to the LORD's call to repent and return. Divine love doesn't give up.

1. Every marriage has its problems

You need not be a professional marriage counselor to forecast difficulties in the union between Hosea and Gomer. Their backgrounds are simply so different, and yet, it was the LORD's will that they should marry. Perhaps you are experiencing some frustrations in your marriage. Maybe you are beginning to conclude that you and your partner are too different, that you married the wrong person. Stop for a moment and let us explore the first 3 chapters of Hosea. The union of Gomer and Hosea have a great deal to teach us about marriage.

- Their wedding: Try to visualize the wedding of a prostitute and a devout prophet. Who would feel comfortable in such a celebration? If a few of Gomer and Hosea's friends eventually decided to show up, they certainly would not mix. From the very start they were at the centre of social controversy. Can you imagine the comments of Hosea's family and fellow God-fearing friends? Can you picture the sneer on the face of Gomer's work colleagues? Even today, outsiders may hurt and distance married couples by expressing their unsolicited personal opinions.
- Their home: Now try to imagine their life at home. Gomer was no young beginner. When Hosea married her, he took her home with her "children of unfaithfulness." Adapting to living together must have been complex. Hosea's quiet and devotional-oriented lifestyle was rapidly invaded by noise, demands and preoccupations. My dear reader, if God had plans for this extraordinary and complex union, I am sure He also has a unique purpose for your marriage – even though you may not see it at present.
- Their offspring: After their marriage, Gomer gave birth to Hosea's first son. He was named Jezreel. In those days, and in some cultures today, a name had a purpose and a meaning. Hosea (and its variants Hoshea, Joshua, Jesus) means "saviour" or "salvation." In Hosea's case, this name fits his role very well, and reinforces the message that Hosea is a picture of the Lord. The names of Hosea's three children may have a dual significance, reflecting the state on Israel and probably also his domestic developments. **Jezreel** means "God sows." Here is a recognition of the LORD's hand in Hosea and Gomer's union. Then came a daughter, **Lo-Ruhamah**, meaning "not loved" or "not favoured." Must romance die after the first child? This name suggests that something was not running well in their marriage. Then Gomer gave birth to a son, **Lo-Ammi**, meaning "not mine." Did Hosea suspect that Gomer was up to her old devious tricks? No marriage has guaranteed happiness. Even unions directed by the Lord will have their tense moments and, if not careful, very serious problems. Are you taking good care of your partner? Loss of affection, even infidelity, is a real possibility in your marriage too!

Before we move on to explore Gomer's unfaithfulness, it is worth noticing how Hosea addresses his children. Was it their fault that they should go to school being called "not loved" and "not mine"? In the first verse of chapter 2 we notice that Hosea drops the prefix "Lo" (meaning "no" or "not") from their names, calling them **Ruhamah** (meaning love, mercy and compassion) and **Ammi** (meaning mine, my people, compatriot and kinsman). It is bad enough for children to suffer the consequences of conflicts between their parents. Finding ways to reassure them that they are loved and that they belong will help provide the stability they need while the parents sort themselves out.

2. Steps towards adultery

Failure seldom occurs instantaneously. It is the culmination of a process. Various warning signs are ignored, and then comes the moment of crisis. Most moral sin, perhaps all, starts in the mind. We feel attracted to a member of the opposite sex, which is quite natural, but when we play with "remote possibilities" of an extramarital relationship, we are already walking on the wrong slippery path. Do Christians flirt? Those knowing looks, those private emails, those hidden phone calls ... when there is a warm anticipation of the next encounter, an "adulterous relationship" has already begun. Some erroneously believe that adultery starts when you climb into bed, but the words of Jesus are very clear: "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). What happened with Gomer?

At first, every new experience has its element of excitement. Gomer now had the security of a loving husband and a home of her own. Some forget that every privilege has its corresponding responsibility. The making of a home requires work and sacrifice. What caused Gomer to abandon her home?

- Selfishness: was Gomer unwilling to pay the price? Did she not stop to consider Hosea's heart and her children's future?
- Comparisons: her past experience allowed her to compare Hosea with other men. She found it difficult to be satisfied with just one man.
- Ambition: Hosea provided well for her (2:8) but perhaps he could not give her everything she wanted.
- Adventure: perhaps she preferred the excitement of risk and uncertainty to the predictability of security.

Many men and women are frustrated by the lack of romance in their marriage. She did not learn to appreciate what the LORD had given her in her husband. One day Gomer decided to put into action her well-rehearsed plan: "She said, 'I will go after my lovers, who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink'" (2:5). She did.

How do you feel about your marriage partner? Are you one of those that still think that casual flirtation is innocent fun and sexual fantasies do not harm anybody?

Sexual sin can sedate the conscience. We are then prone to hide, deny and rationalize. “This is the way of an adulteress: She eats and wipes her mouth and says, ‘I have done nothing wrong’” (Proverbs 30:20). Once we choose to live with hidden sin, we force ourselves to live pretending. “They commit adultery and live a lie” (Jeremiah 23:14). Happy marriage partners protect their exclusiveness. This requires self-discipline and sacrifice.

3. The Lord opposes extramarital affairs

Leaving behind her a hurting husband and weeping children, Gomer returned to her promiscuous free lifestyle. Some old friends must have congratulated her for being courageous enough to walk out of such a restrictive, old-fashioned monogamous relationship. In her self-centeredness, Gomer had probably forgotten that she formed part of a home for which the LORD had special designs. How does God view those who ignore their marriage vows and set out on a more exciting adventure? In response to Gomer’s choice, the LORD said: “Their mother has been unfaithful ... Therefore I will block her path with thornbushes; I will wall her in so that she cannot find her way. She will chase after her lovers but not catch them; she will look for them but not find them” (2:5-7). We cannot expect the Lord’s hand of blessing on a path of disobedience. Within marriage, the Lord blesses sexual expression, but, outside marriage, He strongly opposes it.

In the Ten Commandments, marital unfaithfulness is condemned twice (Exodus 20:14, 17). Under the Law, infidelity was a serious crime: “the adulterer and the adulteress shall certainly be put to death” (Leviticus 20:10 DBY). It is no surprise then, to find the LORD hindering Gomer’s progress. She expected to be happy with her lovers, but her joy soon turned to frustration. She became confused – she could no longer find her way (2:6). The LORD reduced her sexual appeal – her lovers were no longer interested in her (2:7). She was viewed as unclean and impure (2:10). He opposed her celebrations (2:11) and weakened her finances (2:12). The LORD declared: “I will punish her for the days she burned incense to the Baals; she decked herself with rings and jewellery, and went after her lovers” (2:13). Was God being nasty? No! He led her to the point where she said: “I will go back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off than now” (2:7). Is your partner about to leave you? Pray for a miracle – the Holy Spirit is still active. The Lord can work in the heart of your partner and also in the circumstances that surround your partner.

We live in a Godless society. Marital unfaithfulness no longer carries social disapproval. Everyone seems to understand when after many years marriages break up in pursuit of fresh alternatives. Could this happen to you? After the Lord Jesus warned against entertaining an adulterous relationship, He added: “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away ... And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell” (Matthew 5:29-30). The message is clear: if we desire the Lord’s blessing on our marriage, we must be radical about what we allow ourselves to look at and touch. Yes! The Lord expects us to “cut off” that which offends. Gomer decided she had suffered enough. She started walking home.

4. Deciding to forgive

What should Hosea do with a wife like Gomer? Should he simply “forgive and forget” and get on with life as normal? With smaller offences this may well be possible, but with adultery? Should Hosea wait for Gomer to confess her sin and beg to be received back? Should Gomer be made to suffer and hurt a little before being offered forgiveness? Should Hosea wait until she deserved to be forgiven? The divine instructions are clear: “... as God’s chosen people ... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience ... and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:12-13). Is this too simple?

Surprisingly, the theme of forgiveness generates strong and contrary feelings among Christians. In part, this is caused by failing to differentiate between forgiveness and restoration.

- Forgiveness is a decision. It is an act of grace. We cannot earn it. We shall never deserve it. We must give and receive forgiveness freely as a gift. Once forgiven, we may still live with some consequences of our failure. After forgiveness, restitution may still be necessary.
- Restoration is a process. If you have been offended, forgiveness depends on you – your willingness to obey the Lord. Restoration, however, requires constructive cooperation between you and the offender. Complete restoration will require repentance, confession and, where possible, restitution. In a matter of days, the Lord may cause an offended wife to forgive her unfaithful husband. But the restoration of confidence, enough to resume a happy marriage relationship, may take months, even years. It depends on both parties.

Forgiveness requires obedience. If in doubt, recall those strong words uttered by our Lord Jesus: “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:14-15). Bible students try to explain this verse in various ways, but its central message is unarguably clear: the Father wants you and me to forgive, there are no exceptions. If we choose not to, something very serious and bad happens to us.

One day Hosea came home to the news that Gomer, his promiscuous wife, had returned. He may have felt like weeping, screaming or even running away. Should he interrogate her to extract all the details of her affair? Should he embarrass her before her children? Hosea did not do what his fallen nature urged him to do. She did not receive what she deserved. Hosea did something painful, something he had seen God do: He chose to forgive. Holding back his natural desire to seek revenge, Hosea works out a plan for the days ahead: “Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her” (2:14). When Hosea forgave, he was set free from bitterness – free enough to take the initiative, to extend his hand to his estranged wife and initiate reconciliation. Restoration cannot begin without forgiveness.

5. Steps towards restoration

Many suggest that one decade or perhaps two have elapsed between chapters 1 and 2, because their children were old enough for Hosea to seek their cooperation in avoiding legal action and a possible divorce: “Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband. Let her remove the adulterous look from her face and the unfaithfulness from between her breasts” (2:2). Was Hosea considering a divorce? When Jesus was asked about this difficult matter He replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning” (Matthew 19:8). God hates divorce (Malachi 2:15-16), but He well knows the stubbornness of our fallen nature; He knows that we can make such a mess of life that reconciliation can become impossible. Not as a mistake, but as recognition of our human condition, the Lord Jesus added the exception clause: “I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery” (Matthew 19:8-9). Yes, under these terms, Hosea had legal grounds to divorce Gomer.

Hosea knew his legal rights but chose to continue fighting for his wife. Because he loved, he set aside the legal system. Hosea, like the Lord Himself, chooses to love, to bear the pain, to take the initiative and pursue the capricious sinner. Children have a special place in the heart of a parent, so Hosea pleads with them to cooperate in saving their marriage – a strategy worth taking note of. Then he sets out to “allure her,” that is, to entice her by charm, to attract her. He will gently “lead her into the desert”, away from the noise of normal life, away from the curious ears and eyes of others – an invitation to reflect and reconsider. There he will “speak tenderly to her,” that is, speak heart to heart (2:14). How different from the atmosphere of legal proceedings. Did Gomer truly repent? Did she return moved by material considerations alone? (2:7). Here we must be careful. We may have our suspicions, but only the Lord sees the driving motive. Hosea responded to Gomer’s willingness to abandon her lovers and return home. The degree of remorse and repentance she showed was enough to initiate the process of reconciliation.

An important fruit of genuine repentance is to make a definite break with all the lovers involved. Sometimes the price of reconciliation will involve a change of job, local church or a move to another city. As long as some form of contact is maintained, the grieving and healing process is unlikely to succeed. The adulterous relationship must be brought to death and the mourning process must complete its natural cycle. The break must be definite and, in some way, verifiable. The offending and repentant party must be willing to submit to a degree of accountability and supervision. This may be necessary to allow shattered confidence to grow. To help the reconciliation process, Gomer would not even mention the names of her lovers (2:17).

Hosea takes the initiative again: “There I will give her back her vineyards” – there is now enough confidence to reach some material agreement, “and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope” (2:15). In this valley Achan was judged and stoned to death. Achor means “trouble.” The fear of punishment, legal action and divorce is giving way to hope. A door is opening. “There she will sing as in the days of her youth” (2:15) – now some natural expressions of joy begin to return to this relationship. But grace always has surprises. Something more happens: “In that day ... you will call me ‘my

husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master'" (2:16). Gomer was used to having masters. She had even seen Hosea as her marriage master. The grace expressed in the reconciliation process led Gomer to love Hosea again. This is the wonder of God's grace: when He is involved in the reconciliation, He can genuinely restore a relationship, and even lead it to a higher level than before. Hosea's concluding words to Gomer would make any marriage counsellor feel satisfied: "I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD" (2:19, 20). This would be a very happy ending to this story. It is not! A genuine and happy reconciliation is what God desires for every broken relationship, but reconciliation is never an insurance against future marriage difficulties.

6. Painful surprises

Chapter 3 opens with some depressing news: "The LORD said to me, 'Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress'" (3:1). Gomer had returned to her bad old ways. Worse, as a result of her shameful life, she had become another man's slave and could no longer return even if she wanted to.

Why do some find it so difficult to be free from some sin, bad habit or wrong way of thinking? Twice Hosea uses an expression which is unique to his book: "spirit of prostitution." Could this extra bondage to a particular sin be caused by the influence of demons? In the first reference, Hosea is preaching against idolatry and then adds that a spirit of prostitution "causeth *them* to err" (4:12DBY). Something external had a strong influence over them. From other Scriptures we know that there is a direct connection between idols and demons (Deuteronomy 32:16-17; 1 Corinthians 10:20; Revelation 9:20). The second time Hosea uses the expression, he is concerned with Israel's inability to return to their God. He sees two causes: "their doings," – the habit of bad behaviour, and the fact that a spirit of fornication "is in the midst of them, and they know not Jehovah" (5:4DBY). We know that demons can affect thought patterns, blinding it to reality, making it very difficult to think and act correctly (1Timothy 4:1).

Some, therefore, see in the expression "spirit of prostitution" evidence that some demons specialize in creating bondage to sexual sin. This may or may not be so. The term "spirit" could also be translated "breath" or "wind", and could refer to a general attitude, strong inclination or deep-seated desire. The uncertainty of the precise meaning of Hosea's expression should not distract us from the clear fact that repeated sin enslaves. It is also clear that in some forms of sin, the presence of demons can lead to further bondage. In counselling, the prayerful provision of sound Biblical advice will usually be sufficient to break sinful thought patterns, encourage repentance and reach freedom. And yet, some people find themselves so addicted to their sin, bad habit or wrong way of thinking that they will require deeper involvement by fellow believers to free them. This applies as much to adultery and covetousness as to legalism, pride and unwillingness to forgive.

At some point in her downward path, Gomer had lost her freedom. Hosea, moved by love to his LORD and love to his wife, set out to look for her and redeem her: "So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley"

(3:2). That is, he paid about 170 grams of silver and probably about 500 liters of barley. The price of a slave used to be 30 shekels of silver (Exodus 21:32). Was Gomer so worn out that she was worth less than the price of a normal slave? The fact that Hosea paid only half the price in silver and added some barley could also hint at Hosea's limited financial resources. Emotionally and financially redeeming his wife proved expensive! Was Gomer really worth it? The LORD asked Hosea to do more: "Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites" (3:1). In New Testament words: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). We are simply unable to love like this. When the Lord asks us to do something, He will also provide us with the strength to do it, but we must want to obey and must ask for His help.

If you are like me, you are now probably feeling sorry for Hosea. Is the LORD asking too much? How many times should Hosea forgive and pursue such a difficult wife? The apostle Peter posed the same question to Jesus: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" The Lord told him a parable about a king who forgave one of his servants. The forgiven servant chose not to forgive a fellow servant. Dear offended husband, dear offended wife, have you ever offended the Lord? Have you sat down to consider the magnitude and gravity of your own sin? Has the Lord, by grace, forgiven all of it? The king punished the servant who chose not to forgive. Then the Lord Jesus concluded: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:21-35). It is the Lord Himself who is responsible for justice, not us. The Christian life is not about fairness, it is about showing grace – expensive grace.

Hosea once again took the initiative. He again took her into the desert. He again spoke tenderly to her heart. "I told her, 'You are to live with me for many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you'" (3:3). A new process of restoration begun. Hosea again expressed his love for his wife. What a tragedy that more homes do not have someone willing to work at keeping their family together. Will you try again? True love persists!

7. Why does the Lord allow such pain?

Isn't the Christian experience supposed to be a life of joy, peace and freedom? Aren't we authorized to make the necessary choices to avoid pain, sacrifice and burdensome limitations? Perhaps I could ask: have you yielded your life to Jesus or have you bought one of those religious packages which include a right to good health, material comfort and constant happiness? Was the life of Jesus devoid of pain, sacrifice and burdensome limitations? Why then do we expect to be free of them? How do you think Jesus would deal with your complicated partner? He certainly would not do less than what He asked Hosea do to! Are you still willing to follow Jesus all the way? Perhaps you have already noticed that when we follow Jesus, it is possible to experience joy, peace and freedom while still living in undesirable circumstances.

- Character: From the life of Hosea, it is clear that the path of obedience does not always have logical explanations, it is not always understood by family and fellow

believers, it is not always comfortable and it is not the easiest option. Jesus was not exaggerating when he said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). And yet there is nothing good about pain itself. The Lord did not look for pain, neither did He enjoy it. The wonder is that our heavenly Father uses the pain and frustration we experience in this fallen world to mould our characters and improve our potential for service. Hosea and Gomer needed each other. I am sure they also had their happy times together. God worked on them through those difficult periods. They learnt to obey even when they didn’t feel like it. They grew in patience, they learnt to give and receive forgiveness, they matured, and they were forced to experience grace.

- Service: the Lord loved and deeply desired to restore the people of Israel. Who could feel what Jehovah felt towards His wayward people? Who better than Hosea? Knowing his personal circumstances, we can nearly hear the passion in Hosea’s voice as he pleaded with Israel on the LORD’s behalf: “I am the LORD your God ... You shall acknowledge no God but me. I cared for you ... When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me’... Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: ‘Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously ...’” (13:4-6, 14:1-2). The LORD needed such a prophet. Through those painful events, God worked out his plans in the life of Hosea and Gomer. Your heavenly Father also desires to work out His plans in and through you and your marriage. Don’t give up! The Lord has still not finished!

8. True love persists

It is difficult to read and reflect on the family life of Hosea and Gomer without feeling a variety of emotions. Betrayal and infidelity make me feel angry. Forgiveness and reconciliation make me feel happy. However, what touched me most as I reflected on Hosea’s drama of persistent love was an awareness that this is only an imperfect picture of what the Lord is willing to do for me. Yes, we know that Christ came to seek the lost, that He stooped down to our unworthy condition to clean us and adopt us into the family of God, that He paid a high price to redeem us, but, that is not all. The love of our Lord Jesus, as our supreme Hosea, will seek and pursue us to the very, very end.

May it never happen, but if some day my heart grows cold, if I drift away, and become unfaithful ... even if I reach such a low condition as that of Gomer, or worse, I have a Divine Lover that will take the initiative and will pursue me, and persist no matter what. He will never give up on me! This knowledge warms my heart and makes me feel very secure. He loves me with “everlasting love” and will draw me with “loving-kindness” (Jeremiah 31:3). My God is the same God who followed Jonah and gave him another chance, who persisted with David even after he committed adultery and murder, who restored embarrassed Peter to full apostolic ministry. Have you fallen? Have you messed it up? Have you been unfaithful? Are you the guilty party in your marriage? As you read this, the Lord is even now calling you again. This undeserved persistence is the hallmark of true Divine Love. Let Him love you again!

Conclusion

Unless we receive regular and positive feedback, we humans are prone to lose heart and give up! Hosea and Gomer were very different from each other. They experienced nasty moments. If the LORD had a special purpose for that complex marriage, He also has a special purpose for your marriage. Don't give up! Gomer was unstable, ungrateful and repeatedly unfaithful, yet Hosea took the initiative to search for her, forgive her, speak to her heart and initiate a process of restoration. Will you take that initiative again? True love doesn't give up!

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