

Sex, Wealth, and Unfaithfulness

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[0 : 0 0] Well, this morning we're going to turn back together to the passage that we read from the prophecy of Hosea, looking at chapters 1, 2 and 3. Together, these chapters form a very powerful passage because they're really quite shocking in what they describe and yet at the same time they are incredibly moving. Now, the book of Hosea takes us back 2,750 years to around 750 to 720 BC. This is maybe two thirds to three quarters of the way through Old Testament history and at this point for 200 years the nation of Israel has been divided into two. If you think of, please forgive this terribly inaccurate map, but if that's Greece and this is the end of the Mediterranean here coming down to Egypt, if I make that blue it'll be clearer. So there's the Mediterranean Sea there. Israel at this point occupied the area of land around here, as you know, pretty much the same as what it occupies today. But around 932 BC the land split in two and the kingdom was divided and the northern kingdom was called Israel and the southern kingdom was called Judah. That happened in 930 BC.

The split, Hosea is about 740 BC through to 720 BC and Hosea is a prophet to this northern kingdom. And he spoke at a fascinating time because when he began speaking to the nation this northern kingdom was prosperous and everything was going well. And yet within a period of about 40 years the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrian kingdom that was the dominant empire up in the north. And that means that the story of the northern kingdom was basically one of failure and Hosea watched the failure happening.

And at the heart of that failure was Israel's continual unfaithfulness to God. And it's that unfaithfulness to God that is powerfully depicted in everything that we read in these chapters in relation to Hosea and his marriage to Gomer. Now there's a huge amount in these chapters so today we are barely scratching the surface. We're just going to do three things. We're going to start by just explaining a little bit of what's going on in the chapters. And then we're going to briefly think about two of the most important statements that you'll ever hear. So first of all what's going on here. If you've never read Hosea before it was not read it for a long time it's so easy to think I don't have a clue what's going on here. So let's just take a wee minute to explain all that together. In many ways the story of Hosea is summed up by the words that are on the screen here in verse 2 of chapter 1. When the Lord spoke to Hosea the Lord said to Hosea go, take yourself a wife of Homer and have children of Homer for the land commits great Homer by forsaking the Lord.

So that word Homer could also be thought of in terms of prostitution, in terms of sexual infidelity, in terms of just a notorious way of life that's gone on over a long period of time. Hosea is told to marry a notorious woman and from day one he knows that she's going to cheat on him and be unfaithful. And the point is that this tragic marriage between Hosea and Gomer is a symbol of the tragic unfaithfulness of the nation of Israel in their relationship with God. And this is just one example of the basic problem that's been running through a huge period of Old Testament history. Ever since Moses had led the Israelites out of Egypt and into the land of Canaan that was promised to them, the people of Israel were constantly drawn towards the religious practices of the nations around them. In other words, instead of being exclusively committed to God as they were commanded to be, they looked at the gods of the nations around them and they said, we want that religion instead.

And every time they did that, they were breaking their relationship with God, they were violating the covenant relationship that they were supposed to have with him. That relationship between the Israelites and God is summed up by a key phrase that runs through the Old Testament.

[5 : 07] It's one that we saw that you see with Moses way back in Exodus, God says to the Israelites, I will take you to be my people and I will be your God. That's the foundational statement of God's covenant relationship with his people. And yet Israel again and again and again looked at other gods and they thought, we want them instead.

Now, it's very easy to think that all of this is just ancient history and you might say, well, Thomas, this is an interesting insight into the religious practices of long, long ago, if that's the kind of thing that fascinates you. But it's a million miles from how we live today. Well, I can understand why you might think like that, but before you switch off completely from what maybe looks like a boring history lesson, I want you to pick two words that you think might lie at the heart of the false religions that were luring the people away from God. The passage that we read told us that the people were drawn towards worshipping Baal. Now, Baal was the god of the Canaanites, the nation that had been in that period of land before the Israelites. Their worship was centred on the worship of Baal and there was two things that lay at the heart of that worship. Now, what do you think would be the two things that lie at the heart of their religion? Well, the answer is sex and wealth. The whole thing was focused on having sex and on getting rich and being prosperous. And that's why the sermon title for today is Sex, Wealth and Unfaithfulness.

So what was it all about? Well, Baal was a storm god and as the storm god, he was strongly associated with fertility. Now, this might be hard for us to understand in Scotland because when we think of the weather, the weather that we long for is sunshine. But for many parts of the world, the weather that you long for, the weather that you pray for, the weather that's a sign of divine favor is rain. And that was the case in Canaan. When the rains came, it brought life. It meant that the crops would grow. It meant that the animals would be watered. It meant that you had pasture for them to feed on. And so worshipping Baal involved trying to get the rains to come. And in order to get the rains to come from this god of storms and of fertility, you would go to the temple, you would have sex with a temple prostitute and in doing so, you would be trying to invoke Baal, the god of storms and of fertility, to send the rain that was going to bring life. And when the rains came, crops grew, animals thrived, the nation prospered, everybody became more wealthy. Sex and wealth, that's what lay at the heart of Baal worship. They were the keys to a happy life. And the minute we see that, we discover that this ancient history is dealing with exactly the same stuff that people are chasing today. And that tells us that these Israelites weren't religious fanatics who were looking for the latest spiritual fad to arise in ancient Near

East culture. They were people who were tempted by exactly the same stuff that tempts you.

It doesn't take long to look at British and Western society to see that sex and wealth dominates our media, our culture and our news. And you can see that it's all weaving its way through the passage that we read. Hosea marries Gomer, but she's unfaithful to him.

[9 : 36] She goes after other lovers and she thinks that they are going to provide food and clothing, wax, lap-flacks, oil, food and drink. She goes off on parties. She decks herself out in jewellery to impress them, hoping that she'll get noticed and all the time she forgets her husband. And she lives as though her relationship to him meant nothing. And this is where we see how powerfully everything is tied together in the narrative. Hosea's wife cheats on him. She runs off after sex, parties, prostitution. That symbolizes Israel's unfaithfulness to God as they are lured by a religion offering sex and prosperity. And all the time they are abandoning their covenant relationship with God.

This highlights what I'm going to describe as the second most important point in these chapters. The fact that the marital unfaithfulness of Gomer towards Hosea is an incredibly powerful picture of the spiritual unfaithfulness displayed by Israel. That's the second most important point. The most important point is going to come later on. But before we reach that point I want to spend a moment just thinking about this correspondence between marital and spiritual unfaithfulness depicted in these chapters because it serves as a powerful warning to us against both.

So three things I'll say. One, both marital and spiritual unfaithfulness both involve a rejection of exclusive commitment. Gomer refused to remain exclusively faithful to her husband and instead she left Hosea to one side, went off after multiple lovers. Israel refused to remain exclusively faithful to God. Instead they left God behind and they gave their allegiance to another. And in both instances exclusive commitment is seen as a problem.

It's a restriction, a hindrance and inconvenience. Whether it's for relationships or for religion it's so easy to think like that. There's not many people today, if you look at British culture at the moment, there's not many people today who want to be tied to one lover and there's even fewer who want to be tied to one faith commitment. Instead we want freedom, options, flexibility. But maybe the key point that we have to recognise and think about is the fact that, you know, we think exclusivity, that sounds harsh, that sounds restrictive, that sounds difficult, but if you think about it rejecting exclusivity means refusing to make someone unique. And so in terms of sex, pursuing multiple lovers disqualifies you from ever saying to a guy or a girl, you are the only one with whom I will ever be this close. And in terms of faith, rejecting exclusivity is a refusal to say to God that he's unique, but really it's a refusal to acknowledge that he's God. God can only be God if nothing else is. And so if we reject exclusivity then we're refusing to make someone unique and yet if you think about it at the heart of love is the fact that someone is unique, why do you love your wife or your husband? It's because to you they're unique. Why do you love your children, your parents, your family? It's because to you they are unique. To reject exclusivity means to reject uniqueness, which ultimately means to replace love with something else. To give our spiritual devotion to something else means that we're basically same to God, you're just one of many. Both involve a rejection of exclusive commitment. Second thing I'll say is that both promise delight and yet only deliver regret. Gomer runs off after lovers and feasts and parties and a good time and in doing so she was probably just slotting in with what most other people were doing at the time, but the feasts end, the parties die down and the lovers move on and she's left looking for them. You see the description there in verse 7, she's looking for them, can't find them and she's left full of regret realizing that it was better for her when she was with Hosea. That's a picture of Israel, racing off after other gods and for a while everything seems great. You remember when

Hosea began his prophetic ministry, the nation was prosperous and successful, but it quickly falls apart. And again, this is a crucial lesson for us all because it's reminding us that there will always be moments when marital and spiritual unfaithfulness seems like a good idea. That's what makes it tempting. Nothing's tempting if it has no attraction whatsoever. But people are lured into this kind of behavior whether in terms of relationships or in terms of religion and yet it leaves you empty and it leaves a huge pile of wreckage all around you. I cannot help at this moment but think of the high profile case in the news just now about Ryan Giggs. I'm sure many of you have seen it, Ryan Giggs, one of Britain's most successful ever footballers who's on trial just now accused of abusing his former girlfriend. I don't know if it's true or not, we just have to wait till the outcome of the trial. But what's fascinating is that as you look at it and you see what's happening now, you see that his relationship with this woman, for both of them it began as an affair.

[15 : 44] They were both married to other people. It began as an affair, it began as something that seemed so good, so tempting, so attractive, so liberating and yet it has ended up in a total mess. Spiritually, exactly the same can happen and we do have to recognize that a life without having to bother with Jesus can seem attractive. Free of commitment, free of responsibility, free of boundaries, people are sucked in by those kind of promises all the time and yet it's crazy because since when were commitment, responsibilities and boundaries a bad thing? Commitment gives you security, responsibility gives you purpose, boundaries prevent things from falling apart. Unfaithfulness, whether in relationships or in faith, it can seem like a ticket to freedom, it's only ever a pathway to regret and a good way to prove that is to ask yourself, is there ever a circumstance when you will say to yourself,

I am so glad I was unfaithful? Both promise, delight and deliver regret. And then thirdly the last comparison I want to highlight here is that both involve replacement. Now in the case of marital unfaithfulness that's obvious, Gomer replaced Hosea with other lovers, she allowed others to have her, she allowed others into a space that was only ever to be reserved for Hosea, she replaced him with an alternative. But the absolutely crucial point is that spiritual unfaithfulness is exactly the same. When we turn away from God or when we put God to one side in our lives, we never ever step onto religiously neutral territory. Because religiously neutral territory doesn't exist, when we push God out of our lives, we replace him with something else. Might be a job, a relationship, a football team, a sense of worth on social media, comfort in our homes, power and influence at work, approval from others, everyone is a worshipper, everyone has something that's the most important thing in their lives. If that's not God, then what is it? And the alarming truth is that when we replace God with something else then we're giving to that something, the things that should only belong to God.

When you think about Gomer just for a second, you think she was crazy because it just seems unbelievable that it seems mind-boggling that she would give all the intimacy that she could offer as a woman to a bunch of men who would pick her up and put her down like she was some kind of commodity. And it's even more shocking when we do that with God, when we give all the worship and devotion that we can offer to something that is nowhere near worthy of being worshipped. Isaiah was another prophet who spoke at the same time as Hosea and he captures this really powerfully. He talks about somebody who cuts down wood from the forest. He says, he cuts down cedars or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it.

Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself. He kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also, he makes a god and worships it. He makes an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat, he roasts it and is satisfied. Also, he warms himself and says, aha, I'm warm, I've seen the fire.

And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, deliver me, for you are my god. The word bail can also mean owner.

[20 : 20] And I think that sums it up really well. When we replace God with something else, we get a new owner. And for all of us, we always have to ask that question. Is that owner worthy?

Is he righteous? Is he dependable? Does that owner love you? And so these chapters are a really powerful warning against unfaithfulness. That applies in marriage. And so for those who are married, those of you who would like to be married, never ever forget that you won't always be young and beautiful and handsome and fit and fast or strong. You won't always be able to give all of those things to your husband or to your wife. But one thing that you can always, always be is faithful. But most importantly, this applies spiritually. Hosea 1-3 speaks a lot about marriage, but it's all to teach a lesson about the nation's spiritual state. And that's what makes it so relevant to us all. That whatever stage we're at in our journey of faith, whether we're barely starting out as followers of Jesus, whether we've been following him for years, whether we're not sure about the whole thing at all, whether we've maybe let things slip for a while. For all of us, we're being warned against the danger that we face every day of being lured away from God and of replacing him with something else. And all of this gives rise to two of the most important statements that you will ever hear. In these chapters, through it all,

God is saying two things, and these two things are incredibly important. They're two things that everyone must listen to. Number one, in the face of all this spiritual unfaithfulness, God looks at Israel and he says, this is not okay. This is not okay. Hosea was a prophet and prophets functioned as God's spokesman. God's spokesman in regard to the relationship that God had with his people. That's why verse two of chapter one speaks of God speaking through Hosea. And most of the time, when the prophets spoke, it was to warn the people.

And the reason they were warning the people is because they were wandering away from God. They were turning away from him and he was calling them back. The prophets were sent to call people back when things were not okay. And here in these chapters, we have described before us the worship of Baal, an obsession with sex and wealth, abandonment of God's commands, bloodshed and cruelty, spiritual unfaithfulness. And the thing that would be told is that God didn't look at all that and say, oh, it's fine. God saw all that and he sent Hosea to tell the people this is not okay. And that message is one of the most important statements that we can ever hear. But the big problem is that it's a message that none of us want to hear. Today, people want to be told that it's okay. In terms of relationships, in terms of what people watch, in terms of who people sleep with, in terms of avoiding commitment, in terms of casual intimacy, people want to be able to do whatever they like and then they want to be told it's okay. And in terms of faith, it's exactly the same. People want to believe what they like. People want to come to God on their own terms. People want to pick up God for a week or on a Sunday and then forget about him for the rest of the week. And they want to be told it's okay. And there's something incredibly therapeutic about being told it's okay. And one of the most important statements you will ever hear is that it is actually not okay. It's not okay. Nothing is okay unless God says it's okay. In other words, we don't set the terms for a relationship with God. We don't tell

God what he can and cannot expect from us. We do not tell him what's right or wrong for the humanity that he created. That's what Israel tried to do and it led them to destruction. They destroyed them because they made out that it was okay. But it wasn't. And the key thing is that pretending that it's okay will prevent it from ever actually being okay.

[25 : 07] And every single one of us, we've got to realise that when we pick and choose when and where we want God in our lives, when we give God a little nautnus Sunday and then live the rest of our week as though he doesn't exist, when we replace him with false gods of sex and wealth or whatever else people are chasing, God is saying to us loud and clear, this is not okay. And why does he do that? Is it because he's a cranky tyrant who loves finding fault with you? No. The whole reason he tells us it's not okay is because of how much he cares about you. And that takes us to the second statement that is one of the most, in fact I think this is probably the most important thing you'll ever hear. And this is the last thing I'm going to say. So in the face of all this spiritual unfaithfulness from Israel,

God is saying this is not okay. That's the first thing he's saying. Second thing he's saying is even more important. In the face of all this spiritual unfaithfulness from Israel, God is saying I am not walking away. I am not walking away. And that's the incredible message that's been proclaimed through Hosea's marriage. The unfaithful bride is only part of the story. The mess of chapter one and two that we read about is not the main point.

Remember I said to you that's the second most important point because the most important point is something else. God is not saying to Hosea, marry an unfaithful wife and watch her cheat on you because I want the breakdown of your marriage to show that I'm justified in saying that I'm finished with my people. That's not what God is doing. God is saying, marry an unfaithful wife. Watch her cheat on you because I want the restoration of your broken marriage to show how much I love my people and to show them that I am never ever walking away from them. And that's what's presented to us so powerfully in this passage, chapter three, one and two, highlights it. The Lord says go back, take her back, buy her back, bring her back into your home. And these two statements, it's not okay, I'm not walking away. They are the two most important things you'll ever hear and they must be held together because they are telling you what the gospel is all about. God looks at our sin and he says that's not okay but at the very same time he's saying to you I'm not walking away. And what I want you to see is that both of these statements tell you how much God loves you. The warning is not a message of fury, it's a message of love, warning you because he cares about you. And the call to come back, the call that says I'm not walking away is because of how much he loves you. And this is where Hosea gives us such a magnificent glimpse of the gospel. Hosea takes an unfaithful woman, marries her but he doesn't walk away, instead he pays a price to get her back. Jesus does exactly the same for us. And the only difference is that for Jesus the price is far higher. Hosea buys his wife back with 15 shekels of silver and a homer and a lech of barley. Jesus buys you back by giving his life for you on the cross. And that is why no matter how you feel today, no matter how inadequate you might feel before God, no matter how much you might feel as though you've mucked up in your life, no matter how guilty you might feel, no matter how much you feel that your chance has gone. Jesus is standing before you today and he's saying I'm not walking away. Jesus is saying to you I'm not walking away. He's standing with open arms, ready to heal, ready to restore, ready to forgive, ready to forget everything that's happened up to this point and all he asks of you is to trust him. And these two statements tell us what the gospel is all about. It's not okay that we're sinners but Jesus has not abandoned us, he's not walked away and if you put your trust in him he will never ever let you go. And I want you to hear that, I want you to know that and I want you to understand that. And I want to close with the words of 2.14 where God says therefore behold I will allure her and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. Now I think that is one of the most incredible phrases that you have in the whole Bible. It's reminding you that Jesus has not brought you here to shout at you or to nail you for every stupid

thing that you've done or to expose your guilt and shame. He's brought you here to speak tenderly to you. To tell you as you start another new week, to tell you that he loves you, that he's here for you, that he is the most faithful bridegroom ever, that he loves you with an everlasting love and he's never ever walking away. Please listen to it. Amen.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we confess that we are so often lured away from you by sex and wealth and prosperity and status and everything else that the culture around us offers us.

[31 : 57] We thank you for telling us that that's not okay and we thank you so much that you've not walked away. Help us all to hear your voice speaking to us today. Amen.