

# Lesson 1

## Introduction to Hosea

### Hosea is a strange book

On one hand, Hosea is not strange at all. It contains some of the best known verses in the Bible.

**Hosea 1:10** – And in the place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” it shall be said to them, “Children of the living God.”

**Hosea 4:6** – My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me.

**Hosea 8:7** – For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.

**Hosea 11:1** – And out of Egypt I called my son.

But, despite the comfort of those well-known verses, anyone who undertakes a study of the book of Hosea is immediately confronted with one of the strangest commands found anywhere in the word of God: “Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom!”

And the strangeness doesn't end there! Hosea's wife, Gomer, has three children (perhaps all with Hosea, and perhaps not), and God commands Hosea to give them strange names: first, a son he names **Jezreel** (which is somehow related with King Jehu, who died a half century before Hosea started

preaching); second, a daughter that he names Not Loved; and finally another son that he names Not Mine.

And that's all just within the first nine verses of the book!

And what about the remaining 188 verses in the book? Do they clear everything up? Well, here is how one commentary describes the remainder of the book:

The book swiftly plunges into a maze of warnings, microsermons, poems, and laments, and through them all it swiftly and evasively alludes to biblical texts and incidents, mixes metaphors, and changes topics, seemingly at random.

In short, we have our work cut out for us! I hope we are all ready for a challenge!

And if we think the book of Hosea is strange, just imagine for a moment how strange it was to Hosea himself!

Other prophets were given strange commandments by God. Ezekiel was told to lie on his left side for 390 days and eat bread baked over human dung in Ezekiel 4. Isaiah was commanded to walk naked and barefoot for three years in Isaiah 20. But I suspect that on some days (and perhaps on many days), Hosea would have been happy to swap commands with Ezekiel or Isaiah!

As we study the book of Hosea, we need to see these events and hear these proclamations as Hosea himself and his listeners saw them and heard them. In fact, as we will see, that was

why the book of Hosea was given to us in the first place.

God wanted his people to see themselves through Hosea's eyes. God wanted them to see what was happening to Hosea in his relationship with his new wife and to understand something about their own relationship with God.

Later in the introduction we will consider perhaps the hardest question about Hosea – what is the structure of this book? Many suggest there is no structure, but I think we will answer that question differently. I think we will see that this book has an elaborate structure that is based on the people we meet in the first nine verses. But more on that later.

## **Hosea is a difficult book**

Apart from the difficulty of discerning a structure to the book, Hosea is difficult for many other reasons as well. Here is how one commentator describes the difficulty of this book:

Hosea contains possibly the most difficult Hebrew in the Bible (although many scholars would give that distinction to Job). Hosea is frequently elliptical, at times apparently ungrammatical, and often contains passing allusions to historical incidents and other texts of the Bible that are almost bewildering. Its logic is sometimes paradoxical. It also contains a fairly high number of obscure or rare words, the meanings of which scholars must struggle to recover.

And sometimes it appears that the book of Hosea is **intentionally** difficult and obscure! And, yes, that is what I mean – not just obscure, but deliberately obscure!

And when that happens, we have two problems. First, we need to solve the problem creating the obscurity if we can, but second, we then need to explain why the book intentionally obscured something! Let's look at an example.

**Hosea 11:8** – How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like **Admah**? How can I treat you like **Zeboiim**? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

Who or what are Admah and Zeboiim? We can answer that question with a quick search of the Bible:

**Genesis 10:19** – And the territory of the Canaanites extended from Sidon in the direction of Gerar as far as Gaza, and in the direction of Sodom, Gomorrah, **Admah**, and **Zeboiim**, as far as Lasha.

**Deuteronomy 29:23** – The whole land burned out with brimstone and salt, nothing sown and nothing growing, where no plant can sprout, an overthrow like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, **Admah**, and **Zeboiim**, which the LORD overthrew in his anger and wrath.

Admah and Zeboiim were cities near Sodom and Gomorrah that were apparently destroyed at the same time as Sodom and Gomorrah, although neither Admah nor Zeboiim is mentioned explicitly in Genesis 19.

**Genesis 19:25** – And he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.

So, now back to Hosea 11:8. If the verse had said, "How can I make you like Sodom? How can I treat you like Gomorrah?," we would have had no trouble at all understanding the point. But the verse doesn't say that. Instead, it asks, "How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?"

It is very hard to see verse 8 as anything but deliberately obscure. Should that worry us? Not at all. Jesus was also sometimes deliberately obscure.

**Mark 4:10-12** – And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that 'they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.'"

**John 6:53** – Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.

The occasional deliberate obscurity should not worry us, but we do need to figure out the reason for it – and there is always a reason for it!

And the most common reason? I think the most common reason for a deliberate obscurity is that it makes the listener think. But, whatever the reason, the obscurities remain, and we have to figure them out – and Hosea is full of them! In

fact, one thing we will discover very quickly about the book of Hosea is that it places very high demands on the reader!

Think back over your own educational background. Did you ever have a teacher or a textbook that held your hand each step of the way, that really took its time, and that went over topics again and again? And did you ever have a teacher or a textbook that took the opposite approach – that did not hold your hand, that threw you in the deep end with a command to swim, that never said the same thing twice, that went along at a gallop and expected you to keep up? In which course did you learn the most? Hosea is firmly in the second category.

Hosea is very light on explanation! Jerome described the situation well: “Hosea is concise, and speaks in detached sentences.” And another: “Conciseness, combined with a fulness of meaning which needs much expansion to be intelligible, occasions perplexity and confusion.”

And there are other reasons why Hosea is difficult. One source of difficulty in Hosea is the imagery that it uses. We will see many very striking images in this book.

- In 4:16, Israel is like a stubborn calf.
- In 6:4, the people’s love is like the morning dew that vanishes quickly.
- In 7:8, Ephraim is a half-baked cake.

- In 7:11, Ephraim is like a silly and senseless bird that flutters between Assyria and Egypt.
- In 9:16, Ephraim is a diseased and dried-up plant that bears no fruit.
- In 13:13, Ephraim is a baby too unwise to be born.

Sometimes the imagery in Hosea turns on a Hebrew wordplay. Hosea, it seems, was very fond of puns!

- In 12:11, the altars in Gilgal are as “heaps of stones (gallim).”
- In 10:5, Beth-el, “the house of God” has become Beth-aven, “the house of vanity.”

Those puns are impossible to appreciate in our English translations.

At other times Hosea turns the images in unexpected directions.

For example, in 7:4, the people are like a heated oven because of their adultery, but a few verses later in 7:8 the people are like an unturned cake in that oven.

We will also see many different portraits of God in this book.

- God is like a husband in 2:2.
- God is like a father in 11:1.
- God is like a physician in 14:4.
- God is like a fowler in 7:12.
- God is like a lion and like a leopard in 13:7.

- God is like a bear in 13:8.
- God is like dew in 14:5.
- God is like a green tree in 14:8.
- God is like a moth and like dry rot in 5:12.

We will also see statements in this book that on the surface might seem self-contradictory.

For example, in 13:14, God promises to ransom and redeem the people, but a few verses later he says, “their little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open.”

How do we handle such verses? The answer is that we do with them what we do with the paradoxes in the New Testament. We find the truth behind the apparent paradox.

For example, in 2 Corinthians 12:10, Paul writes, “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” That sounds like a paradox, until we realize that Paul is weak in one sense while strong in another sense.

Likewise with Jesus’ statement in Matthew 20:16 – “So the last will be first, and the first last.” Again, that sounds like a paradox until we realize that it is those who are last in one sense who will be first in another sense. There are no contradictions in the Bible.

Another potential source of difficulty in Hosea are the places that he mentions. Like a geography teacher, Hosea takes his listeners from place to place reminding them of their history.



- (9:10) But they came to Baal-peor and consecrated themselves to the thing of shame, and became detestable like the thing they loved.
- (9:15) Every evil of theirs is in Gilgal; there I began to hate them.
- (10:9) From the days of Gibeah, you have sinned, O Israel; there they have continued. Shall not the war against the unjust overtake them in Gibeah?

Our task is to keep up as Hosea moves from place to place!

Another feature of Hosea that can present some difficulties for us is how closely the book is tied back into the Law of Moses. Over and over again, Hosea points us back to the books of Moses.

- Hosea 1:10 refers to the promise to Abraham in Genesis 22
- Hosea 2:18 refers to the creation in Genesis 1
- Hosea 6:7 refers to the sin of Adam in Genesis 3
- Hosea 11:8 refers to the destruction of the cities in Genesis 19
- Hosea 12:3 refers to events in the life of Jacob

We could add to that list numerous references to the Exodus, along with allusions to the curses in Deuteronomy 28.

Most significantly, the foundation of the book of Hosea is based on the frequent depiction of

apostasy as whoredom found elsewhere in the Old Testament.

**Exodus 34:13-15** – You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods.

**Leviticus 17:7** – So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore. This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations.

**Deuteronomy 31:16** – And the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers. Then this people will rise and whore after the foreign gods among them in the land that they are entering, and they will forsake me and break my covenant that I have made with them.

Why do all of those Old Testament references create a difficulty for us? Because Hosea doesn't exactly hold our hand here! Instead, Hosea knows the Old Testament, and Hosea expects us to know it as well, and to follow his arguments when he alludes back to these other events. Sometimes we will need to work very hard to keep up with Hosea and his rapid-fire arguments!

Hosea is a difficult book that makes great demands on us, and we will need to proceed very carefully.

## **Hosea is a heart-breaking book**

We cannot read this prophecy without tears in our eyes and an ache in our hearts.

Few books of the Bible are more emotional than the book of Hosea.

In the message of Hosea we see the passion of God. We see the jealousy of God, the commitment of God, the heartbreak of God, the enthusiasm of God, the love of God. People often talk about what they feel about God. Hosea tells us what God feels about us.

Sometimes we are tempted to view God as a giant computer that operates only with a cold emotionless logic like Mister Spock. We know that view of God is false, and one of the best pieces of evidence against that false view (especially in the Old Testament) is the book of Hosea.

This book is heart-breaking, both from the perspective of Hosea and, more importantly, from the perspective of God.

How does God feel about his people? How does God feel when his people reject him in favor of another? How does God feel when he pleads with his people to return? And how does God feel when he hears the response of his people to those pleas? How does God feel when his people turn their back on him? Does God ever feel hurt? Hosea answers all of those questions.

The book of Hosea reveals God's heart to us. This book is proof of the old adage that it is the people you love the most who can hurt you most.

If I ever wonder whether the eternal architect of the universe really knows me and personally loves me, then I need to read the book of Hosea.

From a New Testament perspective, we know that God's love is revealed perfectly in Christ. God sent Jesus because God loved us (John 3:16). The inexpressible gift of 2 Corinthians 9:15 is a result of inexpressible love. We know that God loves us, but we often struggle to understand it. How could God love us so much that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8)?

Where can we turn for help in understanding God's love? One place is this book of Hosea. Hosea helps us understand why the Bible doesn't end with the curse in Malachi. Hosea helps us understand Matthew 1. Hosea helps us understand what it means for the church to be the bride of Christ.

But God's emotions are not the only emotions we see in Hosea. We also see Hosea's emotions, and, as we will see, God is revealing himself to us through what happens to Hosea in this book. We are intended to learn something about God from what we will learn about Hosea the prophet.

And one way to do that will be to put ourselves in Hosea's shoes.

How does Hosea feel when, as a young man, God commands him to marry a prostitute? How does

Hosea feel when his children are born, and when he is forced to wonder whether they are his? And how does Hosea feel when he is commanded to give them names that he knows will cause others to wonder about whether his children are really his? How did Hosea feel when he hears the whispers of those around him each time he walks past?

One of the commentaries on Hosea I saw this past week was entitled "The Cross of Hosea," and that is certainly a thought-provoking title. We know that we are each told by Jesus to take up our cross daily and follow him (Luke 9:23). If we want an example of what that means we can find one here in the Old Testament with Hosea.

As we study this book of Hosea, let's keep in mind something very important about Hosea the person – he was a real person, with real emotions, with real faith, and with, no doubt, many questions. Let's never lose sight of Hosea the man and of his strange little family – Hosea, Gomer, Jezreel, Not Loved, and Not Mine. They were real people, and let's not forget that.

And there is even more important reason not to lose sight of Hosea's strange little family as we study this book, and it is this: in a sense, we are that strange little family! The church is God's "peculiar people"! (1 Peter 2:9) We are not the family that many in the world would expect God to have.

**1 Corinthians 1:26–29** – For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God

chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

We in the family of God have some things in common with those in the family of Hosea, so let's be on the lookout for that as we study this book.

## **Hosea is a wonderful book**

Despite its odd beginning, the great themes of the Bible are all on full display in Hosea. Two key themes of this book are the love of God and the grace of God – and those are also key themes of the entire Bible.

Although the book is heart-breaking, Hosea does not present that sorrowful condition as a permanent condition. Instead, another of the key themes in Hosea is reconciliation.

We see this theme in the opening verse of the book. The name “Hosea” means deliverance or salvation.

Yes, the relationship had been shattered, but the relationship would be restored – both between God and his wayward people and between Hosea and his wayward wife.

We will see this beautiful theme of reconciliation all throughout this book.

- (1:10) And in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God."
- (2:23) And I will have mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not My People, 'You are my people'; and he shall say, 'You are my God.'"
- (3:5) Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days.
- (11:8–9) My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.
- (14:4–7) I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon; his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow; they shall flourish like the grain; they shall blossom like the vine; their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

Over and over again, the New Testament turns to Hosea to show us things about Christ and about his church.

When Paul in Romans 9:25–26 wants to show us that the Jews (like the Gentiles) stand in need of the mercy of God, he quotes Hosea.

**Hosea 1:10** – Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” it shall be said to them, “Children of the living God.”

Peter alludes to the same verse when he gives his great description of the church in 1 Peter 2.

**1 Peter 2:9-10** – But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

When Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15:4, says that Jesus “was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,” he almost certainly had a verse from Hosea in mind.

**Hosea 6:2** – After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.

Later, in that same chapter of 1 Corinthians 15, Paul in verse 56 again refers to Hosea.

**Hosea 13:14** – I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol; I shall redeem them from Death. O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.

Jesus quotes a verse in that same chapter of Hosea in Matthew 9:13.



**Hosea 6:6** – For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Matthew 2:15 tells us that Jesus' flight to Egypt as a child was prophesied by Hosea.

**Hosea 11:1** – When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

So, we know with certainty that in our study of Hosea we will see Jesus, we will see the church, and we will see the gospel.