

Lesson 14

Hosea 3:1

1 And the LORD said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins."

Verse 1 drags Hosea's readers back to their present sinful reality after the brief tantalizing look at their future that we saw at the end of chapter 2.

If we are looking for a key word in verse 1, we don't have to look very hard. The word "love" appears four times in that one verse!

But, as we also use the word "love" today, the word "love" is used in various ways here in verse 1. It is used for the love of God for Israel, the love Hosea was to have for this unnamed woman, the love she has received from her lover, and the love of Israel for raisin cakes.

There is a lot going on in this first verse! Let's move back a bit and look at the entire third chapter before we dive into the first verse.

Chapter 3 is a very short chapter, and it has a simple structure. God issues a command to Hosea in verse 1, Hosea carries out that command in

verses 2–3, and God explains the reason for the command in verses 4–5.

This structure is the same structure we saw in chapters 1 and 2. God commanded Hosea to marry Gomer; Hosea did that, with Gomer having three children; and God then explained the significance of those events to what was going on in Israel.

A big difference between the events in chapters 1–2 and chapter 3 is that here in chapter 3 no children are born or even mentioned. Also, the woman in chapter 3 is not named, unlike with Gomer in chapter 1.

Another difference is that chapter 1 described the events in the third person (“the LORD said to Hosea” in Hosea 1:2) while here the events are described in the first person (“And the LORD said to me” in Hosea 3:1).

Some commentaries explain this difference by arguing that chapter 3 is a later addition created by a different author, but I think that conclusion is baseless.

If we have trouble understanding something about the text of Hosea, then that just means we need to do some more work and dig a little deeper. It is both misguided and lazy to instead conclude that there must be something wrong with the text. **Maybe the problem is with me if I can't understand the text!** But, of course, no liberal commentator would ever reach that conclusion!

When we dig a little deeper, what we find is that this back and forth between the first person and

the third person does not end in chapter 3. Instead, we see the same back and forth later in the book.

Hosea 8:2 – To me they cry, “My God, we – Israel – know you.”

Hosea 9:17 – My God will reject them because they have not listened to him; they shall be wanderers among the nations.

Let’s not reach our final conclusion on this question yet, but I think what we may find is that this back and forth between first and third person is part of the structure of this book of Hosea.

This back and forth in the point of view is part of the message that God wants us to understand. I think we may find that it is based on the events that Hosea has experienced with Gomer that mirror what God has experienced with Israel.

Hosea has, in effect, through his own experiences earned the right to speak for God. And so perhaps we see that fact even in the grammar that is used – sometimes God speaks for himself, and sometimes Hosea speaks for God.

So, what is going on in chapter 3? Even though it is a short chapter, it is a hotly debated chapter in Hosea circles!

The commentaries differ greatly in their interpretation of Chapter 3. There are two primary questions:

(1) Is this woman in verse 1 Gomer or another woman?

(2) If the woman is Gomer, then is this event in verse 1 just a retelling of the event we already saw in chapter 1, or is this a different event?

By the way, if you ever want to show someone why the NIV is a very poor translation, verse 1 is a good place to go. Here is how the NIV translates the verse.

Hosea 3:1 – The LORD said to me, “Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress.”

But if that is really what the verse says, then why are we asking whether the woman in verse 1 is Gomer? Didn't the NIV just tell us the woman in Gomer?

Yes, that is what the NIV just told us, but no, that is not what the Bible just told us!

When the NIV inserts the word “wife” into verse 1, the NIV is acting like a poor commentary rather than like a poor translation! Here are some actual translations of verse 1.

ESV – And the LORD said to me, “Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress.”

KJV – Then said the LORD unto me, Go yet, love a woman beloved of her friend, yet an adulteress.

ASV – And Jehovah said unto me, Go again, love a woman beloved of her friend, and an adulteress.

Is that woman Gomer or not? The text of verse 1 is ambiguous on that point, and a good translation of Hebrew into English should carry that ambiguity in the Hebrew over into the same ambiguity in the English. The NIV does not do that, which is why the NIV is both a poor translation and a dangerous translation.

If someone reads the original Hebrew text and has some questions about what he just read, then that person reading an English translation should have exactly the same set of questions. That is the hallmark of a good translation.

And, yes, no translation is perfect, but some are much better than others. And while no translation is perfect **in its entirety**, it is possible to perfectly translate a verse in the Bible.

How do I know that? Because most of the Old Testament quotes in the New Testament are taken from the Septuagint – a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. And so the Holy Spirit has confirmed for us that those translations are perfect translations.

But, with all of that said, it is likely that the NIV chose correctly when it removed the ambiguity in the Hebrew by inserting the more specific English word “wife” in place of the less specific Hebrew word for “woman.” But we need to keep in mind that the NIV is acting as a commentary in making that choice and not as the translation it purports to be.

Why is the woman in verse 1 not named? The most likely reason she is not named is because we

already know who she is – she is Gomer. If, instead, she is someone else, then we would need to explain why she is not named even though Gomer was named.

Even more persuasive is the fact that she is called an “adulteress” in verse 1. That means she has a husband, but she is faithless to that husband.

If this woman was the husband of someone other than Hosea, then why would God command Hosea to go and love her? Commanding Hosea to show his love to the adulterous wife of another man would come very close to commanding that Hosea commit adultery himself! The command in verse 1 makes sense only if the woman in adultery is Hosea’s own wife.

And, if this woman is Gomer, then we should note that, like the beginning of chapter 1, the focus at the beginning of chapter 3 is on Gomer the person rather than on Israel the people (which is the focus in chapter 2). That is a similarity between chapters 1 and 3.

But we should still pause a moment to consider why verse 1 does not name Gomer? Why the ambiguity? Why does verse 1 refer to Gomer in anonymous terms?

I think what we are seeing with Gomer is the same thing we have already seen with Israel. Gomer has lost her identity as the wife of Hosea just as Israel has lost its identity as the people of

God. Remember Hosea 2:2 – “for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband.”

So, here are our two questions again.

(1) Is this woman in verse 1 Gomer or another woman?

(2) If the woman is Gomer, then is this event in verse 1 just a retelling of the event in chapter 1, or is it a different event?

And I think we have now answered the first question – this woman is Gomer. But what about the second question?

There is a word in verse 1 that helps us here – the word “again.”

As for what is happening *again*, grammatically the word “again” can modify the verb that precedes it (*go again*) or the verb that follows it (*love again*). If it is the latter, then we have confirmation that this woman is Gomer – someone that Hosea can love *again*.

But either way, that word “again” in verse 1 puts us on a timeline and places verse 1 as a later event in a sequence of events. It tells us that something is happening again – either God is telling Hosea to go for a second time, or God is telling Hosea to love Gomer for a second time.

And I think the commands themselves tell us that this command in chapter 3 is a different and later command than the one we saw in chapter 1.

Hosea 1:2 – When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, “Go, **take to yourself a wife** of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD.”

Hosea 3:1 – And the LORD said to me, “Go again, **love a woman** who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.”

In Chapter 1, Hosea was commanded to marry an immoral woman and to have children. Here in Chapter 3 we see neither of those commands. Instead, Hosea is commanded to love an adulteress woman. What that tells us is that the woman in Chapter 3 is already married – an unmarried woman can be promiscuous, but only a married woman can be an adulteress. We are seeing two different commands.

So where are we on our second question? I think we can conclude that the events in chapter 3 are subsequent to the events in chapter 1 given that no marriage had yet occurred when the command in chapter 1 was given.

But now we have another question – how can Hosea be commanded to love this woman? Can God command that Hosea have a certain emotion?

I think the next phrase answers that question: “even as the LORD loves the children of Israel.” This commanded love by Hosea is to mirror the love that God has for Israel – and that love had been shown over and over by what God had done for

Israel rather than by how God may have felt about Israel.

Hosea was to take this woman back and restore their prior relationship. What we see in that command to love is redemption. What we see in that command to love is the same sort of love that we see in John 3:16.

Now let's see if we can look between the lines a bit and figure out what likely happened here. Hosea married Gomer in chapter 1, but Gomer appears to have left Hosea as of the beginning of chapter 3. What happened?

One thing we know is that Gomer has become an adulteress, which means that she has been unfaithful to Hosea.

The penalty for adultery was death, but that judgment was not inevitable. Her husband could show her mercy as Hosea is commanded to do here. Perhaps, as some commentaries suggest, that command from God is a foretaste of the interplay between grace and the law that we see in the gospel.

As for the details of what happened, we don't know because we aren't told. Some surmise that this event may have occurred prior to the birth of Gomer's third child, which could explain why he was named "Not Mine." But we don't know for sure when it happened.

Why does the end of verse 1 mention raisin cakes? Why is God concerned that the people are enjoying raisin cakes?

I think we can safely conclude that God's grief over Israel has nothing to do with their choice of dessert. So what is going on here?

The eating of raisin cakes was not in and of itself evil, even when eaten as part of a religious ceremony.

2 Samuel 6:18-19 – And when David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the peace offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts and distributed among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins to each one. Then all the people departed, each to his house.

Raisins were, for the Israelites, a high energy food that was consumed by those who were faint with hunger.

1 Samuel 30:11-12 – They found an Egyptian in the open country and brought him to David. And they gave him bread and he ate. They gave him water to drink, and they gave him a piece of a cake of figs and two clusters of raisins. And when he had eaten, his spirit revived, for he had not eaten bread or drunk water for three days and three nights.

It is possible that raisin cakes were thought to have an aphrodisiac quality.

Song of Solomon 2:5 – Sustain me with raisins; refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love.

From these examples, it is most likely that these raisin cakes were used as part of the pagan worship of the "other gods" mentioned in verse 1. These cakes may have been part of ecstatic or wild celebrations, and they may have played a

role in the promiscuity of the Baal fertility cult.

We have another issue to deal with in verse 1, and that issue involves a command in the old law.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 – When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

Here is how one commentary describes the issue:

Although probably not technically in violation of this law, because it does not seem that Gomer had remarried in the interim, Hosea's action of taking Gomer back pushes the envelope. If it was wrong for a man to take back a woman after she had been married to another man, what was Hosea doing taking Gomer back after she had been with countless men?

What Hosea was doing was obeying the command of God. God commanded that Hosea take Gomer back despite what she had done. Yes, Gomer had been with another man and likely other men. Yes, she had been defiled. But Hosea took her back anyway.

Was that a **violation** of the law? Was that an **abolition** of the law? No, that was **fulfillment** of the law!

Matthew 5:17 – “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

The action commanded of Hosea in verse 1 prefigures the action of God in sending Jesus to this sin-soaked world so that God could have “a people for his own possession” (1 Peter 2:9). What we see in Hosea 3:1 is the great reconciliation of the gospel.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19 – All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

Gomer’s reconciliation is our reconciliation.

When we started looking at verse 1 we noted that the word “love” is found four times in that one verse, and perhaps that means “love” is the key word in the verse. But perhaps there is another candidate for that honor – a word that occurs only once in verse 1 – the word “again.” Here is how one commentary describes that word “again” in verse 1:

The word “again” leaps off the page from verse 1. “Go again, love.” The “againness” of God’s repeated, indefatigable love for Israel is to be Hosea’s purpose and passion.

By every human standard, God should have quit loving Israel long ago. But that is not at all what we see here.

These verses demonstrate the unflagging pursuit of God's love. When, by every standard, he should have ceased to love Israel, still God loves relentlessly, pursuing through the years those in whom the flames of love have long since died.

It reminds me of a famous poem by the English poet, Francis Thompson (1859–1907). As a young man, he became addicted to drugs, and, as a result, he found himself living on the streets of London while in his twenties. At the age of 31, while struggling to break free of his addictions, Thompson wrote the poem, "The Hound of Heaven" about God's relentless pursuit of him.

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat – and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet –
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'

And on it goes. That description of God as the hound of heaven reminds us of the description of God that we find in Hosea. What we see in these

verses is God's great love and relentless pursuit of a people who have turned their back on God and who have instead gone away to love another. And yet God persists in his pursuit; he doesn't give up on them.

In a verse that mentions "love" four times, the greatest description of God's love may be shown by another word in verse 1 – the word "again."

Hosea 3:2

2 So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley.

As we said with verse 1, some argue that this woman is not Gomer, and they cite verse 2 as evidence for that view. They say that Hosea divorced Gomer and married someone else here in chapter 3, with the price in verse 2 being the bride-price of Hosea's new wife.

I don't think that is what is going on here. For the reasons we just looked at, I think the woman here is Gomer. And I also don't see any evidence that Hosea divorced Gomer after she left him. In fact, after having looked at the law in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, I think the command that we see here in verse 1 strongly suggests that Hosea and Gomer were not divorced.

But if that is true, then what is this payment that we find in verse 2? Why is Gomer is not able to return to Hosea until this payment is made? There are a few possibilities.

First, Gomer may have become somebody's slave or concubine, perhaps as a result of her poverty after having left Hosea. Either of those situations could have meant that a payment would be required to gain Gomer's freedom.

A second possibility is that Gomer had either gone to or gone back to a temple of Baal to be a temple prostitute, which may have required a "donation" to Baal to regain her freedom.

Either way, we can say that Gomer had found herself in a rock-bottom situation. Back in Hosea 2:7 we saw that Gomer had something in common with the prodigal son, and I think we see that again here in Hosea 3:2.

It seems that Gomer has found herself sent into the fields to feed pigs as the prodigal son did in Luke 15:15. But will Gomer come to herself as the prodigal did in Luke 15:17? If so, will she find God running to meet her as we see in Luke 15:20? I think we know the answer to that question!

How much does Hosea pay? He pays 15 shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley. That is not a large amount of silver, and barley was the cheapest of grains. (A lethech is otherwise not mentioned in the Old Testament, but in post-biblical times it was smaller than a homer.)

Why this particular price? Some compare this price to the price of a slave.

Exodus 21:32 – If the ox gores a slave, male or female, the owner shall give to their master

thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned.

Others compare this price to the price of a bride.

Deuteronomy 22:28–29 – If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are found, then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young woman **fifty shekels** of silver, and she shall be his wife, because he has violated her. He may not divorce her all his days.

Still others compare this price to the price paid to Judas.

Matthew 26:15 – And said, “What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?” And they paid him **thirty pieces** of silver.

Zechariah 11:12 – Then I said to them, “If it seems good to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them.” And they weighed out as my wages **thirty pieces** of silver.

But there are some problems with these views. First, none of those verses mention 15 shekels, although some argue that the thirty pieces of silver paid to Judas was equal to 15 shekels, and we don't know the value of the barley in shekels.

But a second problem is that this price was almost certainly not determined by Hosea or by God but rather by whomever Hosea paid to free Gomer.

God could have certainly arranged that price to be whatever he wanted it to be, but I don't see any basis or any need for that here. Instead, I think the simplest explanation is the best

explanation – the price in verse 2 was simply the price that was required to free Gomer. In fact, the Hebrew word translated “bought” includes the idea of haggling, which may also be seen in the odd combination of silver and barley that was paid for her freedom.

I think we can safely say that the haggling and the low purchase price were not exactly making Gomer feel like queen for the day! This must have been a humiliating experience for her.

The key point in verse 2 is not the price. The key point in verse 2 is the redemption. Hosea went out to seek and save the lost! And that is what he did. He sought Gomer, he found Gomer, and he freed Gomer.

And let’s pause here and think about these events from Hosea’s perspective. We need to do that a lot in our study of this book because that is why God is commanding Hosea to do these things – so that we can think about how Hosea feels and then infer how God feels.

So how does Hosea feel? Well, he married Gomer, a prostitute, he had one child with her for sure, he may have had two other children with her – or perhaps they were someone else’s children, he was commanded to give the children strange names, including Not Loved and Not Mine, at some point Gomer left him for someone else or perhaps for more than one someone else, and Hosea is commanded to go and pay to get her back. How would we feel about all of that? I suspect that is pretty close to how Hosea felt.

But let's go back and reconsider a question we asked earlier – did Hosea love Gomer? Not love as in caring about what happened to her, but love as in the romantic love that a husband has for his wife. Did Hosea love Gomer? Here is how one commentary answers that question:

“So I bought her for myself.” Such a simple statement of so profound an act! God's instructions were clear enough: “Go yet again. Love her. Bring her back home where she belongs even if you have to make yourself look like a fool to others.” So, Hosea obeyed the call of God to incarnate God's kind of love for Israel. “So I bought her for myself.”

Although Hosea could not be commanded to have a specific emotion of love about Gomer, I think that Hosea did have that emotion of love for Gomer.

I think to demonstrate God's love for Israel, Hosea would need to have both a loving heart as well as loving actions. I don't think Hosea could have shown what God wanted him to show if Hosea had been filled with hatred and resentment toward Gomer. And I don't think we see those attitudes here in verse 2 or elsewhere.

Did Hosea love Gomer? I think the answer is yes – both with the loving actions commanded by God and with Hosea's own loving heart. I may be reading between the lines a bit in reaching that conclusion, but that must have been how Hosea felt about Gomer if his life was to show us how God feels about us.

Hosea 3:3

3 And I said to her, "You must dwell as mine for many days. You shall not play the whore, or belong to another man; so will I also be to you."

Hosea speaks directly to Gomer in verse 3 for the only time in the book. What does his statement in verse 3 mean?

Let's break it up into parts.

"You must dwell as mine for many days."

Hosea pays someone to redeem Gomer, but there are some conditions for Gomer.

And if we are looking for some lessons about the gospel in these verses, let's be sure that we don't miss that one! Gomer has a role to play here in her own redemption.

The first condition is that she must not run off again. She must live with Hosea as his wife for many days. She must be faithful to Hosea.

But why does Hosea say "many days"? Why not until death do they part?

I think that question is answered by what Hosea is about to say next. This "many days" is not the time period in which Gomer is to be Hosea's wife, but rather this "many days" is the time period in which Gomer is to refrain from all sexual activity.

Why do we reach that conclusion?

One reason, as we said, is because of what Hosea will say next (which we will look at shortly).

But another reason is because of what we will see in verse 4 – “for the children of Israel shall abide many days without a king.” What we are seeing here between Hosea and Gomer is intended to mirror a punishment against Israel. And so it would make sense for the “many days” in verse 3 to also be a punishment of some sort, but against Gomer rather than against Israel.

And, as with all punishments from God, both of these punishments are intended to teach a lesson – a lesson both to the one who is being punished and a lesson to those who read about the punishment.

“You must dwell as mine for many days.” I think a better translation of that first phrase is, “Many days you shall remain with me.”

And, as we said, the phrase “many days” is most likely a probationary period during which Gomer is required to be completely chaste. We see that in the next phrase.

“You shall not play the whore, or belong to another man.”

I think a better translation of that phrase is, “you shall neither prostitute yourself nor be with any man.” Not “another man” as we read in the ESV, but “any man,” which would include Hosea himself. Literally, the Hebrew is “not be to a man.”

But if Hosea and Gomer are still married, then why must she abstain from marital relations with Hosea, her own husband?

I think we saw the reason earlier. Gomer has been defiled. That is what we read in Deuteronomy 24:4 – “she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD.” And so, as one commentary stated, “it would seem quite unnatural for Hosea and Gomer immediately to resume conjugal relations.”

I think the best way to view verse 3 is that, as part of her restoration to Hosea, Gomer is required to abstain from all sexual activity for “many days.”