

Hosea *and* Gomer: Forgiving *the* Unfaithful



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Hosea 1–3.*

Memory Text: “The Lord said to me, ‘Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes’” (*Hosea 3:1, NIV*).

There are many who believe that the story of Hosea and Gomer should not be taken literally. God, they believe, would not require anyone, least of all a prophet, to undergo such a tragic experience. Such people believe that the story should be understood as an allegory.

But why? God used other prophets' family lives to illustrate their messages, so why not this one? Isaiah pointed out that he and his children were signs and symbols in Israel from God (*Isa. 8:18*). Jeremiah was instructed not to marry or to have children, all in order to reinforce his message of doom (*Jer. 16:2–4*). Ezekiel's wife died and God, who foretold it, instructed the prophet not to mourn for her (*Ezek. 24:16*).

Thus, we may take the story literally, as the experience of a prophet who had a wife, lost her to other men, but lovingly took her back. This is not an isolated incident. Throughout history men and women have forgiven an unfaithful spouse and rebuilt a wholesome relationship.

The Week at a Glance: The story of Hosea and Gomer powerfully illustrates God's love for His wayward people.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 22.*

Hosea and Gomer

When you consider the kind of intimate relationship that the Lord sought with His people, a relationship compared with marriage (*Hos. 2:19, 20; Isa. 62:5*), then the imagery and symbolism that takes place here becomes clearer.

From what we can tell, Hosea's prophetic ministry spanned the reigns of Uzziah (790–739), Jotham (750–732), Ahaz (735–715), and Hezekiah (729–686), kings of Judah. This acknowledges a ministry of about forty years and corresponds with the idea that both his ministry and his marriage commenced about the same time. Nothing more is known about the prophet as a person. His father, Beeri, is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. His hometown is not identified. His messages address the northern kingdom of Israel, and he surely resided there, the only literary prophet to do so. These were the closing years of Israel's history, but Hosea does not record the fall to Assyria in 722 B.C. He must have moved to Judah and written his book before that event. His ministry is dated by kings of Judah.

Based on numerous allusions to baking in Hosea 7:4–8, some suspect that Hosea was a baker by profession. He describes the oven, its fire, and the kneading and rising of the dough.

Read Hosea 1:1, 2. What did God tell Hosea to do? What was the symbolism behind this action? See also *Jer. 3:1, 2, 9; 13:27; Ezek. 16:15, 16; 23:17–19.*

Was Gomer a prostitute? While the NIV calls Gomer adulterous, the Hebrew text does not call her a harlot but uses the phrase “woman/wife of harlotry.” There are several options: (1) She could be the daughter or granddaughter of a harlot (some descendants drifted into the profession themselves). (2) She could be a woman who shows such tendencies. (3) She may be called a harlot by one with a prophetic knowledge of the future. (4) The book was written years later, by which time her character was fully known.

Gomer was obviously a real person. The value of Hosea's relationship with a real unfaithful wife has so much more meaning than if the story were a mere allegory. The Lord used this account to give His people a powerful message about what their spiritual unfaithfulness was really like. No doubt He was seeking to draw them back to Himself.

Gomer's Unfaithfulness

Soon after Hosea married Gomer, we are told that she “bore him” a son (*Hos. 1:3, NIV*). The text indicates that Hosea can claim to be the father of the child. Gomer had two more children, but the text does not say that she bore them to Hosea, just that she “gave birth to a daughter,” and “had another son” (*vs. 6, 8, NIV*). The language allows for Hosea not to have been the father. Some Bibles openly interpret the texts to say just that.

The first son was named *Jezreel*, which means “God scatters.” The next child was a girl named *Lo-ruhammah*, which means “not loved.” Though God gives the names, it would be appropriate for Hosea to indicate that he does not love a child that is not his. The final child is a son named *Lo-ammi*, meaning “not my people.” Again, this could be a sign that Hosea does not accept the child as his. In fact, Hosea does declare that he cannot show his love to her children because they are the result of adultery, conceived in disgrace (*Hos. 2:4, 5*).

What are Hosea's charges regarding Gomer? *Hos. 2:5, 8.*

It may seem preposterous to think that any person might not know who brings home the food, but there are several ways to understand and apply these passages. We may take a cue from the application to the Israelites. They credited Baal—the god of rain and fertility—with their harvests of the fields and vineyards (grain and wine), their wool, and their oilseeds. They considered their gold and silver also as gifts from Baal and used these metals lavishly in the manufacture of images to him (*see Hos. 8:4, 13:2*). Imagine God's reaction to their obeisance to Baal all the while He was providing rain for their crops in addition to all their other blessings.

There is a certain blindness that comes in with sin. This blindness causes reasoning to be clouded so that persons can come to such stupid conclusions, conclusions they use to justify stupid actions.

What has been your own experience with the power of sin to blind your mind? What other Bible accounts reveal this spiritual danger? See, for instance, John 9. What steps can you take to protect yourself from falling into this blindness?

Spiritual Adultery

As we've seen, if the Bible uses the idea of marriage to depict the intimate relationship that God seeks with His people—then adultery, even whoredom, are appropriate symbols of what happens when God's people are not spiritually faithful to Him.

Of all the ways that married people can hurt each other, adultery has to be one of the worst. A married couple, through physical intimacy, creates a sacred environment that only they themselves, as one flesh, should ever enter. To violate that is to violate a sacred trust; it's to share with another what should belong only to that couple.

Read Matthew 5:32. What can we discern here from Christ's words about just how bad adultery is?

The real issue, however, in the story of Hosea isn't marital infidelity; it's spiritual apostasy; it's about God's people going after other gods. Today most of us are not polytheists; we don't openly seek and worship what we believe are other divine entities (Satan knows we're too sophisticated for that). However, spiritual adultery isn't dead among us. There are numerous ways in which we can be lured into this kind of adultery, even whoredom.

What are some things that we face today that could lead us, as individuals, or even as a church, into spiritual adultery?

We mustn't be fooled: Bit by bit, little by little, we can slowly be lured away from total dedication and faithfulness to God. Slowly but surely the ways of the world, its methods, its ideology, and its moral views can cause us to depart from the intimate and close relationship that God wants with us, and before we know it, we're committing spiritual adultery.

None of us are immune to the temptations of spiritual adultery. What are some Bible texts that, if obeyed, could help protect us? Find the texts, write them down, and bring them to class on Sabbath. See, for instance, Phil. 4:8, Col. 2:6, 1 Pet. 4:1.

Bearing the Fruit of Unfaithfulness

Sin is always what it has been: the most deadly and destructive force in the universe. However pleasurable it can be, in one way or another, it always reaps bitter results. How many men and women, for instance, thinking they would find happiness through their adulterous affairs, ended up bringing only sadness and pain to themselves and others?

What happens to Gomer as she plays the harlot? *Read Hos. 2:1–13.*

What parable of Jesus does this story remind you of? *See especially Hos. 2:7.*

All through the history of ancient Israel, the people were tempted to worship idols, images of “silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know” (*Dan. 5:23*). Again, we might not be tempted today to bow down and worship idols, but we can be just as easily swept away from God by things of the world that in the end do not satisfy us, that cannot meet the deepest needs of our hearts, and that cannot save us in the day of judgment (*see Jer. 2:27, 28*).

A few years ago in the United States a man won the lottery, taking home more than \$113 million. Within a few years his life was destroyed; the money that had become his god also became the thing that led to his ruin.

The message that the Lord was seeking to teach His people through the story of Hosea and Gomer was this: Be faithful to the only God that there is, the only God who loves you and who can save you and who can provide for your deepest needs.

What has been your own experience with God working to keep you close to Him? How have you responded? What changes do you need to make that will help you better respond to His prompting?

Amazing Love

Read Hosea 2:14–23. Despite everything, what does the Lord tell Hosea to do? What’s the message there for us?

Hosea had already condemned his wife, listed his accusations, and twice passed his verdict. (1) “ ‘Therefore I will block her path . . .’ ” (*Hos. 2:6, NIV*). (2) “ ‘Therefore I will take away my grain . . .’ ” (*vs. 9, NIV*). We are prepared for the third and final verdict; it turns out, however, to be a surprise.

Hosea’s first method of keeping his wife at home could not be a lasting solution. She was bound to escape sooner or later, and even if she didn’t, there could be no real satisfaction in keeping her that way. The second method had a greater chance for success. He had wooed her and won her once before, and he could do it again, provided he was sincere. Hosea was instructed not just to take her back but to love her as the Lord loves the Israelites.

Read Hosea 3. What happens here, and what does it symbolize?

Note that Hosea is not only to take her back but to love her. Not just love her but love her as God loves His people. Hosea followed God’s command again and bought her for 15 shekels of silver and a measure of barley. A slave normally commanded a price of 30 shekels (*Exod. 21:32*), but either the barley made up for the difference, or else Gomer went at a discount.

Hosea taking back his adulterous wife mirrors the historical situation. God loves His people Israel even though they have been adulterous. This is the message delivered by Hosea in words and in action. The Israelites can accept the faithfulness of God so much more easily when they view the faithfulness of Hosea in taking back an unfaithful wife.

Are you where you should be in terms of your relationship with the Lord? Have you committed spiritual adultery? What hope can you draw from the message that God has given us through these chapters?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Moral Standards,” pp. 326–339, in *The Adventist Home*.

The story related in these pages shows us just how willing God is to forgive His erring children. Violation of marriage through infidelity has to be one of the worst ways a person can betray another. And God uses that imagery to depict how He views His own people’s spiritual adultery. Yet, He’s willing to forgive them and take them back. These chapters, if nothing else, reveal to God’s people the extent of His grace.

“Jesus is our Saviour today. He is pleading for us in the most holy place of the heavenly sanctuary, and he will forgive our sins. It makes all the difference in the world with us spiritually whether we rely upon God without doubt, as upon a sure foundation, or whether we are seeking to find some righteousness in ourselves before we come to him. Look away from self to the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world. It is a sin to doubt. The least unbelief, if cherished, involves the soul in guilt, and brings great darkness and discouragement. It is saying that the Lord is false, that he will not do as he has promised; and he is greatly dishonored.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (1892), p. 426.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** As a class, go over the Bible verses you used to answer the question at the end of Tuesday’s lesson. What practical principles can you take from these texts that can help us, as individuals and as a church, to protect ourselves from spiritual adultery?
- 2** As a class, talk about what you believe the basic message found in these few chapters in Hosea is. What is the Lord telling us as a church today through this story? What lessons should we not draw from it?
- 3** Are there some church members who have fallen away? As a class, make an effort to contact these people, to show them that you care about them and that you are interested in them. In what ways can you show them the kind of grace and mercy that God has revealed to us through this story?

Summary: The marriage of Hosea and Gomer is the best illustration of forgiveness of an unfaithful spouse in the Bible. It’s also an example of God’s willingness to forgive us.

One Man for God

by JOHN T. NOEL

I live in a village in southern Sudan. Most people here belong to a Protestant church that has been working here for 100 years. Then John Charles came to our village. One Sunday he came to visit, and I invited him to worship with me. I was surprised when he said he had worshiped God the day before. “Where do you worship on Saturday?” I asked. He told me that he worshiped in his hut, reading the Bible, singing, and praying alone.

“What do you believe that makes you worship on Saturday?” I asked him.

He answered, “First, let me tell you about Jesus.”

I told him I knew about Jesus, but he said if I truly knew about Jesus, I would follow His commandments. After a long talk, he invited my brother and me to come to his home and hear more. John Charles read about God’s love from the Bible. He explained that God has outlined principles He wants us to live by. He turned to the Ten Commandments and read each one. When he read the fourth commandment, I realized that this was why John Charles worshiped on Saturday. My brother and I believed.

Our friends warned us that John Charles was a false teacher, but I shared with them what he had taught us, including the Ten Commandments. Eventually ten of us studied with John Charles. We all believed, but our families refused to allow us to leave our Protestant church without a fight. My father even brought his spear to try to convince me to reconsider. I refused. But I had a problem. Like many men here, I had two wives. I asked God what to do, and He told me to choose the wife who will share my faith. So I took both wives to the Bible studies with me. My first wife did not want to follow my faith. So I gave her a dowry, and she returned to her parents’ village. My second wife accepted the beliefs I now love, and we have been baptized.

Some of the new believers have become lay evangelists to other villages. I remained in my village, where I study with people who want to know more about God. So far 28 people here have become Adventists and more than one hundred in the area, thanks to John Charles’ fearless ministry. Even my parents are interested in learning God’s truths from the Bible.

Your mission offerings are making a difference in the lives of many in Sudan and throughout the world.

JOHN T. NOEL *shares his faith in his home village in southern Sudan.*