

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.

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

▶ **Key Text:** *Hosea 3:1, NIV*

▶ **Teach the Class to:**

Know: God seeks, redeems, and saves the lost.

Feel: The love that God feels for us.

Do: Draw the backslider through true Christian love.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. An Unusual Request (*Hos. 1:2*)

A Bible names often reveal character. Gomer is described as a child of whoredoms. This may refer to her ancestry or to her future downfall. It also may mean “completion.” Like Gomer, we’ve all fallen. Yet, how does Gomer’s name hint that, despite our past, God woos us back to Him? How does He complete us?

B Expectant parents spend hours picking out names. Perhaps Hosea chooses Beerli after his father. Or maybe Gomer wants Diblaim after hers. God gives their child a name that means “scattered.” It would serve as a living warning of the future to those who heard it. What living warnings does God use to get our attention today?

II. A Question of Paternity (*Hos. 2:7, 8*)

A An American sports idiom used to boast about victory is “Who’s your daddy?” It equates one’s victory over an opponent with the power that a father wields over his children. But this takes on quite literal meaning in the case of Gomer, whose children’s paternity is in question. Is our Paternity in question? If the world asked “Who’s your daddy?” how would your life reveal that God is your Father?

B Gomer, a symbol of Israel, wasted her life with Baal lovers. Notice God’s response to her adultery. “Behold, I will allure her” (*Hos. 2:14*). The language of redemption here is that of love. How does God “allure” us back to Him today?

III. Love That Never Fails (*Hos. 3:1–3*)

Hosea redeems Gomer for 15 pieces of silver, plus one and one-half homers of barley. It’s enough for Hosea to buy back her life. How does Jesus’ blood make our worth incalculable and buy us back from sin?

▶ **Summary:** God embraces us fully when we return to Him.

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” (*vss. 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?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners' experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer this question, *Why is this lesson important to me?*

There is a story about a husband who finds his wife's suicide note that asks the question, *Can you forgive me?* The story unfolds to reveal that she had an affair with her brother-in-law and chose death rather than the humiliation and shame of having her husband find out about it. For her, seeking forgiveness was not an option.

Many of us have skeletons in our closets, things we work very hard at keeping away from family, friends, and the church. But with our sins, there is no hiding from God. However, this should bring us comfort, not fear. God's intimate knowledge of everything we do should make it easier to approach His throne of grace. Ask the class if there's anyone bold enough to share their darkest, deepest secret with the rest of the class. Wait only for a brief, awkward moment before anyone responds and say something like, "Of course, I do not expect any eager volunteers. Many of us have skeletons in our closets, things we work very hard at keeping away from family, friends, the church. But with our sins, there is no place to hide them from God."

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question, *What do I need to know from God's Word?*

Hosea's marriage is a picture of God's relationship with Israel. Hosea's choice of a prostitute was exactly like God's choice of Israel and of us. The only thing that happens with regularity in the story of Hosea and Gomer is that he takes her back every time she returns; her repentance is short-lived, and she is off again with another new lover.

Only one who knows the love and forgiveness of God can ever love this perfectly. And one who has experienced His loving forgiveness cannot help but love and forgive others. Hosea is an outstanding biblical example of that kind of love.

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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.*

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

The entire message of Hosea can be summarized in Hosea 11:8, 9: “For I am God, and not man—the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath” (*NIV*). When it comes to our sin and judgment, God does not treat us the way we treat one another; He treats us with mercy. The story of Hosea and Gomer emphasizes the kind of relationship God wants with us.

What separates us from God is not so much our sin but our refusal to accept His forgiveness. Like Gomer, our lives tell a recurring story of weakness, sin, failure, and betrayal. Like with those before us in the Bible (Moses, David, Jonah, Peter, etc.), God longs for us to leave our worldly ways and come back to Him.

Consider the reasons why we refuse to accept God’s forgiveness. Are some attitudes that keep us away worse than others? What was Israel’s attitude toward God’s open arms of forgiveness? Read the following texts from Hosea to get a sense of Israel’s attitude: 4:8, 17; 5:5; 7:10; 9:7; 11:2, 5, 7; 13:9; 14:4.

God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness far outweigh our worst sins. The litany of Israel’s sins consists of the worst, most vilest form of betrayal, deceit, and adultery. The kind of betrayal seen in Israel’s actions, and in Gomer’s, is not commonplace. But the extent of the deceit accentuates the mercy of God.

Consider: If God can be so forgiving of the worst sins, should we not be more supportive and accepting when a church member falls from grace? Why are some sins more difficult to forgive than others? What can we do to keep from being judgmental about the faults of others?

► **STEP 3—Practice!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the learning cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**

Thought Questions:

❶ The usual course of action when we find a loved one in sin is to shame and manipulate that person. This often brings the person back to right behavior. But what is more important than right behavior? What is the ultimate result of right behavior that’s not paired with a changed heart?

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

2 Depending on the threshold of our comfort zone, our forgiveness has its limits. For some of us, forgiveness means thinking about the atrocity but without pain. That is, we forgive if we are no longer hurt by that person. To others, it means moving on with life just as long we do not have to see the offending person ever again. To still others, it means having a normal relationship once again with the concerned person and restoring trust once more. Why the different levels? Are all acts of forgiveness? Does God always expect forgiveness to result in complete restoration of a relationship? Explain.

Application Questions:

The word *compassion* means feeling with or shared emotions. When you approach someone with compassion, you cannot stand on the outside with a finger pointing at him. You need to step inside his circle of shame and hold him without reservation. In what ways does your church do this? What positive changes can we make in our church life to be more compassionate?

Witnessing

What is your responsibility toward a church member who you know is having difficulty with a particular temptation? When Nathan approached David about his affair with Bathsheba, he began by sharing a parable (*see 2 Sam. 12:1–14*).

What lessons can we learn from Nathan about approaching someone with the intention to help? What lessons of confrontation, intervention, and intercession can we learn from Nathan?

► STEP 4—Apply!

Just for Teachers: In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them to answer this question, **With God’s help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?**

Have the class meditate on the hymn “Just As I Am” and Ephesians 3:18–20. Then have members come up with a bumper sticker slogan or

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

newspaper headline that shouts out in praise the awesomeness of God's forgiveness.

Encourage your class to develop into better forgivers by applying one of these suggestions:

- Read Psalm 139 in your favorite version. Then follow David's example and invite God to help you unearth all the buried sins of your past and fill it with His grace and love.
- Make a list of people you need to sort things out with about hurts and offenses. Then pray every day for these people and your feelings toward them until you feel the Spirit's comforting presence, and go set things right!

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.