

Spiritual Adultery (Hosea)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Hos. 1:1–3; Ezek. 4:1–6; Hos. 2:12–15, 18; 4:1–3; James 5:1–7; Rev. 14:6–12.*

Memory Text: “ ‘I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called “Not my loved one.” I will say to those called “Not my people,” “You are my people”; and they will say, “You are my God” ’ ” (*Hosea 2:23, NIV*).

Key Thought: Even amid spiritual adultery and divine judgment, God’s love for His people never wavers.

The prophet Hosea ministered at the close of a very prosperous period in Israel’s history, just before the fall of the nation to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. At that time, God’s chosen people no longer worshiped the Lord alone but also served Baal, a Canaanite god.

Placed at the head of the Minor Prophets, Hosea’s book addresses the central question of the prophetic proclamation during this time of apostasy: Does God still love Israel, despite the spiritual harlotry? Does He still have a purpose for them despite their sins and the coming judgment?

Hosea’s personal story and prophecy are inseparably tied into his book. Just as the prophet forgave his unfaithful wife and was willing to take her back, God is willing to do the same for His people.

What can we learn from the experience of Hosea and the Lord’s way of dealing with wayward Israel?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 6.*

A Strange Command

“When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, ‘Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD.’ So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son” (Hos. 1:2, 3, NIV).

For centuries, students of the Bible have debated the nature of this command, asking questions such as: Was Gomer a prostitute or just an unfaithful spouse? Was she immoral before her marriage to Hosea, or did she become unfaithful afterward?

We do not know for certain. One thing, however, is sure: when the Lord spoke to Hosea and through him, He wanted to turn people’s attention from Hosea’s story to God’s love story with Israel. Because Gomer was an Israelite, the story of her marriage to the prophet blends with the story of God’s covenant with Israel.

There are important parallels between Hosea’s story and God’s experience with Israel. On a human level, Gomer was adulterous against Hosea; on the spiritual level, Israel was unfaithful to God. Just as Gomer’s immorality hurt her husband’s heart, so Israel’s idolatry grieved the great heart of God. Hosea was called to endure a broken heart and a broken marriage. He must have suffered public indignation and disgrace. Yet, the more he experienced Gomer’s unfaithfulness, the deeper was his understanding of God’s pain and frustration with Israel.

God often asked other prophets to do something beyond preaching. Read the following passages and explain how the prophets’ actions symbolized God’s dealings with His people. *Isa. 20:1–6, Jer. 27:1–7, Ezek. 4:1–6.*

What kind of witness for the Lord are your words and your actions? What is it in your life that reveals not simply that you are a good person but that you are a follower of Jesus?

Spiritual Adultery

When Hosea’s wife, Gomer, committed adultery against him, he suffered the agony of betrayal, humiliation, and shame. To the neighbors and friends who saw his pain, Hosea delivered a divine message through his words and actions: Israel, God’s wife, was just like Gomer. The chosen people were committing spiritual adultery.

The prophet Jeremiah compared God’s unfaithful people to “a prostitute” who lived with many lovers despite everything that God provided for them (*Jer. 3:1, NIV*). In a similar way, the prophet Ezekiel called idolatrous Israel “an adulterous wife” who had departed from her true husband (*Ezek. 16:32, NKJV*). For this reason, idolatry in the Bible is viewed as spiritual adultery.

Read Hosea 2:8–13. What warning is given here? In what ways could we, as Seventh-day Adventists, be in danger of doing the same thing in principle?

The expression “grain, new wine and oil” also is used in the book of Deuteronomy (*Deut. 7:12–14, NIV*) to describe Israel’s staple produce that people enjoyed in abundance in accordance with God’s promises as given through Moses. In Hosea’s time, the people were so ungrateful to God, so wrapped up in the world around them, that they were presenting these gifts, originally given them by God, to their false idols. What a warning this should be to all of us that the gifts we have been given should be used in the service of the Lord and not in ways that never were intended for them (*Matt. 6:24*).

“How does God regard our ingratitude and lack of appreciation for his blessings? When we see one slight or misuse our gifts, our hearts and hands are closed against him. But those who received God’s merciful gifts day after day, and year after year, misapply his bounties, and neglect the souls for whom Christ has given his life. The means which he has lent them to sustain his cause and build up his kingdom are invested in houses and lands, lavished on pride and self-indulgence, and the Giver is forgotten.”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 7, 1886.

Think about how easy it is to take the gifts given you by God and to use them selfishly, or even in an idolatrous manner. What are practical ways of preventing this sin in our lives?

A Promise of Restoration

Read Hosea 2. What is God’s basic message to His people here? How is the gospel revealed in this chapter?

Hosea’s message presents the profound truth of God’s steadfast love for an undeserving people. Hosea 2 contains a lengthy speech by the Lord about Israel’s apostasy, which is then contrasted with God’s unending love for His people. After the punishment, the husband (God) will lead the wife (Israel) on a trip to the wilderness, where they will be remarried.

Thus, the chapter ends with a portrayal of a future time beyond the judgment when God will woo Israel to love Him as before (*Hos. 2:12–15*). The wild animals of the field will no longer devour the wife’s vines and fig trees but will become partners in the new covenant (*Hos. 2:18*). In addition, all the children will be renamed, revealing again God’s willingness to heal and forgive the past transgressions of His people.

God freely offers to pardon our sins. How much does forgiveness cost God? What was the personal cost of this lesson to Hosea? *Hos. 3:1, 2*.

Growing up as a male in Israel, Hosea was destined to enjoy a privileged status in that patriarchal society. But this privilege came with a great responsibility. A man in ancient Israel would have had to make a tremendous effort to forgive and take back an unfaithful wife, not to mention accept as his own the children who may have been fathered by another man. To stand by his wife and her children and thus endure social rejection would have to have been one of the most difficult of life’s experiences.

Hosea, however, “bought” her back. God, in a sense, did the same thing for the human race, but the cost was the death of Jesus on the cross. Only by looking at the Cross, then, can we get a much clearer picture of what it cost God to buy us back from the ruin that sin has caused.

The Case Against Israel

Hosea 4:1–3 presents God as one who brings a charge or a legal dispute (Hebrew *rîb*) against Israel. The chosen nation stands guilty before her God because the people have failed to live up to the terms of the covenant. Truth, mercy, and the knowledge of God were to have been qualities of Israel’s unique relationship with Him. According to Hosea 2:18–20, these are gifts that God bestows on His people at the renewal of the covenant.

Due to sin, however, Israel’s life was devoid of these gifts of grace. The crimes listed by Hosea had brought the nation to the brink of anarchy. The religious leaders, priest and prophet alike, shared responsibility in the current deterioration of Israel’s life and were held accountable for it. Theirs was a heavy responsibility. If they did not confront the abuses and did not condemn the acts of injustice, they themselves would be condemned by God.

However, due to the dry climate, rains in the land of Israel were a matter of life and death. The Israelites came to believe that their blessings, such as life-giving rain, were coming from Baal. This responsibility was made even heavier by the fact that in the Old Testament, idol worship was considered to be the most serious sin because it denied the role of the Lord God in the lives of the nation and the individual. Thus, it was a serious problem when they built shrines to foreign gods and began mixing immorality with worship.

At the same time, social injustice was rife in the land. The rich classes in Israel exploited the peasants in order to be able to pay tribute to Assyria. Many resorted to fraud and cheating (*Hos. 12:7, 8*). It was through this injustice that the formerly peaceful and prosperous period led to a time of political and social turbulence. The country was at the brink of total chaos.

“Poor rich men, professing to serve God, are objects of pity. While they profess to know God, in works they deny Him. How great is the darkness of such! They profess faith in the truth, but their works do not correspond with their profession. The love of riches makes men selfish, exacting, and overbearing. Wealth is power; and frequently the love of it depraves and paralyzes all that is noble and godlike in man.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 682.

Read James 5:1–7. How do these words fit in with present truth as expressed in the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6–12? Whatever our financial position, how can we protect ourselves from the dangers that money always presents to the followers of Christ?

A Call to Repentance

“ ‘And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent’ ” (John 17:3, NKJV).

The name *Hosea* in Hebrew means “the Lord saves” and is related to the names *Joshua*, *Isaiah*, and even *Jesus*. The prophet calls the people to reject sin and find refuge in their Lord God because He is their Creator and Redeemer. The purpose of the divine judgment was to remind the sinners that their life and strength come from the One to whom they must return. Thus, even amid all the warnings and pronouncements of judgment, Hosea’s book presents the themes of both human repentance and divine forgiveness.

The prophet urges the nation, which was perishing in sin “ ‘for lack of knowledge’ ” (*Hos. 4:6, NKJV*), to press on to know God fully and live in harmony with His eternal principles. It was the people’s lack of knowledge, the knowledge of God, that led them to rebellion and eventually resulted in judgment.

In contrast, through faith and obedience the people could come to know the Lord for themselves. This knowledge can be close and intimate too. That is precisely why, time and again, marriage is a symbol of the kind of relationship that the Lord wants with us.

That is also why the Christian life consists primarily of a relationship with the living God. That is why the Lord calls people to know Him and follow His will for their entire lives.

The sin problem brought a fearful separation between God and humanity. But, through the death of Jesus on the cross, a way has been made so that each one of us can have a close walk with the Lord. We can, indeed, know Him for ourselves.

What is the difference between our knowing about God versus our knowing God? How is this difference reflected in our everyday living? If someone were to ask you, How can I come to know God, what would you answer? What do the following passages teach about the importance of “knowing the Lord”?

Exod. 33:12, 13 _____

Jer. 9:23, 24 _____

Dan. 11:32 _____

1 John 2:4 _____

Further Study: “As time went by, Hosea became aware of the fact that his personal fate was a mirror of the divine pathos, that his sorrow echoed the sorrow of God. In this fellow suffering as an act of sympathy with the divine pathos the prophet probably saw the meaning of the marriage which he had contracted at the divine behest. . . .

“Only by living through in his own life what the divine Consort of Israel experienced, was the prophet able to attain sympathy for the divine situation. The marriage was a lesson, an illustration, rather than a symbol or a sacrament.”—Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Mass.: Prince Press, 2001), p. 56.

“In symbolic language Hosea set before the ten tribes God’s plan of restoring to every penitent soul who would unite with His church on earth, the blessings granted Israel in the days of their loyalty to Him in the Promised Land. Referring to Israel as one to whom He longed to show mercy, the Lord declared, ‘I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 298.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ We tend to think of idolatry as the act of bowing down to statues. In what ways can idolatry be something that is much more subtle and deceptive than that?
- ❷ In class, further explore this idea of what it means to know God. If you say that you “know the Lord,” what do you mean by that? How is this knowledge of God acquired?
- ❸ Some ancient theologians argued that God is impassible, that is, He does not experience pain or pleasure due to the actions of other beings, such as humans. What might cause people to argue this position? Why do we, however, reject it?
- ❹ Dwell more on the fact that our redemption is so costly. What does that tell us about what our worth is to God?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Hosea 2:23*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize God's intolerance toward sin and His love for His people.

Feel: Foster the feeling of love toward sinners as God loves them.

Do: Submit to God's plan and praise Him for His acceptance of us.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God Cannot Tolerate Stubborn Disobedience

A Why does God ask Hosea to marry Gomer, a promiscuous woman?

B What does his marriage say about the condition of Israel before their exile to Assyria?

C How did God, through the example of Hosea, refocus Israel on the essentials of real relationships in life?

II. Feel: God's Unselfish and Unconditional Love

A What does God's condescension to our human level of understanding and behavior say about His love?

B Why does God love people so much? Why is God concerned about humans?

C How does it make you feel to know that the scattered ones will be gathered and planted again, the unloved will be loved again, and those who are called not-His-people will be adopted as His children?

III. Do: God's Grace Reverses the Situation

A Why is Hosea's behavior of forgiveness toward a wayward wife so disturbing and important to our church today?

B How do God's gracious actions toward sinners help you to treat those who err against or around you?

► **Summary:** When we return to God as a response to His calling of love, He forgives us, changes our status, blesses, and leads us into new lives.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Hosea 3:1–3*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God is like a loving and caring husband, and His people are His bride. This husband-wife relationship is dramatized in the life of Hosea, God’s prophet, whom God asked to marry a promiscuous woman. God’s deep, forgiving, tender, and persistent love is a model of faithfulness for our love relationship with God and our spouses.

Just for Teachers: Our week’s lesson opens the study for this quarter on the topic of the twelve Minor Prophets of the Old Testament. Even though they are called “minor,” these twelve prophets are major. The distinction “minor” refers only to the relatively short length of their books in comparison to the larger books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

The term “the Twelve” was mentioned for the first time in the second century before Christ (around 180 B.C.) in an apocryphal book *Ecclesiasticus* (*Sirach* 49:10). Josephus was also aware of the term (*Against Apion*, 1.8.3). It is interesting that each book of the Twelve is quoted at least once in the New Testament (the most cited prophet is Zechariah). Pay close attention to the meaning of the names of these minor prophets, because each name conveys, in sum, the message that is expanded on and explained in each prophet’s respective book.

Opening Discussion: If you had the chance to change your name, which name would you choose? Which personality from the past or present would you like to carry? If you prefer to have several names, instead of just one, which ones would you choose? Why do people appreciate it when you call them by name? What is so precious and important about names? What do they reveal about us? How, if at all, is our character defined by our names? How do biblical names function in comparison to ours?

Questions for Discussion:

- 1 Why do God’s people need prophets? What is so specific and irreplaceable about their role?
- 2 Why is the prophetic voice often disturbing? In what ways are prophetic messages overall positive or negative? How do we reconcile in our minds

that the messages of doom and condemnation, on the one hand, and the messages of hope and restoration, on the other, are expressed in the same book?

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

Hosea is an eighth-century B.C. prophet whose ministry lasted several decades (*Hos. 1:1*). He was the only prophet who came from the Northern Kingdom. Sent by God to deliver His message of repentance to that kingdom, it was his appointed task to help to divert the tragedy of the Assyrian captivity and prevent the fall of Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom (722 B.C.). If the leaders and the people had listened to God, they would have been spared those calamities and a national and personal tragedy.

Prophets were not only spokespersons for God; sometimes they were asked to enact their message as seen in Isaiah (*Isa. 20:2–4*), Micah (*Mic. 1:8*), or Ezekiel, who performed 12 symbolic actions (*Ezek. 3:26, 27; 4:1–3; 4:4, 5; 4:6–8; 4:9–17; 5:1–4; 12:1–6; 12:17–20; 21:6, 7; 21:18–23; 24:15–26; 37:15–23*). The purpose of these sign-actions was to shake people out of their stubbornness, lead them to new decisions for God and His truth, and guide them away from foreign gods, immorality, and unethical behavior.

I. Hosea's Marriage (*Review Hosea 1–3 with your class.*)

The Lord asked Hosea to enact His message in an extremely unusual, dramatic, and spectacular way. Even though scholars' opinions vary regarding some aspects of the interpretation of Hosea 1–3, the best available evidence leads to the following interpretation. The prophet had to marry Gomer, a promiscuous woman who already had children from her previous illicit relationships (*Hos. 1:2*). The reason is given: "The land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD" (*NIV*). Thus, Hosea's family life became a life parable of the Lord's relationship with Israel.

Hosea had three children with his wife, Gomer. The names of these children carry a message too. The firstborn was a son, Jezreel (meaning "God Scatters"), followed by a girl named Lo-Ruhamah (meaning "Not Loved"), and finally another son Lo-Ammi (meaning "Not My People"). God Himself chose these strange names. Every time that Hosea revealed his children's names to the people, they must have stopped to think, which was, after all, God's intention. The names were a strong message to them that could not be easily overlooked.

Consider This: How did Hosea’s marriage serve as a living parable of God’s relationship with Israel? What impact should the names of Hosea’s children have exerted on the hearts and minds of the people of Israel?

II. Hosea’s Marriage in Crisis *(Review Hosea 3:2, 3 with your class.)*

The event described in chapter 3 chronologically follows the experience described in chapter 1. Gomer should have been enormously grateful to Hosea for his acceptance and forgiveness of her, for elevating her to the status of a legal wife, as well as for his providing for the family. Instead of embracing his unselfish love, she engaged, even as a married woman, in unfaithfulness. In spite of her repeated adultery, Hosea was a caring husband and did not divorce Gomer or expose her to the severe punishments applicable at that time for unfaithfulness (one of which was death). Instead, he showed her mercy and love. He redeemed her by paying for her freedom, an equivalent of 30 shekels (half in money and half in goods; *see Hos. 3:2; compare with 2 Kings 7:1, 16, 18*). He called her gently back: “ ‘You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you’ ” (*Hos. 3:3, NIV*).

Discussion Questions: How did Hosea treat Gomer, despite her faithlessness? What did the law say that she deserved instead? How does Hosea’s treatment of Gomer reveal God’s redemptive love for Israel? In this regard, discuss with your class Christ’s ultimate sacrifice of love on our behalf, a sacrifice that remains the model for husbands and the way in which they should unselfishly love their wives (*Eph. 5:25*).

III. God’s Love Is Incomprehensible *(Review Hosea 2:7 with your class.)*

As Gomer pursued her lovers and committed adultery, so Israel committed adultery against God by following Baal’s fertility cults and many other foreign gods (*Hos. 2:7*). God provided everything for His people, and, again and again, He forgave and wooed Israel back to Himself. He commanded Hosea to love Gomer “as the LORD loves the Israelites” (*Hos. 3:1, NIV*). God hoped that His love relationship for His wife Israel would lead her to a change of attitude, repentance, full devotion, and faithfulness: “ ‘I will go back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off than now’ ” (*Hos. 2:7, NIV*). He longs to show His love to her: “ ‘I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD’ ” (*Hos. 2:19, 20, NIV*).

God demonstrated His love for His people by changing the names of Hosea’s children. This is a powerful message and a complete change of status. Jezreel’s name was no longer “God scatters” but “I will plant.” Lo-Ruhamah would no

more be “Not Loved” but “I will show My love.” Finally, Lo-Ammi would no longer be “Not My People,” but “You are My people.” How incredible is God’s love for His people! The only proper response to such overwhelming love of the Lord, our true Husband, is “You are my God.” (*Study carefully Hos. 2:23, NIV.*)

Consider This: How do the changes of the names of Hosea’s children reflect a change in status? According to Revelation 2:17, God will give each of His followers a new name. What would you like your new name to reflect?

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: In our promiscuous society, the lack of faithfulness to God and to our spouses is a tremendous problem. Help your class to understand the importance of healthy relationships and ways in which to cultivate them.

Application Questions:

- 1 In what ways can we practice our true devotion to our God, and how can we show it in practical ways in our families?
- 2 What are the things and issues in our lives today that distract us from being completely devoted to God and to our spouses?

► **STEP 4**—Create

Just for Teachers: Hosea 1–3 is a parable of our life. God’s faithfulness, care, and love must be seen vividly in it. Help your class to see this picture of God in this way.

Activities:

- 1 Ask your class to write a short script on the message of Hosea 1–3. As much as possible, include all the characters of the story and incorporate God’s perspective and voice. If applicable, have the youth group in your church act out the play.
- 2 Discuss with the class what it means to each member that God promises, “I will plant,” “I will show My love,” and “You are My people.”