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## SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confes-

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sion of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can

provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips  
Philip Graham Ryken  
Series Editors



# PREFACE

In the fall of 1990, I walked into a church for the first time in some years at the request of my dear mother, who wanted me to reconnect with my religion. There are so many things I remember from that night. Having grown up in Presbyterian churches, I was grateful that this was a traditional worship service and thus was familiar to me. The familiarity ended when the pastor, Dr. James Montgomery Boice, stepped into the pulpit to preach with intelligence, with care to the text, and, simply, with power from the Holy Spirit. But what I remember most from that evening service was the picture of Jesus Christ that Boice drew from the third chapter of Hosea. There I was, Gomer, sitting in the balcony, stunned at the accuracy with which my sinful condition was laid bare. Then came Hosea to redeem his adulterous bride, picturing how Christ redeems sinners at the cost of his precious blood. (Boice's piercing words in driving home this truth are recited later in this commentary.) I left without speaking to anyone, walked across Philadelphia to my Center City apartment, knelt on its hardwood floors, and surrendered my life in faith to the Savior who loved me with so great a love as to die for my sins.

Given this background, I suppose it was inevitable that someday I would preach through Hosea and publish this commentary. But I confess to having other motives, too. For one thing, I confess to loving the Minor Prophets—about whom there is nothing minor! Too often, in my view, these vital Old Testament books—among the most quoted in the New Testament—receive a cursory treatment that fails to study them as the important portions of Holy Scripture they are. I offer this volume as my third on the Minor Prophets, having published a commentary on Zechariah, the great prophet of the postexilic period, and another on Jonah and Micah. In each of these books,

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I have sought to give as careful attention and thorough exposition as one would offer in preaching Daniel or John.

As the first of the Minor Prophets, Hosea is not a particularly short book (except by comparison to the Major Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel). The prophet Hosea occupies a vital place in redemptive history, during the judgment and fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in the mid- to late eighth century B.C. Drawing back from his predecessor Amos, Hosea looks forward to more famous prophets who came afterward. An interesting feature of Hosea is that this book was evidently preached in the northern kingdom but published in the southern kingdom as a message of warning and promise. The influence of Hosea on the later prophets, especially Jeremiah, is palpable. Moreover, Hosea provides key answers to the problem of how the people of God's promise should be subjected to so final a judgment that these northern ten tribes effectively ceased to exist. So important is Hosea's answer to this theological conundrum that Paul cites him as a key resource in Romans chapter 9. Finally, Hosea's deathly dark context provides the background for some of the most astonishing depictions in all the Bible of God's sovereign, amazing grace. Hosea warns us how cultural accommodation can cross the line into idolatry and apostasy. At the same time, in Hosea the Lord displays the vast extent of his forbearing love and unconquerable grace in Jesus Christ.

I wish to express my grateful thanks to the congregation of Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina, to whom this material was originally preached in the evening worship service. Their prayers, love, and support are a constant encouragement to my ministry of God's Word. My wife, Sharon, and our five children are instrumental in all the service that I offer to Christ, and this volume presents another occasion to give thanks to God for them. I am also grateful to Philip Ryken and Iain Duguid for their extensive editorial comments, together with the wonderful editorial staff at P&R Publishing.

This volume is dedicated to Dr. Peter Lillback, President of Westminster Theological Seminary, for his valiant, wise, and godly service to this extraordinary institution. As a grateful alumnus of Westminster, I am honored to serve on the board of trustees, giving me a vantage point to observe what one man of God can achieve through faith, prayer, and ceaseless labor. Finally, I offer this volume in loving service in response to the great love shown to



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me by the Savior, Jesus Christ, never forgetting his promise: “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’” (Hos. 2:23).

Richard D. Phillips  
Greenville, SC





*Hosea*

THE UNFAILING LOVE OF THE LORD



# 1

## A BRIDE FOR HOSEA

### *Hosea 1:1–5*

*“Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.” (Hos. 1:2)*



The Bible records that in the mid-eighth century B.C., the Lord commanded a prophet named Hosea to marry a woman who had sullied herself as a harlot. Hosea and his bride, Gomer, were to have three children, and each of these children was given a name signifying divine judgment on God's people. It is not surprising that many scholars doubt that the marriage between a prophet and a prostitute could have occurred in the way that the Bible presents it. Even some conservative expositors have assumed that Hosea's marriage was a figure of speech that is understood to have not literally taken place, such a thing being so unseemly.

Yet the marriage that is reported in Hosea 1 is consistent with the pattern of dramatic prophetic actions that God directed during the long years in which both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel slowly descended into destruction. For instance, a generation after Hosea, the prophet Isaiah was instructed for three years to walk naked and barefoot while preaching in Jerusalem (Isa. 20:3). Ezekiel was required to lie on his side for 430 days

to symbolize judgment on God's city, and even to use his own excrement as fuel for his cooking fire. Thus, the pattern of behavior into which Hosea's disgraceful marriage fits has a compelling explanation: God was seeking to gain the attention of his wayward people, and his prophets were the megaphones through which he shouted.

Another reason that we should not be embarrassed by Hosea's marriage to an adulteress is that his experience was designed to highlight the greatest love story ever told. For this faithful prophet spoke on behalf of the God of grace who gives his loving heart to sinners, so that he might redeem us as a people for himself. Hosea's scandalous marriage serves as a type or pattern for the love that God shows sinners in Jesus, who "loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25).

## HOSEA AND HIS TIMES

"Hosea, the son of Beeri," was a prophet of the northern kingdom of Israel during the tumultuous eighth century B.C. It was, in the words of Charles Dickens, "the best of times" and "the worst of times."<sup>1</sup> Israel and Judah, the two nations comprising God's covenant people, enjoyed material abundance and a large measure of peace. The latter resulted from the weakness of their rival Syria, together with the distraction of Assyria, the great empire to the east. The prophet served "in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel" (Hos. 1:1), which were days of prosperity and strength.

Hosea's calling was to forecast the end of these good times. A brief history of the events of these days will help set the context. The tenth century B.C. was the age of King David and his son Solomon, during which the kingdom of Israel flourished under God's grace. But when Solomon's foolish son Rehoboam ascended to the throne in 931 B.C., the ten northern tribes broke away under the leadership of Jeroboam I. This charismatic leader was given the chance by God to establish his own line with long blessing. But, envying the prestige of the Davidic kingship in Jerusalem, Jeroboam set up golden calves for the people to worship at Bethel and in Dan. For this grave sin, the Lord displaced the house of Jeroboam in the ninth century B.C., raising up the house of Omri (880 B.C., 1 Kings 16:23). Omri's son was the wicked King

1. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 1:14.

Ahab, who with his wife Jezebel foolishly opposed the good prophet Elijah. This house God also replaced, raising up Jehu in 841, giving him also the chance to receive blessing through faithfulness (2 Kings 9:9). Jeroboam II, under whom Hosea began his prophecy, was Jehu's great-grandson, reigning over Israel for forty-one years, from 793 to 753 (14:23).

Following the death of Jeroboam II, chaos reigned in Israel through a succession of lackluster kings, most of whom usurped the throne with violence. That Hosea 1:1 does not mention any of the kings who followed Jeroboam II indicates his contempt for their illegitimacy. What is noteworthy is that his prophecy is also measured by the names of four kings from the southern kingdom: "in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah." As Hosea witnessed the fall and destruction of Israel and its capital at Samaria, it seems that his concern turned toward the remnant of the covenant people in Jerusalem, under the true kingship of the house of David. The contents of Hosea will suggest that his writings were collected in Jerusalem. Therefore, while his personal ministry was to the north, the primary audience of his book was the people of this southern kingdom as they foolishly followed the same downward path of idolatry and unrighteousness. When we take in these names and the events associated with Hosea's message, we may estimate his ministry as taking place between 755 and 722 B.C.

Not only did Hosea foretell the fall of the northern kingdom and its extinction in 722 B.C., but he also specified two main reasons for God's judgment. Going back to the reign of Jeroboam I, the people of Israel had worshiped false gods, giving homage to the golden calves and then embracing the pagan cult of Baal. Hosea 8:11 accuses: "Ephraim has multiplied altars for sinning." Added to this idolatry was gross injustice in the exploitation of the poor and vulnerable. James Boice summarizes: "The hearts of the people were empty, religion was shallow, and corruption was rampant on every hand."<sup>2</sup> Tim Chester points out how much Hosea's times were like our own in the affluent, post-Christian West: "a time of prosperity that had led to spiritual complacency, a time of spiritual complacency that had led to spiritual infidelity. It was a time that was coming to a close."<sup>3</sup>

2. Boice, *Minor Prophets*, 1:14.

3. Tim Chester, *Hosea: The Passion of God*, Focus on the Bible (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2014), 35.

In this context, when the best of times was soon to become the worst of times, the Lord summoned Hosea as a prophet to Israel. His primary message was one of judgment on idolatry and sin. Since the southern kingdom was following in the footsteps of its idolatrous cousins, Hosea also sought to encourage the people of Jerusalem to repentance. Given this connection with Judah, many of his themes are taken up in the writings of Isaiah and, especially, Jeremiah. But Hosea was not merely a prophet of woe and doom. His warnings of judgment also brim with a message of hope for those who return to the Lord. Indeed, whenever God sends his warnings of judgment, he provides an opportunity of deliverance for those who turn back. In this way, Hosea is a book of rich gospel tones, presenting some of the most inspiring depictions of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> God speaks through the prophet: "Behold, I will allure her . . . and speak tenderly to her . . . and make the Valley of Achor [trouble] a door of hope" (Hos. 2:14-15).

## **A BRIDE LIKE ISRAEL**

Many of the Old Testament prophets were summoned to their office amid images of glory: Elisha witnessed Elijah's being carried to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11); Isaiah heard the seraphim crying, "Holy, holy, holy" (Isa. 6:3); and Jeremiah heard the stirring words, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jer. 1:5). A prophet was called to speak God's Word to his generation and, in some cases, to act out the Lord's message. The latter was Hosea's charge, but the words of his calling were not so uplifting: "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'" (Hos. 1:2).

Questions are raised about the actual state of the woman whom Hosea would marry, whose name was "Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim" (Hos. 1:3). Some scholars assert that since she is called an adulteress, she must have fallen into sexual sin only after she married the prophet. The problem with this view is that Gomer was described this way before Hosea married her. The question is also raised whether she was a prostitute or just a loose

4. As noted in the preface, I myself was dramatically converted to Christ during a sermon from the book of Hosea.



woman. In the culture of ancient Israel, the two were virtually the same: a woman described as a “whore” was not at all likely to gain a husband, leaving her virtually no other way to provide for herself than in what today is called the “sex trade.” The text speaks clearly of what in Hosea’s time was (and should still be today) a scandalous and shameful situation. Having been called as a prophet, he was then to conduct a wedding in which he would take a local prostitute as his wife.

It is not possible that an event such as this should fail to gain a huge amount of public attention, which is exactly what the Lord intended. Hosea’s marriage contained a message for the people: “for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD” (Hos. 1:2). The people had laughed and whispered behind their hands, expressing contempt for and judgment on this scarlet woman. It is not normally polite to use strong words to scorn a man’s wife, but since God calls her a whore three times in verse 2, we can only imagine what Hosea’s neighbors were calling her. Imagine their reaction, then, when the Lord announced that he was talking about them! Like an adulteress who invalidates her marriage, the Israelites through idolatry had disqualified themselves from being God’s people.

Starting with Hosea, the prophets of the eighth through sixth centuries frequently employed the imagery of harlotry to depict the covenant infidelity of God’s people in worshiping idols (see Jer. 2:23–25; Ezek. 23:1–21; Mic. 1:7). This violation of God’s law started from the inception of the northern kingdom, when Jeroboam I erected golden calves to draw his subjects away from Jerusalem. We should probably think of Jeroboam’s idols as violations of the second commandment, forbidding the false worship of the true God (Ex. 20:4–6), since he probably offered his golden calves as competition to the worship on Mount Zion (1 Kings 12:25–30). It is not surprising, however, that violations of the second commandment led to breaches of the first commandment (Ex. 20:3) through the worship of false gods, as the people turned to the Baals worshiped by their pagan neighbors. In God’s eyes, this apostasy involved the rejection of the love bond that was his covenant, like a wife who commits adultery against her husband. Hosea later delivers the accusation: “My people . . . sacrifice on the tops of the mountains and burn offerings on the hills. . . . Therefore your daughters play the whore, and your brides commit adultery” (Hos. 4:12–13). The Israelites’ sin involved not only giving their love to false gods

but also “their failure to give the Lord their undivided devotion, loyalty, and trust.”<sup>5</sup>

Hosea 1:2 uses a notable expression in saying that “the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD.” Why would the prophet speak of the land when it was the people who worshiped idols? The answer is seen in the close relationship between the people and the land. “The land” included the institutions of the nation and the cultural norms that exploited the poor. It involved the kingship, which promoted false worship and shed innocent blood. Since the land was God’s promised inheritance to the children of Abraham (Gen. 15:18–21), their pollution of the land with idolatry was especially galling.

Not only was Hosea’s wife disgraced by her infidelity, but their children also bore her disgrace: “and have children of whoredom” (Hos. 1:2). This does not mean that these children were illegitimate, since they were Hosea’s offspring, just as the people of Israel were God’s legitimate family. Rather, as these children shared the shame of their mother, so also the people of Israel earned the disgrace of the nation. As Duane Garrett puts it: “Hosea’s children bore the stigma of immorality, but the people were themselves promiscuous and were in that sense just like their mother, Israel.”<sup>6</sup>

The spectacle of a prophet’s marrying a harlot was shocking. But when Hosea’s hearers learned that he represented the Lord in his covenant relationship with Israel, the scandal was even more stunning. The comparison between Gomer and Israel should have brought the people to a penitent shame, like a wife who has been discovered cheating on an honorable husband. Far from this scenario’s bringing disgrace on the Lord, it was designed to display his long-suffering faithfulness. George Schwab writes: “The prophet is called to image Yahweh by marrying a woman who will break his heart. . . . The opening of this book reveals the conflicted heart of God. He is portrayed exactly like a betrayed husband. He wants to punish his unfaithful wife—but he still loves her and desires to take her back.”<sup>7</sup> As we learn in Hosea, God is not reluctant to accuse his people

5. Thomas McComiskey, “Hosea,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 1:17.

6. Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, New American Commentary 19A (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 1997), 53.

7. George M. Schwab Sr., “Hosea,” in *Daniel—Malachi*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, *ESV Expository Commentary 7* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 182.

for their idolatry, but he still loves them when they sin and wants to win them back.

### A SON NAMED “BLOODSHED”

While the interactions between Hosea and his unfaithful wife are foremost in this extended object lesson, the children of their union play a prophetic role through the names they are given. Having been called by the Lord to marry a prostitute, Hosea did not hold back his love. He thus “went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son” (Hos. 1:3).

Hosea and Gomer would have three children, each of whom would receive a name symbolic of divine judgment. When the first was born, “the LORD said to him, ‘Call his name Jezreel’” (Hos. 1:4). Jezreel was a town in northern Israel, and it was also the name of a strategic valley in which a number of significant events had already taken place. Positively, Gideon had defeated the Midianites in the Valley of Jezreel (Judg. 6:33). Notoriously, Jezreel was where the righteous man Naboth had his vineyard stolen and was put to death through the agency of wicked Jezebel (1 Kings 21:1-16). From this point on, Jezreel would be associated with bloodshed and violence. When the Lord anointed Jehu, head of Israel’s current dynasty, he commanded him to go to Jezreel and put Jezebel to death (2 Kings 9:10). Jehu also slew the seventy sons of Ahab and had their heads brought to him at Jezreel (10:7). He then killed “all who remained of the house of Ahab in Jezreel” (v. 11) and murdered many relatives of Judah’s King Amaziah, who were there visiting Jezebel (v. 14).

With this sordid history, “Jezreel” became a symbolic name for *bloodshed*, much as “Watergate” is associated in America with political corruption. If you can imagine naming a child “Chernobyl” for the Russian nuclear disaster or “Auschwitz” for the Holocaust, then you can guess what it meant for Hosea’s son to bear the name “Jezreel.”<sup>8</sup>

We are not left merely with a general impression from this child, for the prophet turned his name into a specific prophecy: “for in just a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel” (Hos. 1:4). Since Jehu had slain Jezebel at this very spot, in addition to earlier killing her son King

8. Chester, *Hosea*, 38.

Joram there (2 Kings 9:24–25), we might easily draw the conclusion that God was going to visit judgment on his household for this sin. The problem is that God had not only commanded Jehu to put an end to the house of Ahab, but also praised him for doing so (9:7; 10:30). One theory holds that God judged Jehu for the excessive violence he employed in slaying everyone in Ahab's house, not to mention the relatives of Judah's king. While this may be the case, the Lord had also commanded Jehu to restore true religion through the suppression of idols, which Jehu did not do (10:29–31). He therefore rebelled against the very purpose for which he had been put in place of Ahab's son, rendering him guilty for the blood that he shed. Garrett explains: "God visited the bloodshed of Jezreel on the house of Jehu because, in the final analysis, his dynasty's rule was little better than that of Jeroboam I or of Ahab and Jezebel."<sup>9</sup>

Hosea foretold that the punishment of the house of Jehu would occur "in just a little while" (Hos. 1:4), and so it happened. Probably not long after he uttered this prophecy, Jeroboam II died at the end of his long reign. His son Zechariah took the throne, but only six months later was murdered by a general named Shallum, who ruled after him (2 Kings 15:10). This event not only fulfilled Hosea's prophecy by ending the dynasty of Jehu, but also began a chaotic period when a succession of military leaders came to power through the death of their predecessors.

Hosea prophesied not only the end of the line of Jehu, but also the end of the northern kingdom as a whole: "I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. And on that day I will break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel" (Hos. 1:4–5). This constitutes the primary prediction made by Hosea, fulfilled when Tiglath-pileser III reinvigorated the Assyrian military and over the next twenty-five years reduced the northern kingdom and finally brought it to an end.

"The house of Israel" refers to the entirety of the nation, which came under God's severe judgment for its unrepentant idolatry and corruption. Jezreel was one of the main invasion routes into Israel, bordered by the mountains of Galilee and Samaria. Secular history records that in 733 B.C. Tiglath-Pileser III conquered both these regions, just as God had foretold. Douglas Stuart notes that "to 'break the bow' is typical treaty curse language, symbolic of total defeat."<sup>10</sup> So it was that the Valley of Jezreel, a site of one

9. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, 57.

10. Douglas Stuart, *Hosea—Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary 31 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 30.

of Israel's greatest victories in the days of her fidelity, witnessed during the life of Hosea the breaking of Israel's military might as God's judgment on her infidelity.

## JUDGMENT AND GRACE

As we begin to study the book of Hosea, the Lord's resolute opposition to sin is pictured in stark relief. Sated by their prosperity and with their senses dulled by pleasure, the people of Israel scarcely imagined that the good times would ever stop rolling. When Hosea began his ministry, peace had long reigned and no obvious threats to their way of life were in view. They forgot how quickly events can get out of control in this troubled world. More importantly, they forgot that a holy God reigns sovereignly over history. Hosea was sent to remind them not only that God observes all of the world's sin with a burning indignation, but especially that he is sure to visit the wanton sins of his people with judgment.

The message that Hosea brought to Israel is one that our comfortable, sin-indulgent society needs to hear. Just as the festive scenes aboard the cruise liner *Titanic* were ended by her calamitous collision with the iceberg, so also the wanton embrace of sexual indecency is sinking our society into a culture of death and shattered relationships. Sin has dire consequences, and if you run from God, you end up in trouble. Gary Smith thus puts the story of Hosea into a message for our time: "Either people are believers and are faithful to their covenant commitments to God, or they are not part of the family of God. Those who are unfaithful to God are really like prostitutes."<sup>11</sup>

We should apply the warning of Hosea 1:1-5 specifically to the sin of false worship. Most people who are willing to admit the sins of our generation would highlight the eighth commandment, where God forbids stealing, or the seventh commandment, against adultery, or even the fifth commandment, which requires us to honor our parents. But Hosea highlights the great sin of breaching the first commandment, which prohibits the worship of false gods. Not only do most Westerners deny to God the adoration he deserves, but they also compound their offense with the worship of money, pride, pleasure, or power. The apostasy of our land can be gauged by the vast extent to which the Lord's Day is devoted to recreation rather than to worship.

11. Gary V. Smith, *Hosea, Amos, Micah*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 44.

## *A Bride for Hosea*

As God sent Hosea to Israel, our generation needs Christian witnesses who speak the truth about God and his hatred of sin. This will often be uncomfortable, just as it was difficult for Hosea to marry “a wife of whoredom” (Hos. 1:2). Yet the Bible shows that for all their many troubles, God did not abandon his prophets. Nor will he abandon his faithful church today as it bears testimony to his Word.

Even more than a warning of judgment, our sinful world needs to discover the hope of salvation in God’s grace. The ministry of Hosea reminds us that even in times of wanton sin, God sends messengers like Hosea, whose very name bore a message, meaning “the Lord saves.” Thomas McComiskey writes: “The prophecy of Hosea is a tapestry of grace. As the prophet loved a woman whose crudeness and brazenness must have hurt him deeply, so God’s grace comes to his people in their unloveliness.”<sup>12</sup> The story of Hosea and Gomer ends with even so disgraced a woman’s being restored to a holy relationship with her husband. However far downward we have sunk in sin, God’s grace is deep enough to lift us out and into his love.

We began by asking how a prophet such as Hosea could ever submit to God’s command to marry so wicked a woman. We see now that the ultimate answer is found in his divine willingness to love and sacrifice. Hosea gave up the normal pleasures of married life so that Israel could be summoned back to her faithful Lord. But Jesus Christ bore an even stronger love that made the greatest sacrifice possible. Hosea did not have to die for Gomer, but Jesus died for our sins. He bore our guilt and shame on the cross so that, having purchased his bride with his own precious blood, he might “redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession” (Titus 2:14).

12. McComiskey, *Minor Prophets*, 1:17.