



#5: Hosea: God's Passionate Covenant

**Bible Readings: Hosea 1: 1-11,
Hosea 2: 14-20, and Hosea 11:1-11**

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES: Faithful God, Covenant People

This series is taking us on a journey through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, looking at God's purposes in calling human beings into a covenant relationship.

PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

In this session try to set the theme within the ongoing story of Israel's history with God, including the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and King David (**2 Samuel 7: 5-16**). By the time we have reached the prophecy of Hosea, the Eighth Century BCE, the once-united kingdom of David and Solomon has been divided into two realms: Israel in the north (also known as Ephraim), and Judah in the south, centred on Jerusalem. Hosea's message is directed to the leaders and people of the northern kingdom, repeatedly under pressure from Assyria, the regional 'superpower'.

As you prepare to lead this session, continue to pray for group members, including those who may be finding it more difficult to attend every meeting.

PREPARATION FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS (before the session)

In our journey through the Old Testament we have reached the section often referred to as the 'Minor Prophets', on account of the length of the books. There is nothing 'minor' about their message. Hosea's story begins with his relationship with Gomer who bore him children, but strayed into infidelity. God (Yahweh) draws the parallel between Gomer's adultery and the faithlessness of northern Israel ("Ephraim") and their leaders in abandoning Yahweh for the gods of Canaan, where they had settled (**Hosea 4:10-14** indicates where this led). **The first three chapters** are worth reading carefully. You will find that they raise many questions, both puzzling and disturbing. Stay with your questions, and bring them to the group. It would also be good to read **chapter 11, verses 1 to 11**, the best known text in the book, opening up a profound insight into God and his saving work.

STARTING THE SESSION: A PRAYER

Let us praise the Lord.

Lord, you made known your deeds to the people of Israel.

You are compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love.

As high as the heavens are above the earth,

so great is your love for those who hold you in awesome reverence.

We praise your name through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

(based on the opening verses of Psalm 103)

FINDING OUR ROOTS – some questions to explore

What questions arise for you from the opening chapters of Hosea? Do you detect God's capacity for both passionate anger and passionate love? How do you react to these striking images of God's character?

Can these two passions be reconciled?

What do you feel passionate about?

How can passionate attraction in human relationships be nurtured and deepened into steadfast maturity?

What covenants help to bind that commitment?

READING THE SCRIPTURES – with background information

Read together the first Bible passage: **Hosea 1:1-11**

The family life of the prophet Hosea symbolizes God's message to the people. Hosea is ordered to marry an adulterous wife (Gomer); their three children are given symbolic names: *Jezreel*, meaning 'God scatters'; *Lo-Ruhamah* – 'not-loved'; *Lo-Ammi* – 'not my people'. God's intentions are spelled out in **verses 4 to 9**, then dramatically revoked in the final two verses. God appears to have a radical change of mind!

Now read the second passage: **Hosea 2:14-20**

The passage looks forward to a second 'betrothal' (**verses 19 and 20**). The original betrothal refers to Israel's desert wandering before she was tempted by the Baals (false gods) of Canaan. 'Achor' in verse 15 means 'trouble', but the Valley, where Achan had been stoned for his sin as Israel entered the promised land (**Joshua 7: 24-25**), will now be made a door of hope. In **verse 16**, 'my master' is the English translation of the Hebrew '*baal*'. For Israel to return to God as her rightful husband entails the rejection of Baal. In **verse 19**, the terrible symbolism of 'Lo-Ruhamah' is reversed: "I will betroth you to me for ever...in love and compassion." Throughout this passage God's promised covenant is symbolised by marriage.

Now read the third passage: **Hosea 11:1-11**

Verse 1 rejects any idea that God is enthroned 'remotely high, untouched, unmoved by human pains' (words of Brian Wren, *Hymns & Psalms 190*). God is known in his totally-involved relationship with us. This chapter can be seen as **a poem is in two parts** (as shown by B.W. Anderson, *The Eighth Century Prophets*, SPCK, 1978). **Part One (1 to 7)** reveals God's *anger*. Third person pronouns are used: '*they* went from me... *they* burned incense to images'. God's pathos is real; expressed first in anger. In **Part Two (8 to 11)**, the pathos of anger is turned into the pathos of *compassion*, using direct speech: 'How can I hand you over, Israel?' God will not destroy, because his heart is changed within him; *all* his compassion is aroused (**v.8**). This apparent contradiction can be explained only in terms of God's inexplicable holiness. Yet the Holy God is not aloof from his people, but *among them*, refusing now to come in wrath – retaining his sovereign freedom, even if it means breaking his own norms! And so, the poem ends with the theme of a 'new exodus'.

DIGGING DEEPER – some questions for you to consider in your group:

Israel, rescued from slavery by the action of the God of history, needed to make a choice between their covenant commitment to Yahweh, and the ancient nature gods of the lands where they had settled. The people were tempted to adopt a mythology centred on the agricultural cycle with its attendant fertility cults. Given the pressures we face in our very different circumstances in today's world, *by what modern 'mythologies' are we tempted? How may we as Christians hold fast to our covenant commitment?*

How do we reconcile the righteous anger of Jesus during his ministry on earth and his mission to be the Saviour of the all? Where in the world would we want to see the anger or passion of God at work today?

One of our modern hymns (*Singing The Faith 351*) speaks of the cross of Jesus as the place where '**the wrath of God was satisfied.**' *Does that help you to understand more fully the truth that Hosea glimpsed? Or does it leave you with unanswered questions?*

How passionate are you about sharing your faith? What questions or doubts sometimes hinder our evangelism? What guidance or help might you need to share with more passion or confidence?

PRAYING TOGETHER

Give thanks for any new insights you have gained in the group today. Offer any unanswered questions to God in simple trust. Use the hymn '**Jesus Christ is waiting**' (*Singing The Faith 251*) as an 'outreach' prayer. Leave space for your own prayers - for others and yourselves. And finish with **The Lord's Prayer** together.

COVENANT LIVING: PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE (to think about afterwards)

How passionate do you believe God to be in his commitment to us? What difference does that make to our relationship with God? Do you feel passionate in your love for God in return? How can we express this?

Junior Good Soil, issue #5

HOSEA: Learning about God's Anger and Love

Written by Andy Murphy.

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Junior Good Soil is for children's and young people's groups in churches. It can be easily adapted and you can add your own ideas!



PLANTING THE SEED – what are we thinking about today?

It was a very long time after Moses and the Commandments. God's people had split into two kingdoms, Israel (in the north) and Judah (in the south). Over many years, led by different kings, they had strayed away from worshipping the one true God, and had instead worshipped some of the false gods of the local area. They would burn sacrifices to them and follow some of the festivals and rituals of the people around them. But God always remembered the covenant he made with them. He remembered the promises made by the people, and the commandments he gave them. He remembered the special festivals he gave them as gifts, and he wondered why they now preferred these other gods instead. God was feeling betrayed and angry. So, God sent the prophet Hosea to give a special message to the people of Israel and Judah. He wanted them to remember their covenant, and he wanted them to know how passionately angry he felt about this. Hosea was given a special understanding of how God felt, because his wife (and the mother of his children) was unfaithful to him. His wife was called Gomer, and she was not very good at staying with just one man. Hosea felt sad and hurt about this, just like God felt about his people. So when Hosea gave his message, he was able to express God's anger.

QUIET TIME – a prayer (for use at the start or end of the session)

Dear God, we learn from the Bible that you can sometimes be angry, especially when your people turn their love and attention to other gods or make other things more important than following in your way. Help us to be faithful in all our relationships, especially our love for you. Forgive us when we hurt you, and others, we pray, and help us to know that your love is always stronger than your anger, just like Jesus shows us. **Amen.**

TELLING THE STORY – reading the Bible... Hosea 11, verses 1-11

In many ways, the full story is not appropriate for children, and you won't find it in most children's Bibles! However, For older children, it might be interesting to reflect on this passage, which shows both God's anger and love: **Hosea 11:1-11** (link to the **Contemporary English Version**).

This video also tries to explain it to children: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ld9IKmpCCc0

WATERING AND GERMINATING – what can we learn? / what does it tell us?

Jesus showed us that God's love is greater than God's anger. Even if we've turned away from God's way and done wrong things, God will forgive us when we come back to him and ask to start again with him. While God always loves us as his children, God is still angry at the sin and wrongdoing in the world. God is angry when people are hurt, and when we deliberately do wrong things. Being in a relationship with God should mean that we try our best to live as God wants us to live.

LETTING IT GROW – ideas for activities and discussion

Try writing a worship song (or poem) for God! *What words would you use to describe how you feel about God? How would you put into words God's love for us? What would you thank him or praise him for?*

PRAISE AND WORSHIP – hymns and songs (can be used at the start or end, or whenever!)

Rescue (Lauren Daigle) www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PugD11k3JU

Faithful God (written by Chris Bowater) www.youtube.com/watch?v=sF1UvaalXic