

A Consuming Love

Learning to Love Again: A Study of Hosea

Hosea 11-13

Pastor Jordan Green

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Introduction

As many of you know Sarah Beth and I have two beautiful daughters. But for this past week, both girls have been sick. So you know what that means. Late nights consoling them. Countless hours sleeping in a rocking chair. Middle of the night car rides, in hopes of a few precious hours of sleep.

But here's the thing—they won't remember any of it. In fact, they won't remember much of the work their mom and I put into their childhood. Ally won't remember how I picked her up when she cried. Avery won't remember me reading the same book to her over and over. They just won't remember.

I know this is true, because I don't remember. In fact, I texted my parents this week to ask some things they did for me as a kid that I wouldn't remember. Shortly after that I got a text from my dad, "Mom's getting ready to send you a long list."

It seems like a burden of parenthood is to love a child who won't understand the innumerable ways their parents loved them. And it might seem funny, or sad, but what about when it comes to the love God has for his children?

This is the plight of the book of Hosea: The children of God have forgotten the love of God. Not an abstract love. Not some mere affection or sentimentality. Rather the unconditional love of God that made them who they are today. And in forgetting the love of God, they've gone astray into all sorts of sin and wrongdoing. And friends, one of the main reasons we so often go astray is because we forget everything the Lord has done for us.

The love of God is the main thing you and I need. It is the thing we must understand, and take into our own life, if we hope to have any knowledge of God. If we hope to have any life at all.

Now I know what you might be thinking. "Great, a sermon about God's love." If you're honest you might think it's a pretty boring topic. Can I say that? Sure, a rich topic. An important topic. But is that all you've got for us? We're Christians, we know God loves us. "For God so loved the world..." It's one of the first things we learn.

Yet, the problem throughout Hosea is that the people of God didn't remember or recognize the love of God. They'd forgotten who God was. And if we're not diligent to recognize and appropriate this love, it's the same danger we can face today.

This is a sermon about the consuming love of God. This is a passage about a God who's turned his heart so intentionally toward you, even when it seems like you can't turn towards him.

As a church we've been walking through this book of Hosea. A story of sin and judgement, but also a love story. A story of people looking for love in all the wrong places. Chapters 1-3 give us the living parable of Hosea, Gomer and their children; which reflects the relationship of God and his people. Chapters 4-10 present lengthy accusations against Israel. Over and over the prophet says

their main problem is there is no knowledge of God in the land. This is why they are being destroyed. Because what they didn't understand is what Hosea says in chapter 6:6. To understand his steadfast love is to have knowledge of God.

So by the end of chapter 10 we find a picture of desolation and destruction, where each false hope, false love Israel has sought has been shattered to pieces. But as chapter 10 closes with this picture of desolation, we come to chapter 11, our main text today. And it's beautiful.

Like a veil pulled back, we get a rare glimpse of this forgotten God. Here we find the clearest and most extended look at God in the book of Hosea. Because knowing God is their only hope. And to know God, is to know his covenant love. Here in chapter 11 we find a God whose heart is unconditionally turned towards his people. In chapter 11 we get a peek at the very heart of God.

This morning we have some of the most extraordinary verses in the whole Bible. But 11-13 is a lot of ground to cover. So here's what we are going to do. We are going to focus our attention on chapter 11, and along the way bring in pieces of chapters 12 and 13 as they help us understand the whole section.

So our goal today is simple. Explore chapter 11 as we see this heart of God intently turned toward Israel, even though his people seem incapable of turning towards him. A God who won't give up on his people. We'll cover chapter 11 in three parts, where we explore three aspects of God and his love.

Hosea 11:1-11¹

¹*When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.*

²*The more they were called,
the more they went away;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals
and burning offerings to idols.*

³*Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them up by their arms,
but they did not know that I healed them.*

⁴*I led them with cords of kindness,
with the bands of love,
and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws,
and I bent down to them and fed them.*

⁵*They shall not return to the land of Egypt,
but Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.*

⁶*The sword shall rage against their cities,
consume the bars of their gates,
and devour them because of their own counsels.*

⁷*My people are bent on turning away from me,
and though they call out to the Most High,
he shall not raise them up at all.*

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

⁸*How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
 How can I hand you over, O Israel?
 How can I make you like Admah?
 How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
 My heart recoils within me;
 my compassion grows warm and tender.*

⁹*I will not execute my burning anger;
 I will not again destroy Ephraim;
 for I am God and not a man,
 the Holy One in your midst,
 and I will not come in wrath.*

¹⁰*They shall go after the LORD;
 he will roar like a lion;
 when he roars,
 his children shall come trembling from the west;*

¹¹*they shall come trembling like birds from Egypt,
 and like doves from the land of Assyria,
 and I will return them to their homes, declares the LORD.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

GOD IS A FATHER. (1-4)

For these 11 verses God speaks, and he starts out by recalling the past. Tim Keller describes it like a storybook opening, it's as though God says, once upon a time I found a helpless child, and I loved him. I took him in and brought him home, out from the clutches of an enemy.

God wants them to know that their relationship is like a father to a child. God is a Father. And one of the defining acts of this Father's love is his rescue out of Egypt. It's this act that defines his people and grounds his love.

In fact, the next two times that God speaks in the book of Hosea, he begins by referring to himself as the God who delivered them from Egypt (Hosea 12:9; 13:4).

What's going on here? He wants us to know a few things. First, his love is grounded in history. The exodus is an act of love. His love is no mere affection or sentimentality. God is known by the very fact that he works in history as a savior and provider.

Secondly, by recalling the exodus, he is recalling the covenant that went with it. And this covenant serves as the very indictment against them. If you remember Deuteronomy 29, Moses outlines what happens if you break the covenant. Because if they don't remember it and teach their children to remember it, if they abandon the covenant, it's going to get ugly. Moses writes, "it will be like Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the Lord overthrew in fierce anger."

This is why the gospel of Matthew picks up on this verse as relating to Jesus. Because Jesus is the one who fulfilled the call of Israel out of Egypt. Unlike Israel's failure, Jesus followed the covenant of his loving Father perfectly.

Thirdly, it also illustrates the very depth of God's love toward his people. God loved Israel, because he chose to. And because of that love God delivered them from Egypt (Deut. 7:7-8).

But even from the beginning of their relationship we see that sometimes wayward children are just wayward. They're bound to run away. Because, you can do everything right and it still go very wrong. You might be a parent who's experienced this. You think to yourself, "Where'd I go wrong? The more I called them the more they pushed me away. I didn't raise them like this." Know that God can relate. He knows this sort of pain to the nth degree. You can do everything right and it still go very wrong.

God expresses the love of an ever present Father, but his child, Ephraim (which is the name God uses to refer to northern tribes of Israel), just keeps running away. And in the midst of this rejection we find God reminiscing. We find a loving Father recalling all the ways he's loved his child. It's the image of a parent going back through their scrapbook, or more likely, scrolling through their iPhone photos.

He says, "Remember when I taught Ephraim to walk? Or when he fell, and I picked him up? I dusted off his knees. I held him when he cried. I healed his wounds. I sat up with him all night when he was sick, but he doesn't know, he doesn't remember."

Hosea then switches from the image of child and father to a master and livestock. How he led them with cords of kindness, not poking and prodding, or whipping and shouting. He didn't overburden them, like an oxen with a heavy yoke and a tight bit. Rather his yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

He's the one who fed them and sustained them.

Now this is highly metaphorical. What's God referring to? What is he talking about? He's talking about how he led them. Like Hosea 12:10 and 13 explains, God used the prophets, primarily Moses, to show his love and care for his people.

Now think about this sort of love. Sometimes it meant rebuke. Sometimes it meant leading them into places of discomfort. Places they didn't like. But it was always for their overall good.

So what do we see about God's love in this passage? We see that God's love is a fatherly love.

We're a culture obsessed with love, but we've got God's love all wrong, if we think of some benevolent old man that wants us to be happy in our own way. Or if we think God's love is some abstract thing that simply makes me feel good about myself, or makes me happy whenever I'm blue. God's love is not a vending machine we access whenever we're down and need something.

His love is more than we can imagine. But at the very least it's like the love of a perfect father.

A fatherly love is a mature love. The opposite, of course, would be an immature love. Like when a child says, "You wouldn't buy me that Fancy Nancy doll with the five dresses and tiara!! You don't love me!" Rather a mature love isn't looking for immediate happiness, but understands the practice of deferred gratification. A mature love keeps the long view in mind.

A fatherly love is also an edifying love. It doesn't wink at evil, allowing people to just be happy in their own way. But it's also not overbearing. Like a heavy yoke bending people to your will. Rather the love of God is gentle and kind. For God to love us, means we are the objects of his love. That

we might become people in which the father is pleased. He is not content to leave us where we are, or where we want to go ourselves, but will work on us to build us up into something more like him.

God's love is a fatherly love. So what does this mean for us?

First, ask yourself, "Where have I seen the work of God's love in my life?" One of our biggest hang-ups is thinking about all the bad and not recognizing God's work. The rescue from Egypt, the signs of the prophets. These were defining moments in Israel's walk with God. What are yours?

For me, I think of a few friends I had in college. Friends that helped me know what it meant to walk the Christian life. The people God has placed in my life are tangible representations of his love and care. Or last Sunday morning when we celebrated the lives of those who've gone before us, faithful with the gospel. These moments should be remembered and celebrated.

Secondly, ask yourself, "Do I reflect the love of the Father? Do I keep the long view in mind, or like a child do I let my immediate needs drive me? Am I overbearing or indulgent?"

To a culture obsessed with love, one of the greatest things we can do is reflect the true love of God. This tangible love of God is to be remembered and celebrated. Lest we forget and go astray. Which is what we find in verses 5-7.

GOD IS JUST. (5-7)

In verses 5-7 we find that God is just. The exodus we just read about is now being undone, because of Israel's turn from God they will go back to the same state they were in before. Exiles. But this time, exile will not be in Egypt, rather Assyria. This is just the same song, with a different tune. Listen to what it says.

Hosea 11:5-7

*⁵They shall not return to the land of Egypt,
but Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.
⁶The sword shall rage against their cities,
consume the bars of their gates,
and devour them because of their own counsels.
⁷My people are bent on turning away from me,
and though they call out to the Most High,
he shall not raise them up at all.*

What happened? They refused to return to God, and so returned to exile. In Hosea 11:12-12:1 we see that Ephraim was consumed with lies and deceit. They made covenants with Assyria and so God would give them over to the desires of their heart.

You see in chapters 12-13 we find the sins of the present are simply repeats of sins from the past. *Some things never change.* Their patriarch Jacob was a liar. Israel continuously rebelled in the desert. Even their king, whether Saul or the litany of kings mentioned in Hosea 1:1 were an affront to God.

In chapter 13 there's even a taunt from God about their rulers. He says, "Where now is your king, to save you? Where are your rulers? I'll give you a king, but you're not going to like it." And here we see it's the king of Assyria.

They had become a people without integrity. They had become a people out for themselves, following their own counsels. They didn't seek God's truth. They were idol worshipers, oath breakers, swindlers. They were proud.

A people bent on turning away from God. Would get exactly what they want. And yet a people turned away from God meet a God intently turned towards them. And in verse 8 we read one of the most astounding passages in the whole Old Testament.

GOD IS COMPASSIONATE. (8-9)

Listen to this:

Hosea 11:8

*⁸How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.*

Do you know what's happening here? It's an incredible image. God is torn up. His heart is wrenched. Now, I know some of our systematic theologians in the room are starting to feel the hair on the back of their neck stand on end. You're worried what I might say about God. Take a breath.

Listen to what one commentator says about this passage:

One may of course regard this as metaphor, as language that somehow puts divine love into terms that a human can understand, even though God himself does not really experience self-doubt and anxiety over issues of justice and mercy. This is certainly true, and we should not press the language too strongly... Still we should not be overhasty to correct the image that the text gives us. ...texts such as this should be allowed to speak to us in the power of the raw emotion. It is precisely in texts such as this that the love of God becomes a vivid reality and not a barren abstraction.²

Don't jettison your doctrine. Your immutability and aseity of God. We all understand that God sometimes describes himself in metaphors or human terms just to help us understand. As we'll see, he is wholly different than man.

But also let this text show you something about the heart of God. Let the text show you something about the love of God. Let the scriptures move you, because they sure moved God.

Here's our problem. Christian folk can sometimes be a little too cavalier with the way we talk about God's mercy and justice. Like it's not a hard thing. Not just intellectually to grasp, but difficult at the very heart of God. It tears him up. And it should tear us up as well.

How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? These are the two cities along with Sodom and Gomorrah which were utterly annihilated. No one was saved from these towns. The thing is, God had every right to destroy them like Admah and Zeboiim. I referenced

²Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, The New American Commentary

Deuteronomy 29 earlier, but there Moses says beware of abandoning the covenant, because God will not forgive you, but give you up for destruction.

Deuteronomy 29:23-25

²³...an overthrow like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, which the LORD overthrew in his anger and wrath—²⁴all the nations will say, 'Why has the LORD done thus to this land? What caused the heat of this great anger?' ²⁵Then people will say, 'It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt.'

He had them dead to rights. They didn't keep the covenant. They worshiped other gods, they lied, cheated, and stole. They were a proud and wicked people.

But to annihilate them? God's very heart, the center of his will "recoils." You know what this word means? This word is violent. It is used to describe the destruction and overthrow of cities by an opposing power. In fact, it's the very word Jeremiah uses to describe the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim (Jer. 49:18; 50:40).

God's saying that just considering to overthrow you is overthrowing my heart. God is compassionate.

Now, God does not love us because he needs us to complete him or something like that. Rather, He identifies fully with us. Another word for that is compassion. God is compassionate. He says, I will not do this. I will not annihilate them.

Of course this doesn't negate the fact that trouble is coming. There has been destruction and there will be more. Rather God is saying that his goal is not to annihilate them all, but to restore them. For he is God not man. His love isn't like ours, and his anger isn't either. He doesn't operate like man. His holiness does not simply relate to his justice but also to his mercy.

Man's aim is for destruction. Annihilation. In fact, annihilation was Assyria's MO. What they were known for. But God's aim is restoration. God knows us, in all our sin and evil deeds and yet we are the object of his love. Gary Williams writes, "The more we (humans) know of evil, the less we are inclined to love. The more God knows of our evil, as much as he hates it, the more he seeks us out."³

I've been reading and re-reading this passage. Over and over, and it continues to astound me. We see something so precious about the love of God. This passage shows us God's love is a vulnerable love. C.S. Lewis writes:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.⁴

Essential to the act of love is vulnerability. Now, of course God's vulnerability is a little different. For us, vulnerability means loving when we're not certain it will work out. We enter the risk not knowing. But for God, vulnerability isn't one of uncertainty rather sovereignty. God's love is

³ Garry J. Williams, *His Love Endures Forever: Reflections on the Immeasurable Love of God*, p. 156

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

vulnerable precisely because he enters the risk loving knowing it will cost. He knows his heart will be wrung and broken. He loves even when he knows he'll be rejected. Cheated on. Spurned. Spat at. Like telling Hosea to go and love a harlot.

He pursues us nonetheless. Because he identifies with us. He's invested in us. God's all in. He has so turned his heart and his will toward us, that his heart is wrapped up with ours. It's more than just empathy, it's compassion. The movement of empathy. He understands and knows our pain and our joy.

Talking about God like this might feel uncomfortable. Good. Scriptures like this are supposed to mess with our categories a little bit. Because God and his ways are not a calculus you have all figured out. He is the God of all creation, who hung the stars in the sky. God. Not man.

And, he has so bound up his heart with yours that that he understands your pain. God cares about your good. He's not an angry God looking to beat people down. God's heart is broken for you and me. And if you don't believe me, then look at the cross. Where Jesus bore the broken heart of God. Where God bore the curse of loving us. Where God bore the cost of love.

At the end of Hosea 13 there is a parallel passage to what we see here in 11. God says, "I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol; I shall redeem them from Death. O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes."

Does this sound familiar? In Hosea this is a summons of judgment. He's not saying they won't die; rather death will come to take his people because of their iniquity. And yet, that's not the end of the story. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:55, picks up these very words and turns this summons of death into a taunt. Death's dominion has ended. It's sting, has lost its bite. For God did not show compassion on his only son, but it was his will to crush him that death itself might be robbed of power.

Friends at the cross, the cost of loving us is on full display. That God would open himself up to such ridicule and shame. In order that he might do what we could not. Being so turned toward us, he might turn us back to him and bring us home. That death would no longer have the last word, but rather life and joy unimaginable.

This is a vulnerable love. This is a consuming love. This is the love of our God.

But how do we respond? In what way does this impact us today?

First, we have to respond with the same sort of vulnerability towards God. We have to open ourselves up to God to be fully known and fully transformed by him. Allow yourself and your concerns to be shaken by the love of God.

Secondly, it means being vulnerable with others. Who do you let know you? Where do you invest in relationships where it might not work out and could go badly? Where do you put barricades up to keep yourself protected? Because it also keeps you from loving and being loved.

To love means to be open to hurt, and no doubt many of you have been hurt before. But don't let your hurt make you hard. It could be hurt you've experienced from friends, or family, or even the church. Don't let that hurt make you cold. Don't try to numb your vulnerability with work, hobbies, food, or addictions. As pastor Tim Keller says when speaking on vulnerability, "Let your hurt make

you wise, not hard.” Be wise in your relationships, not cold. Love with the same sort of openness to shame and disappointment that our Lord Jesus shows each and every one of us.

So what’s the resolution to our story in Hosea? We find it in verse 10 and 11. We find it’s a new exodus. By the help of God, his people will hear his call once again, just like in verse one, and they will finally turn back.

But this time they’ll come trembling. They’ll come with their hearts finally softened toward the love of their father. And the destination of this new exodus is that God will bring his people home.

Simply going home is really an anticlimactic ending to an otherwise dramatic section of scripture. It’s not the poetically beautiful picture of restoration like we’ll find next week in chapter 14. Rather it’s the ordinary image of pulling into your driveway after a long trip. And after all, there’s really is no place like home. No other place you quite feel like you belong. No other place you quite feel as loved.

We all have this homesickness. It’s like the longing of Paul to go and be with Christ. It’s like the longing of the prodigal son to return to his father. The love of God is intent on bringing you home.

Resources that impacted and shaped this message:

- Duane Garrett’s wonderful commentary on Hosea as well as those from the following series: Word Biblical Commentary, Two Horizons, McComiskey’s work on the Minor Prophets, Baker Exegetical Handbook on Hosea.
- Various wonderful sermons on either Hosea or the love of God by Kevin DeYoung, Tim Keller, and James Boice.
- Garry Williams wonderful work on the love of God.
- Lewis’ classic work, *The Four Loves*.