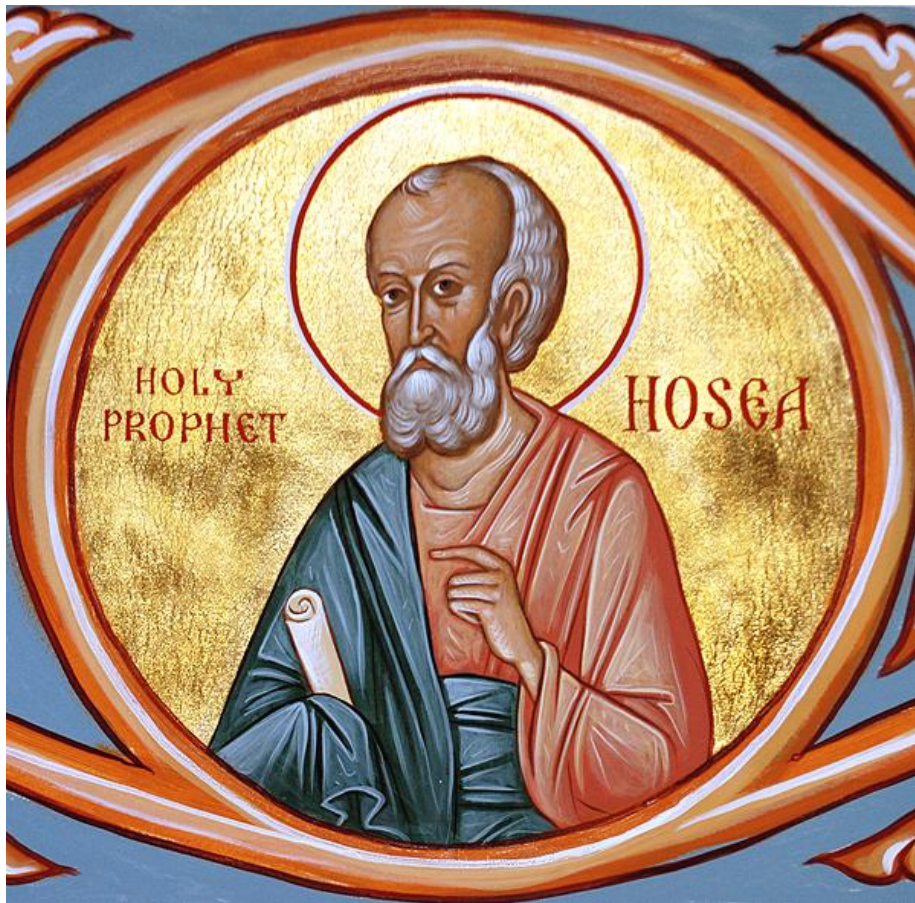


Hosea's Life Shows the Relationship between Doctrine and Practice



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It is a book of love stories, is it not? Adam and Eve enjoyed their most blessed and perfect union for some time. Talk about a honeymoon phase! Noah's wife stood by her beloved even as he worked on what appeared to be the result of a mid-life crisis: the need for a bigger boat. Through sickness, health and barrenness Abraham and Sarah kept their commitment to one another. The LORD blessed them with the Laughter even as their Social Security checks were rolling in. Isaac and Rebekah skipped the blind date for a blind marriage and gave proof to millions of over-eager parents that arranged marriages work. Even Jacob's polygamous ways demonstrated by way of "what-not-to-do" how God's intent for one man and one woman in marriage is best. His Brady Bunch-esque approach to family life spread his love thin, and he lived with such consequences.

Joseph's adult life in Egypt brought him into a biracial marriage with Asenath. Moses lost his bachelor status upon finding his Zipporah during his desert training. David suffered under a great deal of pain as his lust turned to love for Bathsheba. Solomon discovered that with women more is less. God recycled his "Barren? Schmarren!" storyline with Zechariah and Elizabeth that produced the Forerunner. And, of course, who can forget about the unconsummated relationship that still made parents out of Joseph and Mary. When accusations of infidelity and the reality of shame could have given birth, instead the LORD brought forth the Savior for mankind.

Isn't it interesting that after Jesus' parents there is little mention of named couples in the rest of the New Testament? God filled the pages of Old Testament Scripture with numerous records of husbands and wives. In doing so he was not just showing us that he brings man and woman together in a variety of ways; meshing different personalities as he guided them through a variety of issues. God made it clear to his people that marital commitment and the love which results is the human picture of God's love for us. Once his Son entered the world and redeemed it, the shadow was no longer needed for the reality had come.

Whether God parades couples before our eyes in the Old Testament or flashes beautiful illustrations¹ in the New Testament, throughout his unified Word he wants us to see his perfect love for us. Where they failed, he succeeds. Where they broke commitments, he stood resolute to his. And where their sin failed to show total love, God has never done so. Such love goes beyond our comprehension, not because we fail to grasp the concepts, but because apart from the LORD's love for us we have never experienced it.

Reading God's holy Word gives us an aisle seat viewing Scripture's couples walking right by us. Upon considering them, and apart from the divine love of the LORD for sinners, is there any greater human love story in Scripture than that of Hosea? It is even better than Hollywood's take on it.²

Why did the LORD graciously give us this account? To many commentators the book of Hosea brings up more questions than it answers. Some find great difficulty with the LORD's command to his called servant. Apart from finding solace in the fact that God's command to Hosea to take to himself an adulterous wife is not a prescriptive command for us, what can we take away from it? How can this bizarre relationship have any relationship to the marriage of doctrine and practice?

Hosea's World

Political

Hosea begins the book with some helpful context to his ministry. "The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel."³ This helps narrow down the timeline of Hosea's ministry without actually providing

¹ As in Ephesians 5:21-33

² *Pretty Woman*

³ Hosea 1:1

specific dates for it. Jeroboam II in the north ruled from 793-753 B.C. Hezekiah's reign in the south spanned the years 715-686 B.C. Although Hosea's ministry did not span all 107 years, these reigns tell us he served as prophet for at least 38 years, if not for up to even fifty years. Thus, the first listed minor prophet proclaimed God's messages to his people during the reigns of more kings than any other prophet.⁴

As one might expect, with such a long period of service Hosea was witness to a great fluctuation on the political scene. The last king of Israel that Hosea mentions, Jeroboam II, actually ruled in a time of peace and prosperity. His reign was this surprising bubble of time in which neither Egypt, Aram, Assyria nor Babylon snuffed out Israel. As is recorded for us: "He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of Arabah"⁵ (that is from a region north of Aram on the Euphrates River all the way down to the Dead Sea).

As Jeroboam II worked for stability and prosperity in the north, King Uzziah was doing the same in the south. Together they expanded the borders to the extent that they rivaled the borders during the time of David and Solomon. "When Hosea appeared on the scene, all of Israel/Judah enjoyed an unusually high level of prosperity. There were few if any signs or indications on the political and social horizon that a tragic end of the northern kingdom was so rapidly approaching."⁶

Yet this tranquil time ended just as quickly for Israel. Hosea does not even mention the six kings who followed Jeroboam II, including his namesake (Hoshea) who was the last king of Israel. Perhaps that is because their reigns were relatively short. Maybe it is because four were assassinated (Zechariah, Shallum, Pekahiah, and Pekah) and one was captured in battle (Hoshea). Or as one has offered:

First of all Hosea may have felt that the men following Jeroboam on the throne didn't deserve the name, "King of Israel." In the thirty years after Jeroboam's death until the end of the northern kingdom there was much political chaos accompanied by assassinations and rival reigns. Some of these six kings were no more than puppets of Assyria. Secondly there is strong evidence from Hosea's book that he regarded the members of the house of David still ruling in Judah as the only valid, divinely elected rulers of Israel. Therefore the kings of the north would be usurpers.⁷

By 733 B.C. Assyrian forces were knocking on Israel's doors. In 722 B.C. their domination was evident as the Israelite captivity had begun. The physical departure of God's people from his Promised Land was only a reminder of how much further their hearts had gone from him. Hosea was an eyewitness to Israel's transformation from prosperity (which led to arrogance) to complacency (which led to apathy) to desperation (which led to hopelessness).

Economic and Social

The peace experienced during the reigns of Israel's Jeroboam II and Judah's Uzziah led to prosperity in their lands. Of course, prosperity is never enjoyed by 100% of the people.⁸ The prophet Amos, who was a contemporary of Hosea and preached mostly in Judah, details the explosion of wealth for some. However, this also led to social injustice as many took advantage of the poor. Merchants ran their businesses based on dishonesty. Money influenced the courts.

⁴ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 9.

⁵ 2 Kings 14:25

⁶ Paul R. Hanke, *Isagogical Study of the Book of Hosea*, 1.

⁷ James J. Westendorf, *Exegesis of Hosea 1:1-5*, 1.

⁸ In fact, some would argue that 99% do not get to share in the prosperity.

Such external prosperity led to internal decadence. Hosea's timeframe of ministry could be described with a Dickens-ian opening line: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."⁹ The people ran about as if nothing was the matter. They covered over their abominable hearts with the thin veneer of outward success. Trampling over everyone and anyone to get there only encouraged them all the more. It is no wonder that as the Holy Spirit uses Hosea to reveal to us the spiritual state of Israel we cannot help but realize our hearts are not far from such ineptitude.

Religious

When God called Abram from the land, people and household he knew so well, he did not bring Abram to the comfortable heartland of believers. Abram did not mistake Canaan for the invisible Church. Remember what Moses reports to us after the string of gracious promises from God and some details of Abram's family and journey? That seemingly insignificant statement, "Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were living in the land."¹⁰ This was the spiritual equivalent of when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego trusted they would not become a human s'more or when Daniel acted as Jack Hanna in a den of lions. It was a case of one of God's own being surrounded by certain death. The Canaanites' religious practices spelled eternal destruction for anyone who dabbled in them. Just as it was by God's grace he saved three men from a fiery furnace and one more from a lions' den, so it would only be by the grace of God that Abram's faith would survive as he lived among the Canaanites.

These Canaanites would be a constant thorn for God's people. God promised¹¹ he would drive the Canaanites away as Israel walked into the Promised Land, but his people did not follow his command to completely eradicate these pagan peoples living there. Ultimately, the LORD rejected Saul as king because Saul did not follow his command to completely annihilate them.¹²

Throughout Israelite history the people commanded to worship the one true God instead mixed in Canaanite worship practices. Several examples could be given, but certainly few are worse than the deplorable time of King Ahab. Ahab's choice of helpmate made for more of a hinder-mate. Jezebel was the daughter of King Ethbaal from Sidon. She strong-armed her weak-willed husband into bringing over Baal practices. Perhaps under his direction or at least following his rebellious lead, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho at the cost of two of his sons.¹³ Even his people had little regard for God's stern threats. For all this, here was Ahab's legacy: "(Ahab) did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him."¹⁴ And that's saying something.

By the time the word of the LORD comes to Hosea, it is difficult to decipher between the Canaanites and Israelites. Not because the Canaanites were now bringing their lambs and bulls for sacrifice in recognition of the coming Messiah. Rather because Israel had adapted and adopted the Canaanite worship practices. For never completely rooting out the evil influence of the Canaanites, Israel became like them. No longer simply living among them like Abram, but now living as them like Ahab.

How could this have happened? Hosea knew it all too well. Such spiritual depravity came by way of a vicious cycle of people and leaders badly influencing one another.

But let no man bring a charge, let no man accuse another, for your people are like those who

⁹ From *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens

¹⁰ Genesis 12:6

¹¹ Exodus 33:2

¹² 1 Samuel 15

¹³ 1 Kings 16:34

¹⁴ 1 Kings 16:32

bring charges against a priest. You stumble day and night, and the prophets stumble with you. So I will destroy your mother – my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children. The more the priests increased, the more they sinned against me; they exchanged their Glory for something disgraceful. They feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness. And it will be: Like people, like priests. I will punish both of them for their ways and repay them for their deeds.¹⁵

The horrific practices of both people and priests (and prophets and kings, for that matter) took the form of Baal worship. The worship of Baal was not some sort of fad; the Israelites had been fond of and found at his high places several centuries before this.¹⁶ Baal was the son of El, the creator of the world and father of many gods. El delegated to his sons and daughters, so he was not too actively worshiped. Baal was lord of the sky and rains and was much more involved in human affairs.

The gods did not act according to any consistent moral principles, nor were they particularly interested in human goodness or justice. They supposedly could be persuaded to act for good or ill by flattery, begging, sacrifice or magic. Nevertheless, they remained mysterious, unpredictable, and feared. The concept of personal concern and covenant love between any gods and humans was out of the question. Since rain, sunshine, fertility, and death were so unpredictable, people tried to gain some measure of control over them via their gods and goddesses. The Canaanites acted out rituals they wanted their deities to imitate.

Baal was the god of fertility. “Most likely the word *ba'al* originally meant ‘the one who fructifies’ – the one capable of making the other fertile. The husband, the bull, and perhaps the rain were therefore *ba'als*. The power to fructify carried with it authority, and therefore the word had come to mean ‘the one with authority,’ or ‘lord’ or ‘master’.”¹⁷ If Baal had authority over the fertility or lack thereof in your fields, you would want to be sure to appease him as best as possible.

Such thinking leads to a near voodoo-like religion. One can control the ones who are in control themselves. A worshiper of Baal trusted that their own activity could lead to direct blessing for them (or curse for someone else).

We learn that primitive minds suppose that it is possible to destroy an enemy by erecting an effigy of him, and then subjecting the effigy to a spell or an acted wound. It was in conformity to this manner of thinking that the Near East believed it to be the task of religion, making use of such sympathetic magic, to encourage the deities of fertility to awaken (cf. 1 Kings 18:27: Elijah to the priests of Baal – “Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened”) or even to resurrect the god with whose arising was bound up “my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink” (Hosea 2:5).¹⁸

Such worship practices taught the people that their activity could influence Baal. They rendered a service to Baal so he would return one in kind. So by bringing their offerings and participating in the fertility rites at the shrines they could induce Baal to do his part: fill their fields and threshing floors, their vineyards and winepresses with rich abundance.

What sort of practices did this generate in the Baal worshiper? If your god is the one of fertility, you better find a

¹⁵ Hosea 4:4-9

¹⁶ 1 Samuel 12:10

¹⁷ H. D. Beeby, *Hosea: Grace Abounding*, 2.

¹⁸ G. A. F. Knight, *Hosea: God's Love*, 18.

partner quick. If you want Baal impregnating your fields, you better initiate that same relation with someone. Sex brought blessing. Fornication pleased Baal. Prostitution was to your advantage.

The high places, shrines and spreading trees of Baal worship would not be where you would take your spouse and 2.5 children. "Male and female prostitutes thronged the shrines, making sanctuaries indistinguishable from brothels and holiness indistinguishable from harlotry."¹⁹ The same God who designed sex to be a blessing for all married couples now had to observe the people he had graciously chosen as his own gratify their sexual desires with anybody and everybody to please a god who never existed. They decimated the Sixth Commandment while destroying the First. In an attempt to please Baal they pleased one another which only brought displeasure to the LORD God. Worship had become a time of self-gratification as they rejoiced with one another in going to the house of Baal.

The words of the psalmist not only spoke of past atrocities, but also became prophetic. "They shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was desecrated by their blood. They defiled themselves by what they did; by their deeds they prostituted themselves."²⁰ Once the sex became commonplace all disregard for human life was only inevitable. Why not sacrifice human life so that the fields may have a chance for some? Unbelief is always illogical, deplorable and shocking. The world had certainly not learned its lesson from the Flood.

Nor had Israel. She continued on in her atrocious practices as if nothing was the matter. After all, God was still receiving offerings from her, albeit from unrepentant hearts.²¹ Mixing true practices with false probably even confused the worshipers themselves. They no longer knew what was right or wrong anymore. Hosea seems to hint at this, "For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stone, without ephod or idol."²² This spiritual smoothie was not satisfying to their Savior God.

Finally, such religious practices influenced all else. Since many in Israel had prostituted themselves to one another and to false gods, why not do the same politically? With the days of peace and prosperity slamming like a door, they had to turn elsewhere. King Menahem, three kings after Jeroboam II, paid off King Tigleth-Pileser III of Assyria to reverse Assyria's invasion of Israel. All the wealthy in Israel had to contribute fifty shekels of silver.²³ It worked . . . partially. Assyria withdrew, probably laughing all the way to the bank. However, they simply returned a couple decades later to finish what they started. Israel had become the prostitute so promiscuous that she paid others to help her and even leave her alone.

In her religious practices, Israel chose a god she could control rather than submitting to the LORD who is unseen. She chose practices that appealed to her sensuality rather than following the commands of God regarding her worship. That is why Hosea wrote that it is the LORD God, not Baal, who alone can give life.²⁴

Hosea – The Man and His Message

Hosea is one of those Biblical figures who remind us why we cherish the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. We know little about him, but apparently enough in the LORD's estimation. Hosea's upbringing and location remain an enigma to us. However, some have speculated certain things from the little bits of biographical information we do have.

¹⁹ Beeby, 2.

²⁰ Psalm 106:38,39

²¹ Hosea chapter 6

²² Hosea 3:4

²³ 2 Kings 15:19,20

²⁴ Hosea 13:14

He seems to have been a son of Israel, not Judah. His manner of speaking and knowledge of the Northern Kingdom seem to indicate that he was a native of Israel.²⁵ "Hosea's familiarity with the topography and history of Israel, his profound sympathy and concern for the nation of Israel and his intimate knowledge of the political and social affairs of Israel, would indicate that he was a northern born Israelite."²⁶ Also factor in that he had a Northern Kingdom audience, he repeatedly referred to Israel as Ephraim, and he called the Israelite monarch "our king"^{27 28}. He also rarely mentioned Judah and never name-dropped the holy city of Jerusalem.

The date of his writing also is in doubt. Depending on when one takes Hezekiah's reign (which has its own problems), Hosea could have written about 725 B.C., before the fall of Samaria. Also acceptable would be about 715 B.C., after the fall of Samaria, which Hosea does not reference in his book.²⁹ If the later date is used, Hosea may have penned his words in Judah.

The structure of the book is not for those who enjoy a good, clean outline. It is notoriously difficult to outline and analyze. Chapters 4-14 are an unstructured succession of repetitive discourses. A strong feature of Hosea's writing is sudden shifts from threat to promise, from judgment to mercy, from law to gospel. Like a swinging pendulum, Hosea alternates between sharing God's wrath and God's love. The reader gets the feeling that Hosea is cautious against emphasizing one over the other. These Baal-loving Israelites needed to hear that God's threats are real and his wrath is righteous. Ultimately, however, it would be the tender love of their Savior God which would restore a right relationship between the LORD and his people.

The lack of true structure and frequent swings between threat and promise lead some to conclude that Hosea's book seems to be excerpts from his sermons.³⁰ After all, his ministry covered a wide gamut of years. He went from the end of Jehu's dynasty to Israel's fatal attempts at double-dealing with Egypt and Assyria shortly before Israel's demise. Another wrinkle in his writing is that the first three chapters are prose while the last eleven are poetry. "This form of the book seems to suggest that the prophet composed it near the end of his life as a summary, so to say, of all his discourses, presenting the gist of his particular message."³¹

One other possible explanation is the idea of recapitulation. The Holy Spirit commissioned Hosea's message to drive home one truth, one theme. In Hosea's writing he was inspired to return to that theme again and again. "Hosea has one basic sermon or set of themes, and these themes appear and reappear throughout the book; the book as a whole has thus been fashioned to make its overall structure conform to these same themes."³²

If so, that theme is clearly God's love for his people. In order to clearly make known to those in Israel that he desires them to be his own, God will use the closest human relationship to illustrate it. God does not write "LOVE" in the sky as a clear reminder, although he could have. God does not tell Hosea to put a sword to the throat of all in Israel until they understand and trust his love, although he could have. God does not shower his people with so much material wealth they could not miss it as a sign of his love, although he could have. He does something even more strange: he commands Hosea to get married.

²⁵ Westendorf, 1.

²⁶ Hanke, 1.

²⁷ Hosea 7:5

²⁸ Paul Eickmann, *Hosea, Joel, Amos*, 7.

²⁹ Westendorf, 2.

³⁰ Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 357.

³¹ John Schaller, *Book of Books*, 91.

³² Beeby, 4.

Hosea's Marriage and God's Love

The Old Testament prophets were to be a mouthpiece of God. They not only spoke *forth* God's message but they spoke *for* the LORD as well.³³ In that sense, God sent forth his Word *through* these men. Hosea would be a bit like Ezekiel in that the LORD's speaking through him would not take the form of words, but actions. We hear this right from the start. "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.'"³⁴

Whole forests have been felled in order to explain that one verse. Combine that verse with the LORD's command to Hosea in chapter 3 to love his wife again and the questions arise: Was Gomer a street-walking prostitute, a fertility cult prostitute, or something else? Or did she merely have the "spirit of prostitution?" Or to satisfy both was she a prostitute in the broad³⁵ sense? Is the relationship between Hosea and Gomer factual and historical or this allegorical literature? If the events are historical, was Gomer faithful at first and only later unfaithful, or was she immoral even prior to her marriage to Hosea? Are chapters 1 and 3 different accounts of the same event, or is chapter 3 a sequel to that of chapter 1, a distinct redemption and reconciliation? Would God really have commanded a prophet of his to go search for his beloved in the red-light district?

One commentator tried to make it all fit together by suggesting that Gomer was only metaphorically a prostituting woman. She was no more a prostitute than all the Israelites who had broken the LORD's covenant. What she had was a "spirit of prostitution." Had Hosea married any Israelite woman she would have been a "prostituting woman," so rife was the religious promiscuity of his day.³⁶

Luther also did not take Gomer's adulterous description as literal.

Do not take this to mean, then, that harlotry is charged to the wife, that is, do not take this in the active sense, but understand that the wife has allowed herself, her sons, and her husband to be so named because of the people and against the people, as if she were saying: "I am called a harlot and my husband is called a whoremonger because you are harlots and whoremongers." Oh, how great a cross they suffered with those insulting names for the sake of the Word of God!"³⁷

Many of the non-literal interpretations boil down to the uneasiness of suggesting that God commanded Hosea to attach himself to such an immoral woman. However, was not that the very truth God was seeking to get across to his people? That just as humanly foolish and risky it was for a man to marry an adulterous woman, even more so would it be for the LORD God to remain committed to his bride who continually spread her legs for every false god around her. The whole tone of Hosea is about Israel playing fast and loose spiritually. Such spiritual adultery is known as idolatry. God pictured such broken commitments in this woman Gomer. She not only was promiscuous before she and Hosea tied the knot, but even afterwards. She shunned her husband's love and chose to gratify herself with others.

³³ A helpful aid in teaching the office of prophet is playing with two words: "speak" and "for". 1) "Speak forth" – they proclaimed God's Word. 2) "Speak for" – they spoke on God's behalf to (his) people. 3) "Fore-speak" – they told of future events, particularly Messianic prophecies. When many people hear the words "prophet" and "prophecy" they only think of the third meaning. God's people enjoy hearing that they are all prophets in a broad sense, since they have been given opportunity to serve as one according to the first and second meaning.

³⁴ Hosea 1:2

³⁵ Sorry.

³⁶ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 12-13, 26-27.

³⁷ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 4.

To take God's command as anything but literal destroys the connection between Hosea's marriage to Gomer and that of God to his people. Gomer's adulterous ways were to illustrate how Israel had abandoned her faithful husband in turning to Baal and others false gods. To say she was something else than adulterous would lessen the impact of God's words concerning Israel. "The fact is that any other interpretation than a literal interpretation of God's command to Hosea would destroy the entire setting of Hosea's message and rob the text of its intended purpose, namely, to lead men to repentance and back to a merciful God who loved his chosen people so dearly."³⁸

Some commentators also suggest that such a woman would have been stoned if she had been adulterous. However, in such a morally bankrupt culture like that, with the sexual feeding frenzy taking place daily at the high places of Baal, it would seem rather unlikely that someone cared enough to bring her to justice. One might speculate that it may not have been so strange to the Israelite audience³⁹ that Hosea was commanded to marry an adulterous woman, but that he got married at all. Since the view of sex was for self-gratification and field fertility, marriage was possibly honored or, let alone, sought after by very few. It seems that any scorn felt by Hosea may have been less over the bride at his side than the ring on his finger.

Upon purchasing his wayward wife back at the slave's price, Hosea told her, "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."⁴⁰ It is possible to understand that as Gomer being in sexual isolation; even Hosea would not be having intercourse with his wife for some time. In doing so Hosea would have been making it clear to Gomer that he bought her back not for his own pleasure, but in order to restore and reform her.

God wanted Israel to see how he loved. He called on his prophet to live and love like God does. Love the unlovable. Desire the undesirable. Show genuine love to one who sought illicit love. "His love was not a love that simply overlooked her wickedness and adulterous behavior. It was a love which resembled God's enduring love for Israel. It was a faithful and, at the same time, a disciplinary love."⁴¹

What an important truth to remember concerning God's love! It is both law and gospel. God's love recognizes people sin. When he says that he will remember our sins no more,⁴² that does not mean that he has forgotten them, in the sense that he is unable to call them to mind. We do not have a God suffering from Alzheimer's and dementia. The LORD God of the universe is not an old man who cannot recall the transgressions of his grandson from the day before. He knows every one of our attempts to bypass and subvert his commands. Therefore, his threats are real. Whether holding out eternal separation from his love as punishment for our sin, or reminding Israel that Assyria will overtake them, God's hatred of the sinner is evident.

However, God's love also speaks of him not acting on such knowledge. He chooses not to bring our sins to mind and act on them. Despite knowing all we have done and left undone, he punished his Son for us. Jesus' sacrifice clearly demonstrated God's seriousness about our sin and yet his gracious love to take all sin away. Jesus' triumph at his tomb has guaranteed to us that the clear evidence on our record will not be held against us. Every time we have run off to find illicit love like Gomer, each time we have looked to gratify self rather than glorify God, he has forgiven them. He knows our sin. He does not forget it. Yet he still forgives it. That is divine agape love. It is this love that Paul celebrated:

³⁸ Hanke, 2.

³⁹ Another audience which would not find this arrangement strange would be in Zambia. A reality TV show there has 18 ex-prostitutes competing to win a husband and a paid wedding ceremony. Some hold out little hope for change in the victorious bride. "Once a prostitute, always a prostitute," one viewer commented. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14154291>)

⁴⁰ Hosea 3:3

⁴¹ Hanke, 6.

⁴² Isaiah 43:25 and Jeremiah 31:34

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.⁴³

That is the love God wished his people would see through Hosea's relationship with Gomer. Hosea was not so absent-minded or naïve that he did not know all he would get with Gomer. He knew, and even after they had committed their love to one another and she forsook him, he still loved her. He wanted her back. He desired reconciliation, restoration and reform. It would be by his unrelenting love that would she would hopefully be moved to love him in return. As the Israelites witnessed their prophet showing such love in the face of consistent unfaithfulness, it was to be a picture and reminder to them of their God's even greater faithful love. "Hosea must therefore share both the personality and pathos of God. He must be smitten, stricken of God and afflicted, not that by his stripes others might be healed but that others might see and know."⁴⁴

The LORD could have expressed his love to Israel by simply proclaiming it. He could have reissued his covenant with them. But he chose to use this picture of marital love and faithfulness and the damage done when husband and wife do not express or share such love and faithfulness. Referring to God's words in Hosea 2:19-20 ("I will betroth you to me forever . . . I will betroth you in faithfulness"), Luther remarked,

These are wonderful words. He does not say, "I will make a covenant," as he said to the fathers, but, "I will betroth." There is on earth no love more ardent than that between a groom and his betrothed. The groom gives his bride not a gift but himself, the deepest love of his heart and all his property. He goes ahead of his bride; he seeks her out.⁴⁵

Consider how shocking this must have been to those who made their bodies temples of Baal. The LORD was husband to his people and the one who gave life. Baal was not their procreator. God was staking an absolute claim to the love relationship. All love relationships other than the one with him were a total sham.

The rich imagery of God as bridegroom to his beloved runs through the pages of Scripture. Hosea's contemporary to the south in Judah, Isaiah, brought out this specific language describing God's relationship with his people. "Your Maker is your husband."⁴⁶ The weeping prophet twice shares with us how God sees himself as a husband and once how Israel is his unfaithful woman.⁴⁷ Ezekiel's words mimic both Gomer's and Israel's actions: "You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband!"⁴⁸

Therefore, what God showcased through Hosea was really no different than what he portrays to us in Genesis, Song of Songs or Romans. "All of Scripture is at its heart the story of a jilted Lover who will not rest until he has brought his often-unfaithful bride back home – no matter what the cost to him!"⁴⁹

⁴³ Romans 5:6-8

⁴⁴ Beeby, 15.

⁴⁵ Luther, 13.

⁴⁶ Isaiah 54:5

⁴⁷ Jeremiah 3:14,20; 31:32

⁴⁸ Ezekiel 16:32

⁴⁹ Richard Gurgel, *Preach the Word*, 3.

Israel's Unfaithfulness

*Out of Mind, Out of Sight*⁵⁰

Israel had vowed allegiance and willing obedience to her faithful LORD before. She even stated her promise to do everything as the LORD had said both before and after God issued his covenant to her through Moses at Mt. Sinai.⁵¹ Israel was never short on making promises. It sounded as though Israel would follow through on the LORD's intent that their relationship would enjoy mutual love and esteem. However, like a marriage that fails to reach any sort of anniversary before it is over, Moses could not have run down the mountain fast enough to prevent Israel from erecting a calf to worship. Somehow those lifeless, man-made deities trumped the living, creating Maker of all.

God's attention-deficit children still kept him out of their minds during the days of Hosea. Eleven times in the book a form of the verb "acknowledge" is used. A majority of these uses are referring to Israel's lack of acknowledging the LORD or during times of their pseudo-repentant promises. One of the more familiar uses of the word comes from the LORD himself. Right after the Israelites mindlessly drone on with their shallow, empty expressions of repentance, God says, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings."⁵²

God had no need for their space-cadet worship; doing things he commanded, but with their minds far from him. What he wanted was for them to acknowledge him. Not just to realize his existence, but to trust him wholly as their Savior and LORD. True knowledge of the LORD involves more than just knowing about him. It is believing in him, depending on him, and demonstrating such trust by the way in which one worships and serves him. Since God was not on the minds on his people, he was nowhere to be seen in their lives either.

*Absence Makes the Heart Grow Harder*⁵³

People feel that separating themselves from God will soften the blows of their conscience. Perhaps from time to time they will be able to enjoy their slow slide into sorrow, but that soft feeling is accompanied by an ever-hardening heart. Israel refused to give credit to the LORD for her blessings, instead believing that Baal was rewarding their sexual fertility practices with abundant crops. In doing so, God's people saw First Commandment obedience as an option⁵⁴ by lacking appreciation of his gifts.

Such hardened hearts show themselves by the actions of the individuals; or even an entire city. One example Hosea gives takes the city of Gilead to task. He describes it as a "city of wicked men, stained with footprints of blood."⁵⁵ Whatever offense(s) may have occurred, the city as a whole did little if anything to bring the offenders to justice.

Such hardened hearts also lie with the spiritual leaders of God's people. The prophet immediately follows up his indictment on Gilead with one even more shocking concerning those called to be a shadow of Christ. "As marauders lie in ambush for a man, so do bands of priests; they murder on the road to Shechem, committing

⁵⁰ Just to be sure the twisted headings in this section are understood, they will be explained. Normally "Out of sight, out of mind," this could be applied to a relationship which suffers due to a lack of time spent together.

⁵¹ Exodus 19:8; 24:3-11

⁵² Hosea 6:6

⁵³ Normally "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," this could be applied to a relationship in which the individuals' love for one another grows despite of and because of the distance between each other. What one cannot have makes them yearn for it all the more. Call it the "wet paint, don't touch" syndrome.

⁵⁴ A confirmation student of mine once referred to this original decree as "The First Amendment."

⁵⁵ Hosea 6:8

shameful crimes.”⁵⁶

Just from these two examples out of many given in the book, Hosea made it clear that Israel had no intention of truly returning to the LORD. Call it a separation. Call it a divorce. She wanted no part of submitting to her husband’s loving will.

*It’s Not Me It’s You*⁵⁷

To even the most casual observer it was obvious. Israel was the problem. She stiff-armed God’s attempts to reconcile her back to himself. This after she had run off with her phantom lovers; those false gods who never fulfilled a single promise, which could be because they could not make one. Despite this, she continued on in her ignorance and arrogance.⁵⁸ She was totally insincere. Her love was lies. She filled her days with false piety and rank hypocrisy.

Chapters 4-14 in Hosea sound like a courtroom scene in which God is stating the charges against Israel. We hear of no apologies from the LORD; accepting blame for his bride’s waywardness. The LORD had no reason to give such a confession because this was all completely Israel’s fault. The break-up in the relationship was due to the hardening of their hearts which showed itself in a complete disregard for God’s holy law. The fruit of their impenitence involved callousness toward the needy and human life in general, sexual immorality and spiritual prostitution.

Until Israel realized and confessed that she had been in the wrong in this relationship, she would never say, “I will go back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off than now.”⁵⁹

*Let’s Just Be Fiends*⁶⁰

All of Israel’s unfaithfulness could only have led to this: God’s punishment. Sin never leaves an individual on good terms with the LORD. Such iniquity brings consequences as our first parents so harshly learned in the Garden. A picture of this given in Hosea is that of God’s people sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind.⁶¹ Israel’s sinful actions in no way had any potential of producing a good crop. What they would receive for such poor spiritual farming was destruction.

Such consequences lay not only with the offenders themselves, but with their family, their children and their nation. Sin’s effects spread like gangrene. Hosea’s generation would bring upon shame and consequence to succeeding generations. Their children and grandchildren would have to follow them into exile. Ironically, the LORD would make barren those who bowed before the fertility god. The Israelite women would experience “no birth, no pregnancy, no conception.”⁶² Sadly, in some respects that turned out to be a blessing. Those barren women would not have to watch the cruel Assyrian army ravage their children.

In the end, the LORD destroyed Israel with the very thing she thought would save her: foreign powers. Her lovers

⁵⁶ Hosea 6:9

⁵⁷ Normally “It’s not you, it’s me,” this is what one might hear when a relationship ends. It may have been true, or the one ending the relationship could be trying to let the other one down lightly.

⁵⁸ Hosea 5:5

⁵⁹ Hosea 2:7

⁶⁰ Normally “Let’s just be friends,” this is also what one might hear when a relationship ends. The one ending the relationship is not able to match the affection the other has for them.

⁶¹ Hosea 8:7

⁶² Hosea 9:11

would not be there for her. Egypt would not come running to save this whore. Assyria, done using her, now would destroy her. And the one Israel depended on for everything would not be able to “Baal” her out.⁶³ The only thing left to do was wallow in desperation and hopelessness. “With their nation defeated, many of their people languishing in exile, their kings gone, their Canaanite gods shown to be powerless nothings, their impoverished land going to ruin, their people dying out (9:11), how can the Israelites face the future with anything in their hearts but despair?”⁶⁴ The only good hope is for it all to end soon to spare their eyes from the utter atrocities. “Then they will say to the mountains, ‘Cover us!’ and to the hills, ‘Fall on us!’”⁶⁵

What was the clearest indication God’s people had become fiends, or enemies, of their Creator? He was no longer going to reach out to them. “Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone!”⁶⁶ Such harsh judgment! It sounds like his words to the goats on his left on Judgment Day, “Depart from me!”⁶⁷

Letting Hosea Speak on Doctrine and Practice

Baal is alive and well today. Perhaps his worshipers do not refer to their pagan deity by that name, but such practices are around. Not just because there was the story of the seven-year old girl in India who was murdered in a tribal sacrifice with her liver offered to the gods to improve crop growth.⁶⁸ Sound familiar? Not just because a high priestess for the fertility god Isis led a guided meditation at a conference hosted by an ELCA congregation in California.⁶⁹ Also sound familiar?

We can say with confidence that our practices have not slipped into such paganism. However, that confidence resides in God’s grace, without which, who knows what we would be practicing. Such examples are not given to help us puff up our egos or snicker at the false worship around us. They do serve as a warning to us. They also remind us to continually be on guard and check our own practices to make sure that what we do is matching what we believe.

Our doctrine will always affect our practice. And practice will always influence doctrine. The two are like the husband and wife in a marriage. They always end up changing each other. Good or bad, right or wrong, sensible or weird – doctrine and practice always shape and reflect each other. If you change one, the other will change.⁷⁰

The analogy of husband and wife could not be any more fitting for a study from the book of Hosea. Our doctrine – the body of truths mined from Scripture – drive everything we do as individual Christians, congregations and a synod. For better or worse, practice can also influence doctrine. Good practices that flow from true doctrine look to support God’s Word, highlight it, and confess it to others. Bad practices reflect poorly on the Word of God and eventually may lead the one practicing to change their doctrine. In such instances, the tail is wagging the dog.

On What Not to Base Practice

If one looks at Israel’s practices during Hosea’s ministry, they note how far from the LORD those practices had become. One reason for this was pleasure. The sexual fertility practices were pleasing to the eye and body. There

⁶³ Sorry again.

⁶⁴ Eickmann, 90-91.

⁶⁵ Hosea 10:8

⁶⁶ Hosea 4:17

⁶⁷ Matthew 25:41

⁶⁸ <http://news.yahoo.com/child-sacrificed-liver-offered-gods-indian-police-074513654.html>

⁶⁹ <http://www.commandtheraven.com/?p=11929>

⁷⁰ Klemet I. Preus, *The Fire and the Staff*, 108.

were no boundaries of marriage or commands to follow. Worship could denigrate into a free-for-all orgy that was to be pleasing to the worshiper (the sex and fertile fields) as well as the one worshiped (Baal). Practice was based on what would be pleasing.

A related second reason was results. God was not producing the kind of results Israel wanted. As they saw what appeared to be greener grass on the other side of the Middle Eastern fence, they desired all of it. They wanted kings like them. They desired impressive armies rather than taking cities by marching around for a week and blowing trumpets as at Jericho. Then their eyes lit up when they witnessed the Canaanite ways of worship. Naked bodies were preferable to throat-slitting lambs. The results from carrying out fertility rites seemed to be greater than that of some sacrificed livestock.

A third bad place to base practice is in one's own abilities and gifts. Abram thought God needed some assistance in producing an heir. Jacob thought his "gifts" of deception were needed to bring him blessing from God. Israel sought out alliances with the nations around her in order to fight off the nations around her. Simply trusting in God's promises that he would act for her in the right time was not really considered. Instead of believing in the LORD's strength and love, Israel trusted in her own abilities. We see where such trust got her.

A fourth bad basis for a practice is trying to make the end justify the means. Israel sought fertile fields, a peace-filled land, and countless other blessings from the LORD. However, such good intentions never should have led them to mindless, empty-hearted worship. To attain those ends never should have taken them to the high places. Erecting man-made idols was not okay with the LORD even if they had solid intentions in mind.

Finally, bad practices often stem from a selfish seeking for freedom. Israel wanted independence from God. Their practices reflected such "freedom" as they wandered further away from him. In doing so they only considered their own desires. As one reads through the whole book of Hosea, you are stunned at the selfish practices of the people. To act "brotherly" toward one another was clearly not in their thinking. Whatever pleased self and expressed their freedom from God's commands; that is what made a good practice in their estimation.

A Brief Look at Our Practice

Hosea gives us a great deal to ponder regarding our own practice. Three specific subjects come to the surface because Hosea refers to them often: sex, worship and the Christian life. Hosea lived in a sexually permissive culture. That God took the lengths he did to illustrate his love for Israel says something to the promiscuity around. Hosea could remove the Baal references from his book and simply substitute the 21st century way of trampling on the First and Sixth commandments.

We live and serve in a culture that has not expressed a high regard for the gift God intended people to leave within marriage. Premarital sex, cohabitation, homosexuality, pornography and sexually immoral humor only elicit a shrug of the shoulders. Like those in Hosea's day, those who fall for these traps of Satan feel as though their relationship with God has not been affected. Strangely enough, follow the example of the one who married an adulterous woman. Sound the clear bell of God's law even in the face of ever-increasing resistance. Such sexual immorality is a window into that individual's soul. They are exposing something to you. Whether it is ignorance or indifference, callousness or apathy, selfishness or lovelessness, they need you to speak God's truth to them. Otherwise, one day they will wish it was only Assyria they would have to face.

As Hosea wrote at length about the worship practices in his day, so the way one worships is a topic of lengthy discussion today. Part of the problem in Hosea's day was the syncretistic practices. They mixed worship of the true God (though it sounds like simply going through the motions) with the worship of the Canaanite deities, particularly Baal (which, as it sounds, they were not just going through the motions).

We speak of blended worship, although not in a syncretistic way. We do not claim to worship two deities side by side. However, another kind of blending can take place to the detriment of God's people. One blending involves mixing in unscriptural practices, whether knowingly or not. When worship becomes something other than letting God serve us through his Word and sacraments and giving his people an opportunity to glorify him in return, then bad practices creep in. Another blend is the emphasis of church traditions over against letting God's changeless Word be proclaimed in changing cultures. Church fathers and Christian brothers and sisters of the past may find it strange if we keep trying to nuzzle up close to them with our practices as if we are flattering them by our imitation of them.

Perhaps the time God gives us to come together as his Church is not the best time for us to explore how far we can go with our personal freedom and preferences. A danger with either worship blend is saying what God's Word does not ever say for the New Testament era: "This is THE way to worship." Then form has trumped love. What we do becomes more important than what God does. We are dwelling on the sacrifice, when God desires mercy. Consciences are burdened. Freedom is inhibited. "Synod" becomes a misnomer.

Finally, Hosea touches on what it is like living as one of God's people in such a sin-filled world. The Christian finds himself as a person in this world, but at the same time is commanded not to be of this world. What a brutal struggle! The line had definitely been blurred in Hosea's day. The people could no longer differentiate between right and wrong, or worse, did not care! The long list of sinful activity – from sexual immorality to murder to stealing to exploiting the poor – is given by Hosea. Israel had wanted to become like the nations around them. They should have been careful for what they wished.

Satan's work of leading God's people today to blur the line has found similar success. As people find important what the world sees as important, their faith and the work of the church will only suffer. Temptations will come in every area of ministry to be like the world. The church seeks to become a community center rather than a center for communion. The proliferation of sports and entertainment, business and busyness, only lead people further away from the Word of God. They realize that if they answer the question How are you doing? with anything but "I'm so busy!", then they are considered a failure and ripe to ask if they will volunteer for something.

Shockingly, Satan does not leave pastors alone in this way. Time spent in God's Word dwindles because other things press for time. Prayer gets shoved through the daily schedule because somehow we convince ourselves that there is no time like later. Shepherding God's flock with his Word somehow feels so antiquated. Then to paraphrase Hosea: like pastors, like people.

The Marriage of Doctrine and Practice

The book of Hosea seems to look at doctrine and practice on one extreme. Upon discovering child sacrifice, sexual worship, bowing before calves and marrying prostitutes in the book, one might think the applications are close to nil. However, if the book has been used in a curriculum for a Sunday school,⁷¹ then we can find proper use for it, too. The LORD uses this book of Hosea to serve as a warning to us. Much like he does with Jesus' parables of the Last Judgment, God clearly warns against unfaithfulness to his Word.

The true seed that purifies our souls is the Word of God. When you depart from this, you commit harlotry. He transfers a simile of the flesh to the spiritual realm. Committing harlotry means practicing idolatry. Idolatry is the genuine trust in works; harlotry is to sin with

⁷¹ David A. Hubbard, *With Bands of Love*, 5. In the preface to his book Hubbard relates, "The contents of this little book were originally given as Sunday School lessons to the Mariners Class of the Lake Avenue Congregational Church of Pasadena, California." One would imagine this making for some interesting conversations at Sunday brunch in those children's homes.

unfaithfulness against the First Commandment. Properly, harlotry is to act against the First Commandment in the name of God, that is, to do without faith what you imagine you are doing to worship God.⁷²

As mentioned earlier, Luther saw the adulterous nature of Gomer merely as a passive representation of the adulterous spiritual nature of the nation. However, his point is still true. The Word of God is not just God's revelation to us. Through his Word we hear our forgiveness. He connects us to himself, even marries us, his bride, to himself. We run from our Husband when we depart from his Word. What follows is ever-increasing sinful activity and eventually unbelief.

Unfaithfulness to God's Word was Israel's problem; faithfulness to it was the solution. This is made so evident throughout Hosea's writings. In fact, the book begins with "the word of the LORD." God's holy Word served as the basis of Hosea's marriage to Gomer. The Word of the LORD is what would keep God's love before his people. And faithfully immersing themselves in God's Word was the best way Israel could demonstrate her love for her LORD.

So an evaluation of our practice always begins with a thorough study of God's Word. Am I upholding it? Am I glorifying God through such a practice? Is what I am doing faithfully conveying to others my love for God's Word? What we do and how we do it speaks volumes to our fellow Christians as well as those in our communities.

Everything Christians say and do is "confessional" in the sense that words and actions always say something to others about us, our beliefs, and our values. The same could be said of Christian congregations and synods. Whether specifically intended or not, what congregations and synods say (in both their preaching and in their doctrinal formulations) and what they do (in carrying out their mission, in their life together in worship and fellowship activities) is a statement to others, a *confession*, a witness, of what they believe and of the principles they uphold. In the church, words and actions always reflect not just personal faith in Christ and values that flow from that faith; words and actions also are a confession of *fides quae creditur* (the teaching which is believed, the object and content of our faith). They are audible and visible expressions that point to the cross, to the empty tomb, and to the Word of Christ that has made God's saving truth known to us.⁷³

We faithfully craft our practices because they communicate to others our confession. Practice that matches doctrine also teaches what the Word of God says. No wonder so much care and concern is expressed over the practice we carry out ourselves and that which we observe in our fellow believers.

The book of Hosea also teaches that spiritual leaders have a clear responsibility in safeguarding the marriage of doctrine and practice. The priests (and kings and prophets) of Hosea's day shirked this responsibility. The fallout from such spineless leadership was a hand-covering-face level of tragedy.

In our circles we have bestowed much of this responsibility of overseeing doctrine and practice on our district presidents. However, if each pastor does not live as a watchman in his own congregation and even be willing to be reckoned a fool and a maniac,⁷⁴ he has offended the divine call given to him. If each pastor does not lovingly approach his fellow brother with questions or concerns regarding certain practices, it is time for him to do some plank-removing. And if any of us thinks we can attain a perfect marriage of doctrine and practice, we need to read Hosea again.

⁷² Luther, 4.

⁷³ Mark G. Schroeder, "Walking Together with Jesus," 34.

⁷⁴ Hosea 9:7,8

God's Love Story to You

The couple came into my office one day. By the next week it was only her. He had left. She had just discovered he had been with another woman for several months. He told her he still loved her as he called from another woman's residence. He would come back to his bride's place; only to break in through her nailed up windows in order to take what he could. He left all the bills for her to pay. He used social media to let the world know of his impenitence and newfound freedom. Online he flashed pictures of the new woman, the one with so little self-respect she had to become a home-wrecker. The woman in my office said all her relatives and friends told her to get rid of the loser. But she could not. She loved him. Despite his sins, his failings, his weaknesses; she was willing to take him back. Her love demonstrated a willingness to forgive even though she had been Gomer-ed.

The book of Hosea reminds us that marriages will continue to suffer under the weight of sin. All human relationships will strain under the selfish natures we all possess. Worst of all, our relationship with God will severely suffer when we are unfaithful to him.

But this book never strays far from portraying God as the loving Husband, the caring spouse, the forgiving better half. His Word will still go out to us.⁷⁵ He will betroth us to himself forever.⁷⁶ The LORD will continue to see us as his people and his loved ones.⁷⁷ He always longs to redeem us.⁷⁸ He will lead us with cords of kindness and ties of love.⁷⁹ He will never give up on us and always be filled with compassion.⁸⁰ He gives us reason to rejoice by his victory over death and the grave that results in our similar triumph.⁸¹

It is this forgiving love of God that encourages us and strengthens us in our relationships with one another as well as maintaining a right relationship between doctrine and practice. As his love never wavers with us, may we always be sure to plant ourselves in the one place where our doctrine and practice may flourish together.

I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily. Like a cedar of Lebanon he will send down his roots; his young shoots will grow. His splendor will be like an olive tree, his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon. Men will dwell again in his shade. He will flourish like the grain. He will blossom like a vine, and his fame will be like the wine from Lebanon. O Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols? I will answer him and care for him. I am like a green pine tree; your fruitfulness comes from me.

Who is wise? He will realize these things. Who is discerning? He will understand them. The ways of the LORD are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.⁸²

This book of love stories always leads us back to The Love Story. We, the bride of Christ, submit to his love now. Living in this world will never allow us to fully enjoy such a perfect love. However, we eagerly anticipate seeing what the apostle John witnessed: "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband."⁸³

⁷⁵ Hosea 1:1

⁷⁶ Hosea 2:19

⁷⁷ Hosea 2:23

⁷⁸ Hosea 7:13

⁷⁹ Hosea 11:4

⁸⁰ Hosea 11:8

⁸¹ Hosea 13:14

⁸² Hosea 14:5-9

⁸³ Revelation 21:2

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