

## The Happy Gear

### A little bit about Hosea

He preached to a distracted people. The Northern Kingdom lay in the ruinous shambles of war with Assyria. The land is in virtual anarchy, all this due to a growing disobedience and idolatry through the reigns of several kings, and now, the mighty Assyrian looms on the Northern horizon. Needless to say, the relationship with Israel's god is not going well, to the point where the prophet himself is called by Israel's god to actually marry a prostitute. This was done to demonstrate symbolically in the prophet's own grief and pain the deep problems in the nation's relationship with their god. Idolatry is spiritual prostitution. In idolatry, Israel is engaged in the spiritual equivalent of selling her body to the Baals. Hosea is a very graphic book. Edgy. Gritty. R 18. Explicit language, parental discretion is advised.

Yet the overall message of Hosea the prophet is *not* "do wrong and God will punish you." No. It's more like "pollution and adultery in spiritual life can never be resolved by bloodbaths. In Hosea's personal grief and shame but his nevertheless willingness to reclaim his unfaithful wife we find the promise of God. Someone has said there are no unsuccessful marriage, only ones people give up on. Well, Israel and her god are still related to each other and still, despite the problems, capable of returning to marital bliss.

### The Happy Gear

As I pedal my bike, I'm always looking for the "happy gear." There's 27 gears on my bike, but at any given moment there is really only *one* that is not too hard, not too easy, perfectly suited for the incline, decline headwind, tailwind, strength of *my* legs *today*. I call that the *happy gear*. And I always know when I'm in it. When I find the happy gear, I'm working, but not so hard as to make my knees hurt. In the happy gear I can ride all day, and at the end of the day be tired but not exhausted. Challenged, but not stiff and sore.

The Book of Hosea, and especially chapter 11 which we will look at today, is one of the most intimate portrayals of God in human terms - God as a Father. God is not human but the Scriptures God in human terms. And we perceive him that way.

For example: as I trained for my Bike for Bibles ride over the daunting summits, I saw God as cycling coach. But some days he seems a rock-hard tyrant coach, demanding far too much of me -- a brutal pace way beyond what I'm capable of, forcing on me increasingly longer rides -- ordeals, all designed to break me down and leave me despairing by the side of the road. Then on other days it seemed as if God was demanding too little of me -- the indulgent, slacker coach, who is more interested in shooting pool in the club house than training his athlete. "Go on Doug, have more cheesecake. We're not out to break any Olympic records."

Actually, if God was a cycling coach, his constant advice would be, "Doug, all I want from you is for you is to find the happy gear, and ride it."

God is not human, but ultimately we have a . . .

### Humane God

Hosea presents a certain image of God, an image much different from the cruel and implacable idol gods of the nations. And today, in our own age of post-modern paganism with its own dark gods, we search for a humane god who comes to us not with some impossible-to-achieve version of holiness, but as the God of steadfast love who accepts us just as we are, and then takes us on from here.

Yet to *be* that kind of God, *he* must accept an awful load of pain. So, in Hosea 11, he is a father who is deeply disappointed with his child. He now agonize between two alternatives. Does he close the door, disown the child, and just try and get over the heartbreak? or does he continue does to show love and forgiveness despite the pain?

It makes God seem all *too human*, doesn't it. But no other way, by no other cost, can he drive home the truth that divine love is *more* not less passionate than love on the human level. In divine love, God becomes *more* not less vulnerable than the than we become whenever we open our hearts those around us. Because the heart that is open is the heart that can be broken.

Let me to show you a few. . .

### **Things I found on the Road**

As I ride my bike or run along the side of the road, I often find interesting things that I pick up and put in my pocket. They are usually the discarded things, the debris of human life. They are the lost things. Things broken and marred, sometimes beyond recognition. I pick up these things and let them object on which I meditate – metaphors of my own fallen nature, fragments, remnants of my life and relationships which that God wants to restore and renew.

The things I find on the road seem to remind me of how justice and mercy are perfectly reconciled in Jesus. How God can take the broken, ruined and lost things, and use them to renew us.

So the first thing I would like to show you is this . . .

### **Matchbox Car**

Out near Kitchener, I was riding along the shoulder and I saw right in my path, a matchbox police car just parked there. And when I stopped, I found, in fact, that this little white cop-car was attending a terrible matchbox crash scene. Some silly little kid, probably bored of the backseat of a family vacation had thrown a handful of matchbox cars out the window when the parents weren't looking, and they'd tumbled rolled and been run over by real cars and now only the police car on the scene in one piece. Two other matchbox cars were completely totalled – run over, broken down to just the frames, no survivors. But this black matchbox car had rolled, and although the roof caved in a bit, the driver and his passengers were wearing seatbelts, and walked away with only minor cuts and bruises.

In Hosea chapter 11 we come upon a terrible wreck of human spirituality. Only a remnant survived. Israel, the beloved son of Yahweh, who had he raised and careful taught the rules of the road in the Exodus and the Law, had been drawn by the lure of the racier scene of Baal worship. Street racing through the night at breakneck speeds, worshiping idol gods. But now Israel's god has that terrible phone call in the middle of the night. "Mr. Smith, this is Constable Jones of the RCMP. There's been accident. . ."

The father drives through the night in tears. And every scene of his child's life is coming up before him. He remembers the little toddler he taught to walk. This is Israel, the youth of such bright promise. And now he arrives at this terrible scene. . .

This is Hosea's portrait of God. Doesn't sound like an austere, punishing tyrant, does it? But nor is this the disengaged parent who never really cared that much, never devoted much time to his child. No, this is a god who has watched in adoration every step of the way. And eventually the child, as every child must, begins to make his own decisions. Some good, but unfortunately, some bad.

But even our worse choice in life cannot stop God from rushing to the scene.  
The next thing I found on the road was . . .

### **A Quarter [see slides]**

I spot coins on the road all the time, but I don't *always* stop to pick them up – even quarters. (Well, maybe loonies). But as I rode by this quarter something said stop and pick it up. Actually, I've got lots of coins I've found on the road. I keep them in a piggy bank. Because I always think a coin found on the road is always trying to tell me something – a kind of cosmic “a penny for your thoughts”. But, after a while, what can one coin say that the next coin could not say just as well? I mean isn't there only so many spiritual lessons you can take from beat-up old coins strewn along the roadside?

So here's how I use the coins I find as spiritual exercise: I look at the year on the coin and I ask myself what was I doing that year. (I'm about to date myself, here, but I've never understood why do people care about that). I find it totally amazing that I can still find coins *just as old as I am*. Just think that little piece of copper or steel has been on a journey of 30, 40, 50 years. Passed through countless hands. Some coins found on the on the road have had a rough life, marred, or just plain worn out. Some are brand new.

But this particular quarter took me back to 1988. It has the “younger” queen on it. Not the youngest queen of my childhood, the slim damsel with the pony tail, queen, yes, but still too young to be wearing a crown. Nor the middle aged queen, of the not-so-distant past, elegant and at the top of her game. And certainly not the present day queen, who no longer is wearing the crown, perhaps because she doesn't need to – everyone already knows she's the queen, or perhaps because she's giving the hint she's preparing to pass it on. . .

It says in verse 4 “ they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. . . “

It's often only much later that we can look back and see how God was guiding us. In 1988, I was coming up to a kind of spiritual crisis. I'd spent a number of years in fellowship with people who followed a certain kind of deeper life teaching. There were those who were kind of like “spiritual bloodhounds” that seemed to be always sniffing around at me, looking for any trace of sin or backsliding. They meant well, and I believed I had to take their advice. Live up to their standards. I'd almost come to the point of despair that my repentance was imperfect. But finally I came to realize that I didn't need to please them. That their expectations were not necessarily God's.

But now, looking back I realized that I learned something about God. That his leading is not the hounding from behind, but, as Hosea portrays it, the kindly leading from the front, like a prize 4H steer, more of a pet than a working beast. I look at back at 1988 and see now that what was at the time a painful circumstance, was in fact God's way of healing. Which brings me to this next object. . .

### **[Cigarette Lighter]**

When this flashed in the sun as I whizzed by, it looked like something interesting. Something high tech, perhaps crammed with electronics, or perhaps a durable tool that had inadvertently fallen on the road. But when stop to picked it up, alas, it was nothing but a simple dashboard cigarette lighter. Useless to me, and perhaps most people today who now use the dashboard socket, not to light smokes, but to charge their cell phones.

But here's what this hunk of roadside debris brought to me: I made me think of what an empty life I had left to follow Christ.

You know, I still have this reoccurring dream. In this dream, I still smoke, and I run out of cigarettes and desperately go searching through a maze confusing streets, and time is running out and when I finally find a shop that has cigarettes, they don't have my favorite brand, and I can bring myself to buy the weird brand they are selling, but by the time I finally decide to buy them anyway, the shop is already closed. This dream is not just about a harmful and dirty addiction, but about the pursuit of a shallow life. An empty life. A life abandoned long ago.

So, the other day as I stood at the side of the highway feeling a little foolish for having slammed on the brakes just to pick up this little piece of junk, I thought for a moment about what life, for me would be today, if I continued these years to suck in a life without Christ. Would I be richer? Perhaps. I doubt if I would be as healthy. And I know I would not be fulfilled. I know that if I had not followed Christ, I would not have been able to find the happy gear.

In verse 5, Hosea points out that there will be cruel consequences for this people in their empty life. "Will they not return to Egypt," he asks, "flee back as terrified refugees to the very land they left as slaves?"

"And will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent? Swords will flash in their cities, will destroy the bars of their gates and put an end to their plans. "

Now let me point out something about prophetic oracles. They are shouts of warning, never irrevocable sentences. Israel was a child of her time and of her pagan world. Yet hers was still the God of grace. The day when Hosea first spoke these words was a day when they made a decision that determined their future. They could have embraced a very different future than they did. History verifies, however, that in 722 BC the Northern Kingdom of Israel did fall and her inhabitants did flee their land as refugees just as the prophet had warned.

But here's the deal: If they had butted out idolatry like the last cigarette, it could have changed the outcome.

Every human soul has a plan cherished for it in the heart of God, a story with happy ending. But at point, no matter what we have done, we must place our faith in Jesus and enter the faith rest of trusting God with all the unanswered questions, unresolved conflict, and personal failures. In our personal stories we must find the happy gear. And here's where the apostle Paul quotes from this very prophet Roman's 9:25,26

So there just one more little thing that I found on the road and that's . . .

## **Gold**

It's the last thing anyone wants to lose. And with gold, it's never simply the intrinsic price-per-ounce value. It is always the memory. You remember the moment you hummed and haaed and finally bit the bullet and bought it. No, you don't find much gold lying along on the road. In all my travels, here is all the gold I've ever found: bits of chain, clasps from an earring, even a tiny little Jesus on the cross. Here is the tiny little sliver of gold I found at the last rest stop just outside of Calgary on the last leg of my bike trip. And I put it away in my luggage. But you know how gold has an uncanny ability to slip away from us. And so, like the woman in Jesus parable who lost her coin, I went searching through every nook and crevasse of my luggage until I found it. Because I wanted to show it to you.

So in `

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?

We are precious as gold to God. And yet our lives are often marred. Our sense of self-worth gone. But God collects those pieces and melts them down and recasts them. That is what the Cross of Jesus is all about. The full atonement is ours through the cross, and the only precondition for receiving it is to return by faith to him. That is the invitation to this Table. The comfort we can take in God's enduring love is that during those times of crisis, the 1988's of our personal histories, we know it is moving towards a definite consummation. The fiery crucible will yield in us renewed lives, as purified gold. And now. . .

**A final challenge from this text [Read v10]**

Our challenge is to go out from here and share the love with those who have yet to come home.

We do this by "hearing the roar of the lion" – God's voice, and following him.

V11 – Those of Hosea's time who heard the voice became witnesses in Egypt and Assyria. That's where they were. That's where they lived.

Can you hear the Lion?