

## God's Faithfulness

Ephesians 2:1-10; Hosea, selected verses  
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As I was growing up and going to Sunday School, I somehow got in my head that there was an Old Testament picture of God and a New Testament picture of God. Do any of you have that idea? The God of the Old Testament is a harsh, judgmental, wrathful God who is ever ready to punish people for their misdeeds.

You can understand how people might get such a picture of God. Take, for example, the very familiar story of Noah and the Ark. We've turned that into a children's Sunday School story with animals coming onto the ark two by two. But remember how the story begins:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings that I have created" (Genesis 6:5-7).

And so God sends a flood that destroys every living thing.

You read enough Old Testament stories like that one, and you can understand how someone would get the idea that the God of the Old Testament is a wrathful, angry God who is always ready to punish people for their transgressions.

By contrast, the God of the New Testament is portrayed as a God of love and forgiveness and grace, a God who forgives us of our sins, a God who sent his very son to die for us so that we might be given the gift of eternal life and salvation. It's the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son who runs to his wandering, wayward child to welcome him home with open, loving arms.

It was almost like there were two different Gods—the Old Testament God bent on punishment and the New Testament God, gracious and generous with God's love.

But more I read the Bible the more convinced I am that there is only one God—the God of love and mercy, and you see that God not just in the New Testament, but in the Old Testament as well. One place in the Old Testament that you meet the New Testament God is in the book of Hosea.

Let me tell you a little about Hosea. Hosea was one of the Old Testament prophets, who brought God's word to the people of Israel. That's what a prophet is, by the way. In the Bible a prophet is not someone who predicts the future, but someone who speaks God's word to God's people. Hosea was a prophet who spoke God's word to the people during that time when Israel—the people of God—had wandered away from faithfully keeping God's law. They gave it lip service, but it was not at the center of their life. In fact many people even began adopting some of the gods who were worshipped by the pagan peoples who lived around them. One of those pagan gods was Baal, and there were many of the Hebrew people who worshipped Baal right alongside their worship of the one true God.

The word of God that Hosea delivered to the people of Israel was simple and straightforward: there is only one God—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who

brought us out of Egypt into the Promised Land, the God who made a covenant with us to be our God and we would be God's people. One God. And that one God alone is worthy of our worship. That was Hosea's message to the people.

Now to get that message across, Hosea's life itself became a parable in which the relationship between God and God's people was illustrated by the relationship between Hosea and his wife, Gomer. God told Hosea to marry Gomer, and he did. There was one problem: Gomer was a harlot, a prostitute. Gomer's relationship to her husband Hosea was not built on faithfulness and love. Instead, even though she was married to Hosea, Gomer continued her selfish, self-indulgent ways. Rather than living faithfully with her husband, she continued to run after other men.

This was exactly the same way that the people of Israel were treating God. Rather than living faithfully with God and worshipping only God, the people ran off after other gods, like Baal. The people lived, not trusting God, but seeking self-satisfaction, self-gratification.

Hosea and Gomer had children, and they named one of their children Lo-Ammi, which means in Hebrew, Not My People. Because, God said, "You are not my people, and I am not your God" (Hosea 1:9).

As the Hebrew people continued to run after other gods, it was like the rejection that Hosea felt as his wife continued to run after other men. And just like Hosea was ready to give up on Gomer and cut her loose, so God appeared to be on the verge of giving up on the Hebrew people and cutting them loose. In anger and grief, God said, "You are Lo-Ammi—not my people, and I am not your God."

As God's anger toward the people grew, God said about the promised land that God had given to the chosen people: "I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees. I will punish her for the festival days of the Baals, when she offered incense to them and decked herself with her ring and jewelry, and went after other lovers, and forgot me" (2:12-13). You can see God's anger growing. And you wonder if another flood of destruction is on the way.

But just when you think that God's anger is about to boil over and the wrathful Old Testament God is about to unleash a fury of punishment, God surprises us: "I will speak tenderly to her. I will give her her vineyards and make a door of hope. She shall respond as in the days of her youth as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. On that day, says the Lord, you will call me 'My husband'" (2:15-16).

"And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness. I will say to Lo-Ammi (remember that name means Not My People) you are my people" (2:19-20, 23).

The compassion of God toward his faithless, wandering people is seen most clearly in Hosea, chapter 11. This is the word from God:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.  
The more I called them,  
the more they went from me;  
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,  
and offering incense to idols.  
Yet it was I who taught my child to walk,  
I took them up in my arms;  
I led them with cords of human kindness,

with bands of love.  
I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.  
I bent down to them and fed them.  
My people are bent on turning away from me.  
To the Most High they call,  
but he does not raise them up at all.  
How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.  
I will not execute my fierce anger;  
I will not again destroy Ephraim;  
for I am God and no mortal,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath. (11:1-4, 8-9)

Even as the people were running after other gods, like Hosea's faithless wife was running after other men, even then, though grieved and heart-broken, God could not and would not give up on God's people. Even when we are unfaithful to God, God remains faithful to us. That's how great is God's love for us.

Earlier we mentioned the story of Noah and the ark. Let's remember how that story ends. After the flood had destroyed every living thing, God looked at the world and said, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done" (Genesis 8:21).

Even when God has every reason to give up on us for our sinfulness, our failures, God's love for us continues. As the Apostle Paul said, "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved. This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:1-2, 4-5, 8).

Even in our sinfulness, God's love for us never ends. Philip Yancey wrote, "There is nothing we can do which will make God love us more, and there is nothing we can do which will make God love us less" (Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, p. 70). God's love for us is unconditional and unending.

The two symbols of God's amazing love that we see before us when we come into the holy place are the empty cross and this communion table. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God proved once and for all how great is God's love for us. This communion table with its elements of bread and cup symbolizing the broken body and shed blood of Jesus point us to God's redeeming love.

So here's my question for you to ponder: how are you going to respond to so great a love as that? We sing a hymn that says, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."✠