

Session Two

Hosea: Living God's Love Story



The Prophet Hosea by Carl Mayer

A. Establish the Context

We begin our study with Hosea, the first of the twelve minor prophets.

The key to understanding this time in Israel's history and the message of the prophets in general is to recognize the nature of the covenant that was made between the LORD and Israel at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19–24). There, God promised to make the children of Israel his “own possession” (Exodus 19:5) and “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). Israel, in turn, vowed to obey the LORD's commandments and be faithful to him. The resulting covenant formed a permanent bond of kinship; Israel has become God's family. In this context, a sin against God is an act of infidelity more than simply “breaking a law.” God and his people are joined in a deep relationship in which God gives perfect love and faithfulness and expects love and faithfulness in return.

God calls Hosea to speak to the people of Israel (the ten northern tribes) toward the end of the reign of Jeroboam II in the middle of the eighth century BC. Under Jeroboam, the kingdom of Israel has prospered, but the people have strayed from God to worship the gods of Canaan. They have abandoned the very things that define them as a people of God—namely, worshiping him as the one true God; caring for the poor, widows, and orphans; and ruling with justice and righteousness. Instead, idolatry, injustice, and oppression are rampant. The people deserve the judgment that will follow their actions. Having turned from God to other sources of salvation, they will no longer benefit from his protection but instead will be thrown to the mercies of the nations they have sought.

As with many of the prophets, Hosea is called to do more than deliver God's message through words: He is called to live out that message in his life. In Hosea's case, God asks him to marry and remain faithful to a harlot to demonstrate God's loving faithfulness to unfaithful Israel. Hosea demonstrates to Israel and to us what it means to be in covenant relationship with the God who is just and all-powerful and who also is love.

Hosea's ministry lasts until the fall of Samaria in 722 BC, which marks the end of the Northern Kingdom. Before you begin your reading, take time to find the prophet and Jeroboam II on your *Bible Timeline* Chart. Although Hosea speaks in and to Israel, he is from Judah, and his message to Israel is meant to be a warning to the people of the Southern Kingdom as well. Thus, in the first verse, the book of Hosea names four kings of Judah—Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah—along with Jeroboam II of Israel. Find their names on the Chart as well. They are in red, just below the purple “Southern Kingdom” bar.

The book of Hosea is the longest of the minor prophets, a beautiful book that reveals all of salvation history to be a love story between a faithful God and his beloved, yet unfaithful, people. It may be for this reason that Hosea is placed first among the Twelve, even though he is not the earliest of the minor prophets. Scholars have pointed out that the final prophetic book, Malachi, begins with, “‘I have loved you,’ says the LORD” (Malachi 1:2). Thus, Hosea and Malachi, taken together, frame the others, providing a lens that helps us read the minor prophets and their messages of judgment and restoration in the context of God's loving plan.

Note: There are differences in verse numbering between the various English translations of Hosea. This study uses *The Great Adventure Catholic Bible*, an RSV-2CE Bible that incorporates the same color-coded Bible Timeline Learning System that you will use throughout this program. This is the translation we recommend you use for this session.

B. Read the Story

Hosea can be divided into two unequal parts. Hosea 1–3 introduces Hosea, his mission, and God's message as it is lived out in Hosea's family. The remaining eleven chapters focus on the infidelity of the Northern Kingdom and God's covenant case against the people there, seen in light of his steadfast love. Read Hosea 1:1–4:10 (NAB 1:1–4:11) and Hosea 11, 14 (NAB 11:1–12:1 and 13:15–14:10) in one sitting to get a feel for the prophet's message and the metaphors he uses.

Going Deeper (optional): To get the entire story and message of Hosea, read the entire book.

As always, pray before you read.

C. Take a Deeper Look

Answering these questions will draw you into the heart of the story. If you do not understand something, make a note of it to bring up in the small-group discussion.

HOSEA'S MARRIAGE AND CHILDREN (HOSEA 1–3)

- Hosea 1 gives us a snapshot of the entire book. Carefully re-read Hosea 1:1–2:1 (NAB 1:1–2:3).
 - If a prophet is one who speaks for God and reveals his heart, Hosea certainly does so in a unique and painful way. Explain how Hosea dramatically reveals God's heart to Israel.

- b.** Hosea and Gomer have three children. Each name is a message, and as the years pass, the messages grow in seriousness. What is the meaning of each name? (Note: Some Bible versions provide only the English translations of the original Hebrew names. The list below is in order of appearance in the text.)
- Jezreel:¹
 - Lo-Ruhamah:
 - Lo-Ammi:
- c.** Is there any hope that the judgments contained in these names might be reversed? (See Hosea 1:10–2:1 [NAB 2:1–3]; CCC 211.)
- 2.** Re-read Hosea 2:1–13 (NAB 2:3–15), where Hosea first states his case against Gomer (Hosea 2:1–7; NAB 1:10–2:9) and then unites it to God’s charge against Israel in Hosea 2:8–13 (NAB 2:10–15). What are some of Israel’s chief sins? What does God say he will do about them?
- 3.** Now read Hosea 2:14–23 (NAB 2:16–25).
- a.** What is the ultimate motivation behind God’s decision to withdraw his support from Israel?
 - b.** Describe the New Covenant God will make for them if they return.

INFIDELITY AND CONSEQUENCES (HOSEA 4:1–14:1; NAB 4:1–14:2)

The rest of Hosea is composed of a number of oracles that are rich with poetic imagery. Like Hosea 2 (NAB 1:10–2:25), this section begins with an indictment and ends with a plea for restoration.

¹ Note: *Jezreel*, which means “scattered by God,” is the name of the valley where Jehu slaughtered the royal family and usurped the throne of Israel prior to the time of Hosea. The king at the time of Hosea, Jeroboam II, is fourth of that line of kings.

4. Starting in Hosea 4, Hosea addresses the people of Israel directly. "The LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land," he says in the first verse. This is legal terminology that implies a lawsuit over the broken Sinai covenant, in which Israel swore to follow only God and to keep his commands, which was a "marriage moment" between the LORD and his people.

In Hosea 4:1, we read, "There is no faithfulness or kindness, and no knowledge of God in the land." According to Hosea 4:2-3, what are the consequences of the lack of these things in the lives of the people?

5. Hosea 4:6 says that Israel is "destroyed for lack of knowledge." The words "to know" and "knowledge of God" appear frequently in Hosea.²
 - a. Consider the following verses, and record what you discover about the importance of "knowing" and "knowledge of God."

Hosea 2:20 (NAB 2:18): What is the basis of knowing God?

Hosea 4:6: What is the result of "lack of knowledge" of God?

- b. **Think About It:** It is sobering to learn that roughly one-third of Catholics in the United States believe that God is merely an "impersonal force" rather than a personal Being with whom we can have a relationship.³ What might that lack of the "knowledge of God" mean for attitudes and actions in our society? Do you see anything from Hosea's day reflected in our day?

² In Hebrew, the word *yadah*, "to know," means more than simply realizing or understanding something. It is based on experience or relationship and includes acting on knowledge. It can even refer to intimate sexual knowledge, as in Genesis 4:1, when Adam "knew" his wife. Similarly, "knowledge of God" (*da'at elohim*) means not just knowing *about* God but having a close and committed relationship with him, like a husband and wife.

³ Pew Religious Forum on Religion & Public Life, "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey" (2008), as quoted in Sherry Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012), 43-44.

6. In Hosea 2:19 (NAB 2:21), God says he will betroth Israel to him “in steadfast love.” The Hebrew word he uses, *hesed*, appears six times in Hosea, always in reference to the covenant faithfulness of the LORD. When Israel breaks that covenant, ending God’s “legal” obligation to honor it, God’s *hesed* reveals “its deeper aspect: It showed itself as what it was at the beginning, that is, as love that gives, love more powerful than betrayal, grace stronger than sin.”⁴
 - a. Read Hosea 6:6. What does God require of his people in return for his *hesed*?
 - b. **New Testament Connection:** Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 twice in the Gospel of Matthew. Read Matthew 9:10-13.⁵ How does Jesus apply Hosea’s words to his day?

THE FATHER’S LOVE (HOSEA 11; NAB 11:1-12:1)

7. Read Hosea 11 (NAB 11:1-12:1), in which another metaphor is used to describe God’s love for Israel. What is that metaphor? What does it teach us about God’s heart and the motivation behind his actions?
8. **Catechism Connection:** We are not that different today than Israel was. Read CCC 2787, and comment on what the Church has to say about our relationship with God.

A PLEA TO RETURN (HOSEA 14; NAB 13:15-14:10)

9. Hosea 12-13 (NAB 12:2-14:1) details the many sins of Ephraim (Israel). The chapters end in loss and in the terrible judgment that will result from the people turning from God to foreign nations; but immediately after them comes a call to conversion. Read Hosea 14:1-8 (NAB 14:2-9), and answer the following questions.
 - a. In Hosea 14:1-3 (NAB 14:2-3), what does Hosea call on Israel to do?

⁴ St. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* 4, note 52.

⁵ Hosea 6:6 is also quoted in Matthew 12:7.

- b. What does God promise to do and be for the people in Hosea 14:4, 14:5, 14:8 (NAB 14:5, 14:6, 14:9)?
 - c. What advantages will these things have for Israel (Hosea 14:5-7; NAB 14:6-8)?
10. Imagine—God has plentiful grounds for “divorce,” yet he asks to be reconciled. After all the people of Israel have done to him, how can he take them back? Read CCC 218, and comment on what you learn.

HOSEA

The name “Hosea” is closely related in Hebrew to the name “Joshua” (in its Greek form, “Jesus”). It means—appropriately—“salvation.” By making his life a living picture of God’s love for Israel, Hosea illustrates, in a way few others have, that God’s essence is love. Hosea’s life anticipates the life of Jesus: As Hosea purchases Gomer by his love and at his cost, so Jesus saves us from sin by his love and at the cost of his life.

D. Application

This question will help you apply one of the key themes of the session to your life. After meditating on it, respond to God with a brief written prayer if you choose.

Think back over what you have learned. In what sense are you *his* child and is God *your* Father? In what sense do you “know” God? In other words, what kind of relationship do you have with him? What part of Hosea’s message speaks to you most—for yourself, for your family, or for those around you?

Dear Lord ...

SESSION TWO TALK NOTES

Hosea: Living God’s Love Story**I. Setting the Stage**

- A. Background
- B. Spiritual circumstances
- C. Message also a warning to the South (Judah)
- D. Hosea embodies his message in his life (response to marital infidelity)
 - 1. Reveals the heart of God – like a literary Sacred Heart of Jesus
 - 2. God’s heart cry toward a rebellious child (Hosea 11:8)
 - a. First Reading on feast of Sacred Heart
 - b. “Ephraim” – Northern Kingdom
 - c. My heart “recoils” (RSV-2CE) = “is overwhelmed”; (NAB) – *nehpach*: to turn upside-down; “head over heels”
 - d. A “literary crucifix”
 - 3. Spousal language in Hosea 1–3

II. The Marriage Metaphor in Scripture

- A. Genesis – marriage, one-flesh union
- B. Exodus, a love story
 - 1. Exodus 1–18: “God getting the girl”
 - 2. Exodus 19–24: the “marriage ceremony” on Mount Sinai
 - a. Ten Commandments = “ten wedding vows”
 - b. Faithfulness to the covenant framed in marriage metaphor
- C. Deuteronomy – the covenant fleshed out
- D. Psalms – love language between Bridegroom and bride
- E. Throughout the Prophets (example: Isaiah 54:5, “your Maker is your husband”)
- F. A way of seeing Luke and Acts (Bridegroom: Luke; bride: Acts)
- G. Revelation – unveiling the Bridegroom (Revelation 1–11) and the bride (Revelation 12–22)

III. Hosea Embodies This Marriage Metaphor (Hosea 1)

- A. God’s terrible “to-do” – take a wife of harlotry (Hosea 1:2–3)
 - 1. Gomer as a living symbol of Israel
 - 2. Idolatry: spiritual infidelity (the “spirit of harlotry” – Hosea 4:12, 5:4)
 - 3. “Knowing” as shared intimacy

4. What prostitution does to a marriage, idolatry does to relationship with God
5. Pope Francis: "The opposite of faith is ... idolatry"⁶

B. Hosea has a family with Gomer (Hosea 1; NAB 1:1-5)

1. Names of children symbolize Israel's spiritual situation
 - a. *Jezreel* – "to be scattered by God"
 - b. "Not pitied" (*Lo-Ruhamah*) – literally, "without a womb"; love-less
 - c. "Not my people" (*Lo-Ammi*)
 - d. Message: If you do not repent, you will be these things

2. "*Gomer*" means "It's over"

C. God proposes a reversal if they return to him (Hosea 2; NAB 1:10-2:25)

1. Hosea's and God's hearts blend together
2. "Plead with your mother" (Hosea 2:2; NAB 2:4) – a summons to divorce court
3. Gomer takes the stand – "I will go after my lovers" (Hosea 2:5; NAB 2:7)
4. Hosea tries to get Gomer back ("tough love")
5. Gomer, like Israel, persists

D. God's faithfulness to their infidelity, lived out by Hosea (Hosea 3)

1. Hosea buys Gomer back, imaging God's love
2. The price paid shows his desperation
3. Hosea redeems Gomer; a symbol of Christ our Redeemer
4. Hosea 2:3: You shall not live this life anymore

IV. The Rest of Hosea: Unpacking the Covenant Lawsuit

- A. Three charges (Hosea 4): no faithfulness (*emet*), kindness (*chesed*), or knowledge (*da'ath*) of God in the land
- B. At end, a word of hope (Hosea 14; NAB 13:15-14:10): I will heal you of your faithlessness; return to me

V. Conclusion: Prayer of Renewal⁷

⁶ *Lumen Fidei* 13.

⁷ For the text of this prayer, which is prayed at the close of each session, see page 12.