

GENESIS ROAD PRESENTS...



a look at the picture of God
in every chapter of
the 28th book of the Bible

Chapter 1

GOD SOMETIMES MAKES STRANGE REQUESTS.

Okay, so “strange” is putting it mildly. You did read the opening to this chapter, didn’t you? If you didn’t read it in *The Message*, here it is: “The first time God spoke to Hosea he said: ‘Find a whore and marry her. Make this whore the mother of your children. And here’s why: This whole country has become a whorehouse, unfaithful to me, God.’” (vs 2)

Wow. When we teach our young people that God has a special person He has been preparing for them to marry, Hosea 1:2 might be one key text to steer clear of!

What I immediately thought of when I read this chapter, however, was the sometimes utterly strange requests God makes of His people—especially His prophets. He asked Hosea to marry a prostitute. He asked Abraham to take his son up to a mountaintop for an apparent sacrifice. He asked Noah to build a boat because a flood was imminent (although nobody had ever seen rain).

And what I think of when I recall all these things is how, in these modern times, there are a lot of people—especially Christians—who scoff at people who claim God told them to do something outrageous. They claim that God would *never* ask someone to do such-and-such. And to that I say, *Really? If God told Hosea to marry a prostitute, how do you know He doesn’t still make off-the-wall requests of His people?*

In today’s world, there are many different voices competing for our spiritual attention. There are so many different religions and opinions and ideas about God; trying to sort through them all can be confusing, if not totally time-consuming!

But that’s one of the reasons why there is absolutely *no* substitute for learning to recognize the voice of God *for yourself*. As we continue on toward the end of the world, the cacophony of voices and opinions is only going to get *louder*. There will be diametrically-opposed opinions everywhere you turn. The only way to know for sure if God has spoken to you is to know His voice.

And the only way to know His voice is to know Him. And the only way to know Him is to spend time with Him.

It’s really just that simple, and it’s really just that hard. I don’t know about you, but my life is busy. There are some days (a *lot* of days, actually) when the time I spend reading the Bible for this blog is all the time I spend with God in the course of the day. In my own heart, I know I need to make more time for Him, because the more the voices of the world try to crowd Him out, the more I need to allow Him time to talk.

Have you heard Him speak lately? I hope you are giving Him time to get through to you. But when

you do, look out. Sometimes (as in the case of Daniel), what God says doesn't always make immediate sense to us. There might be days when you are very confused! And sometimes (as in the case of Hosea), what God says is just downright scandalous.

If you spend enough time with Him, odds are that at some point, He'll throw in a really strange request. When and if that happens, double-check it with Him to be sure, but don't let anyone else tell you that God "wouldn't" say the things He's said to you. You make sure to learn to hear the voice of God for yourself!

Chapter 2

GOD LOVES WHORES.

In hindsight, I realized that I should have titled yesterday's blog, *God loves whores*. So, I was delighted when I read today's chapter and found that not only could I use that title today, but it actually has a deeper and more profound application in chapter 2. It really was quite a remarkable thing God did through Hosea. He made Hosea's home life a little microcosm of His relationship with Israel. Whenever the people mocked Hosea because his unfaithful wife had left him *again*, whenever they called him a fool for wasting his money on a woman who was squandering those resources on some filthy lover, Hosea could simply say, "Have you looked in a mirror lately? When it comes to God, every single one of you is Gomer! Stop whoring it up with all the false gods already!"

Brilliant.

It's no coincidence that God likens idolatry to adultery. Both are totally destructive to relationships. Both wreak havoc on the minds of those who participate in them. For instance, we know that one of the dangers of pornography is that it objectifies the participants in the minds of the viewers. Consumers of pornography grow to think of the men and women on screen as objects—objects to be used only in the pursuit of self-pleasure. Likewise, those who practice idolatry view their idols as objects—objects to be used only in the pursuit of some personal gain.

Both are ugly. And deadly.

The fact is, every person alive has been a spiritual whore at one time or another. And that might be bad news, except for the fact that God loves whores. Not only does He love them, He pursues them. Not only does He pursue them, He restores them. And He restores them by de-objectifying them, by helping them recover their self-worth through respect.

There were two great examples of that in this chapter. Here's the first, amid God's warnings about the consequences of running after other lovers: "Therefore I will take away my grain when it ripens, and my new wine when it is ready. I will take back my wool and my linen, intended to cover her naked body. So now I will expose her lewdness before the eyes of her lovers; *no one will take her out of my hands.*" (vs 9-10)

That statement really caught my eye. Nobody will take us out of God's hands. At first, that might sound like the rantings of a jealousy-crazed maniac! On the surface, it sort of smacks of, "If I can't have you, nobody will." But that's not actually what God's saying at all. We have seen previously in Scripture (and it will be affirmed again later in this very book) that it is possible for us *to take ourselves out of God's hands*. If we ultimately decide we don't want to be in God's hands, He will let us have our way, but what He's saying here is, "Nobody *else* gets to decide for you! You are not some object to be passed around on a whim. I respect you enough to let *you* make your own choice. No

one is going to take you out of My hands. If you leave My hands, it will be because *you* decided to go.”

The second example of God’s treating us with respect is just a few verses later: “Therefore I am now going to *allure* her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her.” (vs 14)

I love what Charles Spurgeon wrote on this verse: “This is a singular kind of power: ‘I will allure her;’ not, ‘I will drive her;’ not even ‘I will draw her’ or ‘I will drag her’ or ‘I will force her.’ No, ‘I will *allure* her.’ It is a very remarkable word, and it teaches us that *the allurements of love surpasses in power all other forces.*” Love is the most compelling power in the universe. But it wields its power *without* compelling or forcing the object of its affection to accept it. Ironically, it is precisely this *lack* of force that makes it so forceful. It is because love *does not* compel that it is, in the end, so compelling.

So, to those who have abandoned God to run lustfully (and fruitlessly) after blessing in other arenas, God says, “I love you still.” The fact that we have been unfaithful only makes His love for us burn all the greater. And when we find ourselves broken and empty from the selfish pursuits of evil, we will find that God not only takes us back, but He *restores* us. He treats us with respect when nobody else will, endowing us with power—the power to choose and the power to command His attention.

We have all been unfaithful. We have all been the one caught in adultery. But to that one—*you! me!*—God says, “I don’t condemn you. Why don’t you stay here with Me? Nobody will ever love you the way I do.

Chapter 3

GOD OWNS US.

Imagine having to “buy” what you already own. Hosea did: “Then God ordered me, ‘Start all over: Love your wife again, your wife who’s in bed with her latest boyfriend, your cheating wife’ . . . I did it. *I paid good money to get her back. It cost me the price of a slave.* Then I told her, ‘From now on you’re living with me. No more whoring, no more sleeping around. You’re living with me and I’m living with you.’” (vs 1-3)

Of course, in our modern world, the idea that a man would “own” a woman is offensive, but it was a very real mentality in Old Testament times. Women were often viewed (by men, not by God!) as little less than property. So, when you were married, you literally belonged to your husband.

But Gomer had left her husband and was living with another man. I don’t know if the money Hosea paid was a sort of bribe, in order to get Gomer’s boyfriend to kick her out, or if—as her husband—he had to square up with the boyfriend for his wife’s living expenses. Either way, it was nothing short of *ridiculous* that Hosea had to go retrieve his own wife from another man’s house.

Imagine how God must have felt about Israel!

He had saved them from starvation through Joseph, prospered them even in the midst of slavery in Egypt, rescued them from slavery, cared for them miraculously in the wilderness, and brought them into the Promised Land. Everything He did was designed to heap blessing after blessing on

them . . . and they continued to “run away from home” and sell themselves to other gods, just as Gomer did with the locals.

Gomer was willing to be “owned” for a price, so even though she already belonged to Hosea, he went and paid her price to bring her home. And I guarantee you, the treatment she got at home with Hosea was better than anything she was getting anywhere else.

In the same way, God owns us. In fact, He owns us in a more fundamental way than Hosea owned Gomer, because He actually created us. And far beyond simply creating us, He continues to sustain our lives each and every day. In every sense of the word, we are *owned* by Him.

Yet, when we come home to God, we find that the way in which He owns us is completely different than anybody or anything else we have sold ourselves to in the past. Having sold ourselves to sin, we were quickly put in bondage. But, to use a favorite fundamentalist’s phrase, God paid the price to bring us home, and He did that so we could be free.

You see, what God owns, He sets free. And if we use (or abuse) that freedom to sell ourselves to the nearest local, God will come and find us, redeem us, and make us free again.

Whether we will remain free is up to us.

Chapter 4

GOD IS LIGHT .

Oh, another indictment of Israel. One thing's for sure—they knew why God was angry with them! He told them every five seconds. But in the middle of this latest indictment, a very interesting verse caught my eye, and I think it caught my eye because it seems to be the antithesis of one of my most favorite verses in the Bible.

In explaining how God's people were destroying themselves through the lack of knowledge, Hosea said, "You stumble *day and night*, and the prophets stumble with you." (vs 5) That's pretty sad—people stumbling through the day. I mean, we can imagine stumbling when it's dark outside, when you can't see where you're going. But when somebody keeps stumbling in broad daylight, you know something is wrong!

This is what happens when a nation rejects the knowledge of God—soon, they are no longer able to walk straight, to discern direction, or to even see. They continually stumble, even during the day. In effect, without God, the day becomes like night. Perpetual night.

The antithesis of this is found in Psalm 139, and it is (right now) one of the coolest things I know about God: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, '*Surely the darkness will hide*

me and the light become night around me, even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you." (Ps 139:7-12)

With God, there is no such thing as night. He is light—all the time. And in this psalm, David acknowledged that no matter where he went—even if he thought he was descending into the deepest, darkest night—God would still be able to see him and find him, because to God, there is no such thing as darkness.

The more we reject God, the more we stumble, because without God, *there is no such thing as daylight*. Without Him to shed His light on the path of our lives, we are stuck in perpetual darkness, perpetual night, with no hope of finding a way out. God is the only way out.

From this indictment of Israel, God made it clear that when His light is rejected, the first things to go are truth and mercy. Those who think they can understand truth or those who think they can practice mercy outside of a relationship with God are only fooling themselves. In time, the night will descend and the stumbling will begin, because *only* God is light.

Without Him, there is no day.

Chapter 5

GOD MAKES US MISERABLE.

Yes, keep reading. Such a provocative title deserves a little explanation! It stems from the last verses of this chapter: “For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, like a great lion to Judah. *I will tear them to pieces and go away*; I will carry them off, with no one to rescue them. Then I will return to my lair until they have borne their guilt and seek my face—in their misery they will earnestly seek me.” (vs 14-15)

We don’t usually picture God as a devouring lion. In fact, when the New Testament reminds us that there is an enemy who “prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8), it’s talking about *Satan*, not God.

I would even venture to say that, especially in Western Christianity, we have all but dismissed the idea that God brings pain, hardship, or suffering across our paths. Instead, those who are eager to proclaim God’s wonderful character (and it *is*, indeed, wonderful!) sometimes tend to gloss over or ignore many of the Bible’s dramatic pictures of Him. (Ironically, many of them—just like this one—are written as God speaking *about Himself* in the first person!)

So I guess that begs the question: Would God ever do what He talks about in this chapter of Hosea? Would He act like a lion with His own people? Or maybe we should wonder if that was something He would only have done in Old Testament times, but not today?

In Western society, one of the things we love to do most is avoid consequences. Although we don’t have a 100% success rate, we are nevertheless pretty good at it. We attempt to minimize a whole range of “negative” consequences—from taking medication to ease the heartburn related to eating unhealthy foods, to installing a radar detector to be able to drive over the speed limit, to getting abortions to end inconvenient pregnancies.

We see this trend in general society as well, as over the decades, our government has put various “safety nets” in place to help people minimize the “negative” consequences of life’s situations—from being laid off from a job, to losing your house in a flood, to having an unsupported child out of wedlock. Most recently, Americans witnessed a huge, full-scale example of this in the economic bailouts of 2009, when it was determined that many banks, corporations, and companies were “too big to fail.”

There may be nothing wrong with applying this principle to general society, but as saturated as we are with this type of mentality, I think we also try to apply it to God, and there isn’t much in Scripture to suggest that He’s interested in helping us avoid the “negative” consequences of our choices. In fact, it’s often the opposite. Instead of having a “too important to fail” attitude toward us, God so values our eternal life that He looks at us as “too important *not* to fail” when the road we’re on will lead to ultimate destruction.

To that end, God will *happily* make us miserable. He will crash in like a roaring lion and tear us to bits, if that's what it takes. If, in our misery, we will finally, *finally* turn to Him and seek His face, He will certainly make us miserable. Sometimes this may mean simply letting us experience the natural consequences of our actions. At other times, this may mean God imposes consequences as a means of discipline in order to help us change course before we go somewhere we can't return from. (*This is how Satan and God differ as the two lions. Satan is only interested in devouring, because he's a hater. God is interested in restoring, because He's a Lover.*)

From the perspective of Love, it isn't always the loving thing to rescue someone from "negative" consequences. It isn't always the loving thing to help someone avoid misery, for you may be removing the very thing that would send that person seeking after God.

We tend to think that God relieves misery, and sometimes He does. But sometimes, misery might just be what the Doctor ordered.

Chapter 6

GOD CAN BE TRUSTED WITH PAIN.

In yesterday's blog, we discussed the idea that, in Hosea 5, God describes Himself as a lion that will tear His own people to pieces. This is an image that many Christians are uncomfortable with, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. We should be initially skeptical of anything that tends to put God in a bad light, since we know Him to be a merciful, gracious, and loving person.

Thankfully, in today's chapter, Hosea provides more insight into this image of God as the lion: "Come, let us return to the Lord. *He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.* After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence." (vs 1-2) This reminded me of C.S. Lewis' description of Aslan (the lion who represented Christ in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*): "He's not safe, but he's good."

Hosea reminds his listeners that even if they have been wounded, God can heal them. And then he even takes it a step further in the next verse, explaining that God can bring to life the things that are (or seem) dead. You see, the Israelites believed that a person could still "come back to life" up to two days after death, but in their minds, that became an impossibility by the third day. Thus, what Hosea was saying to the people was that even when it seemed God had *mortally* wounded them, He could still give them life.

This is why God can be trusted with our pain—*especially* if it's pain *He* has caused! He alone knows

what we need in order to be healed, and because He loves us so much, He is even willing to do the hard things in order to save us. He will leave no stone unturned in His quest for our restoration.

In the end, it doesn't really matter where our suffering comes from—if it's from our own mistakes, if it's inflicted on us from another person, if it comes from Satan, or if it comes from God. No matter where suffering and pain originates, God can and will use it to heal, restore, and save us.

He may not always be safe, but He is always, *always* good, and everything He does is good.

Chapter 7

GOD KNOWS ALL THE BAD STUFF.

This chapter of Hosea opens with a sobering reminder: “Whenever I would heal Israel, the sins of Ephraim are exposed and the crimes of Samaria revealed. They practice deceit, thieves break into houses, bandits rob in the streets; but they do not realize that *I remember all their evil deeds*. Their sins engulf them; *they are always before me*.” (vs 1-2)

We’ve all struggled with sin in our lives. We all do things we don’t want to do—even when we’re in the act of doing them! And we all *don’t* do things that we want (and know we need) to do. To top it all off, what fuels the continual struggle with sinful behavior in our lives is the Sin we also struggle with—that seemingly-all-pervasive, stubborn independence, that pride that just doesn’t want to *submit* to anyone or anything.

As we struggle, often, it’s easy to forget that God knows and sees it all. He knows about all the lying, stealing, cheating, and hating. He knows about the greed and indifference. He knows about the addictions, the passions, and the lusts that sometimes overwhelm and overtake us, leaving us feeling helpless to do anything at all.

Sometimes, because no other human being knows about our secret sin, we forget that God knows all about it. And we continue right on with what we’re doing, forgetting that He is right beside us every moment, wishing we would turn to Him for help.

Oh, yes. For when we feel helpless to do anything about our sin struggles, this is what God says,

“Come to me, all of you *who are tired and have heavy loads*, and I will give you rest. Accept my teachings and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit, and *you will find rest for your lives*. The burden that I ask you to accept is easy; the load I give you to carry is light.” (Matt 11:28-30)

God not only knows all the bad stuff, *He wants to take the burden of it off our shoulders!* He wants us to surrender to Him, to give Him every struggle we have, and to trust that He will heal us. *This* was the problem with Israel—not that they struggled with sin, but they refused the remedy! “Israel’s arrogance testifies against him, but despite all this *he does not return* to the Lord his God *or search* for him.” (vs 10)

You belong to God, and that’s why nothing you do or don’t do will ever change His love for you. Sure, He knows all the bad stuff, but that doesn’t make Him love you less. And surrendering to Him isn’t going to make Him love you more; it will only allow Him to heal you, which is what He’s wanted to do from the beginning. So don’t worry.

You are fully known, fully accepted, and fully loved. And if you let God have His way with you, you will also be fully healed.

Chapter 8

GOD DOES NOT MAKE CHECKLISTS.

When I really want to accomplish a lot, I make a list to keep myself on track. When I want to re-establish control over my life in certain areas, I make a list to keep myself on track. Making lists doesn't necessarily come naturally to me, but as I get older (and as I am influenced more by my mother!), I see that they are indeed a valuable tool.

A checklist helps me make a plan and stick to it. I decide ahead of time what needs to be done, and then I methodically go through those tasks, without needing to think, checking them off one at a time. If I have been a good list-maker, I can be guaranteed that when everything is checked off my list, I will have accomplished what I set out to do.

I was thinking about checklists today as I read Hosea 8 and realized that God *doesn't* make them. *What?* you ask. *Ever heard of the Ten Commandments? It's the most famous list there is!* And, of course, that would be right. But when I say that God doesn't make checklists, I'm talking about in the ultimate sense. He hasn't based our salvation on a checklist, and this chapter of Hosea demonstrates why: "Though Ephraim built many altars for sin offerings, these have become altars for sinning." (vs 11)

Why did Ephraim build many altars for sin offerings? Because that was one of the things on their checklist! God *told* them to erect these altars for a specific reason—so He could come to know them through their interaction with Him there. But, the problem was, Ephraim actually managed to *avoid* interaction with God at their altars. Once they had

finished that particular item on the checklist, they went on with the business of their sin and eventually turned the places God had mandated to help them overcome sin into more opportunities to sin!

For me, that's a really sobering thought.

However, we have the advantage of living as New Testament Christians, right? Now that Christ has come and put the law in its rightful place, we're home-free. We aren't in danger of repeating the mistakes of Israel, right?

Wrong.

It was Jesus Himself who warned us against the very thing we're now beginning to see in the Christian church—turning the altars of love offerings (to our fellow man) into altars for sinning: "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, *I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!*" (Matt 7:22-23)

It's stunning, isn't it? Jesus says He will call some of the people who have spoken truth, released captives, and healed and fed their fellow men *evildoers!* How could doing any of those things ever be *evil*?

I'll tell you how. They are evil when done outside of The Greatest Commandment. Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love the Lord with all your heart, mind, and soul. *Anything* that is done

outside of that relationship of love is *evil*. If you end world hunger outside of that relationship, *it is evil*. If you heal every person on the face of the planet outside of that relationship, *it is evil*. If you work for justice and mercy and kindness and truth outside of that relationship, *it is evil*.

I must admit, as I write those words, it's even hard for *me* to believe. But aren't those the implications of what Jesus said? It doesn't matter what we do or don't do. If we don't know God, we are evildoers.

Showing love to our fellow man has become the current clarion call of modern Christianity. And, of course, there is nothing wrong with loving our fellow man—*when it is done in the context of our own relationship of love with God*. But, as those Israelites of old, we must be careful not to turn the altar of loving our neighbor into an altar for sinning.

God doesn't make checklists. Our salvation is not dependent upon how many bodies we clothe, how many mouths we feed, how many diseases we heal, or how many wars we stop. Our salvation is dependent upon knowing God.

Period.

Chapter 9

GOD WANTS US TO WORSHIP HIM.

One of the “complaints” I sometimes hear about God from atheists, former Christians, and agnostics is that He requires worship. Some seem to feel that this is a flaw in His character—that there must be something lacking in Him if He “needs” or “demands” worship from His creatures.

On the contrary, today’s chapter clearly explains why God wants us to worship Him. It’s not for *His* sake, but for *ours*: “When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert; when I saw your ancestors, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree. But when they came to Baal Peor, they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved.” (vs 10)

This isn’t just a historical description of what happened to the Israelites when they practiced idolatry. It’s also a statement of a spiritual principle which is true for every created, intelligent being: *We become just like the person or the thing we love and admire*. If we admire what is evil, we will become evil. If we admire what is lovely, we will become lovely.

Paul reiterated this principle in his second letter to the Corinthians: “So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—*makes us more and more like him* as we are changed into his glorious image.” (2 Cor 3:18) Note, there, that being changed into the image of God, being made more and more like Him is a result of having the “veil removed” so we can see His glory.

And that—beholding God’s glory—is *precisely* what worship is.

You’ve probably heard about the phenomenon that couples who grow old together start looking more and more like each other or people who’ve had dogs for a long time start to look like them. I’m not saying that this is because worship is involved in such cases, but the amount of time spent together tends to have a physical effect, even if it’s only mild.

In the same way, what we spend time worshiping has a spiritual effect on the kind of people we become. You might remember that Isaiah wrote that the people who worshiped stone idols become as dumb as a box of rocks (Isa 44). The reverse is also true: If we worship the humble, merciful, and generous Creator, we will become humble, merciful, and generous.

This is why God wants—even “demands”—our worship. *He* doesn’t need us to worship Him. *We* need to worship Him! We are in dire need of a spiritual transformation, and worship is the only prescription for that!

Chapter 10

GOD SAVES US BY FAITH.

If you've spent much time at all in Christian circles, surely you've heard about "righteousness by faith" or "salvation by grace through faith." In the Christian life, not much happens without faith! It is the cornerstone of Christian conversation and experience.

But what is it?

In these days, when so much emphasis is placed on study and understanding, it seems ironic to me that so many people still equate "faith" with some sort of evidence-less blind leap. In fact, I have heard prominent Christian theologians argue that faith *can't* be faith if it is based on evidence, asserting instead that it is the very *lack of evidence* that defines when something is known through faith.

So why is it, then, that in the New Testament, the Greek word translated "faith"—*pisteuo*—is the *same* word that is also translated as "believe" and "trust"? The New Testament doesn't distinguish much between these three words; they are apparently all part of the same concept. If that's true, then real faith would *never* be based on *nothing*, for if you are going to place your "trust" in someone, let's hope you have a very good reason to do so!

So, what does that have to do with Hosea 10? It is in this chapter that God reveals the root of all sin—and it has to do with faith/trust: "You have plowed wickedness; you have reaped iniquity. You have eaten the fruit of lies, *because you trusted in your own way.*" (vs 13)

Trusting our own way instead of trusting God. Isn't this at the heart of sin? When Eve was confronted with the choice to eat of the fruit or not, she decided to trust her own way instead of trusting God. When Abraham was confronted with the prospect of bearing a child in his old age, he decided to trust his own way instead of trusting God. When Judas was confronted with the reality of a Messiah who *wasn't* going to overthrow the powers that be, he decided to trust his own way instead of trusting God.

We are not entirely to blame for this distrust. After all, Eve faced off with the adversary, who told her nasty lies about God, and I'm sure that created some powerful doubt in her mind. Unfortunately, instead of taking that up with God, she took matters into her own hands. And that's been humanity's tendency ever since.

In response, God has done everything He can to restore our relationship with Him and win back our trust. He has rebuffed the lies of Satan with the evidence of His goodness in many and various ways over a long period of time. He has given us *every* reason to believe in Him, to trust Him, and to put our faith in Him.

This is how God saves us by faith. To say that He saves by faith is not to say that He saves us because we make a blind choice. (On the contrary, He has specifically gone on record several times *against* that sort of thing!) To say that He saves by faith is to say that He is able to save us when our trust has

been restored in Him, because when we trust Him, we submit to *His ways* instead of insisting on getting *our own way*. If you still wonder if that's necessary, look at what Eve's insistence on getting her own way has cost us!

As we grow up in Christ, as we mature in our relationship with Him, He will continue to deepen our trust in Him. When situations arise that cause us angst, they are always opportunities to review the ways God has sustained us in the past and to put our *trust* in Him once again—not because we're blind, but because we now can see!

Chapter 11

GOD IS A GRIEF-STRICKEN FATHER .

With the recent fighting in Gaza, this picture has been making the rounds on social media sites:



Jihad Masharawi lost his 11-month-old son, Ahmad, in an Israeli airstrike. From the first moment I saw this picture, it tore my heart out. I still can't look at it without crying. I'm not sure I've ever seen another image which so captured a moment of palpable and unbearable grief.

But this isn't just a picture of Jihad Masharawi. It's also a picture of God.

In Hosea 11, we hear the naked, torn, and devastated cry of God's heart for His own children: "Will [Israel] not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent? A sword will flash in their cities; it will devour their false prophets and put an end to their plans. *My people are determined to turn from me.* Even though they call me God Most High, I will by no means exalt them. *How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? My heart recoils within me!*" (vs 5-8)

Now, for a moment, let's compare these two fathers and their children. In the case of Jihad and Ahmad, two things are true:

1. Ahmad was an innocent victim of his circumstances.
2. Jihad will see his son again.

In the case of God grieving for the ultimate loss of His people, two things are true:

1. God's wicked children have knowingly chosen to destroy themselves.
2. God will have to live for the rest of eternity without them.

War is hell, and—make no mistake about it—we are all caught up in the middle of a universe-wide war. There is a raging spiritual battle in and beyond our world in which God and Satan are struggling for the hearts and minds of God's precious children. And God will do whatever it takes to keep *any* and *all* of His creatures from ending up dead forever.

I'm sure, if he'd had the choice, Ahmad's father would have done anything to have avoided his son's death—perhaps even maiming him or causing him some sort of pain. So, if there are places in the Bible where God looks overly harsh, dramatic, or desperate, it's important to remember that He's leaving no stone unturned in His ultimate quest to *save* His children.

For the ones who choose to reject Him, there awaits not an angry and vengeful God, but a God who looks like Jihad Masharawi—a God with head thrown back in unbelievable anguish and the scream of a forever-wounded heart on His lips: *Oh, my beloved child, how can I give you up?! How can I let you go?!*

Chapter 12

GOD IS A GRACIOUS WINNER .

As children grow up, one of the important things to teach them is how to lose graciously. We live in a world that is fraught with competition in every sector—school, work, social groups, and sometimes even at home. Learning how *not* to be a sore loser is very important, because *everyone* loses at some point. Even if you're considered an expert in your field, there is always someone, somewhere who can do it better than you. (Or if there's not now, there will be soon!)

So, we need to teach children not to be sore losers. But what about being sore winners? We don't often think about that side of things, but I've met many people who don't have the first clue about what it means to win graciously. As soon as they've prevailed at something, they begin gloating and rubbing it in the faces of the losers.

God's not like that. He's *always* a gracious winner—which, I suppose, is important since He always wins.

Or does He? Did you notice the retelling of the account of Jacob wrestling with God in this chapter? It wasn't quite as I'd remembered it: "When [Jacob] grew to be a man, he wrestled with God. *When Jacob wrestled with God and won*, he cried and asked for his blessing. God found him at Bethel and spoke with him there." (vs 3-4)

Jacob won? Really? Actually, you might remember that "when the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so

that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man." (Gen 32:25) In a physical sense, Jacob was the loser in this struggle. He came to be at a physical disadvantage, and he realized he wouldn't be able to win the wrestling match-up.

That's when he began to beg for a blessing. And, because God is such a gracious winner, He gave Jacob what he asked for. Usually, it's the winner who gets the gifts, not the loser! But when we wrestle with God and come to the realization that we can't win, we find that it is in surrendering to Him that we actually *do* prevail! For whoever surrenders to God finds themselves on the receiving end of more blessing and grace than they can stockpile.

A friend of mine once said, "We all come to God with the motivation that *we* are god." In that sense, then, at some point, all of us have the same experience Jacob did. All of us struggle with God. Of course, in reality, there is only *one* God—and it's not us! So, right off the bat, we've lost.

But, you see, God is such a gracious winner that even losers are winners in His presence. God is such a gracious winner that He uses every advantage He has for *our* benefit. Raising the white flag in our struggle with God is the moment we achieve the ultimate victory. Because of the kind of person He is, to surrender to Him *is* to win.

Chapter 13

GOD LOVES CHILDREN .

Gandhi once said, “A nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members.” And while there may be many types of people who qualify for the “weakest” label, we could all certainly agree that children would be placed in that category. You don’t get much more helpless, vulnerable, and defenseless than a baby (which is one of the reasons the Incarnation is so astounding).

In this chapter of Hosea, things weren’t looking good for the children: “And now [Israel is] back in the sin business again, manufacturing god-images they can use, religion customized to taste. Professionals see to it: Anything you want in a god, you can get. Can you believe it? *They sacrifice live babies to these dead gods—kill living babies and kiss golden calves!*” (vs 2)

That’s right. In ancient Israel, “human sacrifice” almost always meant the sacrifice of children. Hosea had already spoken of this once: “I have watched Israel become as beautiful as Tyre. But now Israel will bring out her children for slaughter.” (Hos 9:13)

And that wasn’t all. Because of the moral decay of Israel’s society, God foretold the awful future Israeli children would face at the hands of the Assyrians: “The nation of Israel will be ruined, because it fought against God. The people of Israel will die in war; *their children will be torn to pieces, and their pregnant women will be ripped open.*” (vs 16)

Sometimes, I’m afraid that—as a nation—we’re not any better to our children than the Israelites were. Sure, we may not be physically tearing them to pieces or burning them alive on an altar somewhere, but is their physical, mental, social, and spiritual development our number one priority?

I suppose I began thinking about this several weeks ago as I was watching *Judge Judy*, a popular television program with a sassy, family court judge. Judge Judy seems to adjudicate a large number of cases involving unwed couples who have children together. Invariably, while the “adults” are fighting over the latest hot-button issue, the children get caught in the crossfire.

Recently, one gentleman on the program—who had fathered five children by four different women—became agitated by Judge Judy’s remarks on his prolific baby-making skills. “I take care of my kids,” he said, repeatedly. “I take care of my kids.” But in the course of the case, it became clear that, to him, “taking care of his kids” simply meant sending a monthly child support check. He rarely saw any of his children and wasn’t married to even one of the mothers.

Really? You take care of your kids? I thought. How have we strayed so far away in our society from understanding what children need?

God designed the human race such that a man and a woman would come to love each other, be

bonded to each other through commitment, create children out of that bond of love, and raise them together as a family. But that scenario is certainly on the decline in America and many other Western countries. If and when children even *make it* to birth, they are increasingly being born in out-of-wedlock situations.

In America now, nearly *half* of all babies are born to unmarried mothers. In Sweden, it's 55 percent. In Iceland, 66 percent! That is *two* out of every *three* children born into homes with no fathers who love and care about their mothers. How depressing.

And this only addresses the beginning of their young lives, to say nothing of the social pressures brought to bear on these children down the road as they grow up in homes where available role models are, at best, incomplete and, at worst, rotated frequently. With such disruption in the lives of America's youngest generation, how can we possibly say we're taking care of our kids? We may not be burning them alive to the gods, but we are certainly sacrificing them on plenty of other altars.

But, as a nation strays from God's original plan for the human family, how can we *not* expect to see the children suffer? For God loves children, and everything that was needed for their welfare and proper development, He built into the family unit. The further we go from that, the more our children and future generations will pay the price.

God loves children. They are the very foundation of His Kingdom (Matt 19:14). So when we reject God, we also reject the well-being of our children. Whenever we close our ears to *Him*, we build an altar on which to sacrifice *them*.

Chapter 14

GOD FREELY FORGIVES.

Isn't this a stunning end to the book of Hosea? In a story that involved so much wrath, anguish, and angst, it seems we have come full-circle to forgiveness, acceptance, and reconciliation. Truly, the story of Hosea and Gomer (and God and Israel) is nothing more than the Old Testament's Parable of the Prodigal Son.

At the end of the day, God just wants us to come home.

Really. That's all there is to it. He doesn't nurse a grudge against us. He doesn't keep a record of all the times we've run away from home to other lusts and lovers. He doesn't store up abuse to heap upon us when we walk back in the door. Instead, He spends every ounce of energy He has in pursuit of us, and once we decide to come back home, He treats us as if we never left.

So many people spend a lifetime trying to get forgiveness from God when the truth is, they already have it. God didn't ask Hosea to marry a two-timing whore for no reason; He did it so we would understand *the depth of His love for sinners*. Every time Hosea went and bought back his wife, every time he walked in on her in bed with another man and dragged her back home, every time he renewed his vows of love to her in spite of her many other lovers, God was saying to Israel (and to us), "There is *nothing* you can do to make Me love you any less. I love you, and I *always* will. Just because."

Whatever we have been searching for outside of God will remain forever beyond our grasp. In this closing chapter of the story of Hosea, He reminds us that only He can (and wants to) provide for all we need: "O Israel, stay away from idols! I am the one who answers your prayers and cares for you. I am like a tree that is always green; all your fruit comes from me." (vs 8)

In God, there is no obstacle to our homecoming. In fact, He doesn't even just sit at home waiting on us. Like Hosea pursuing Gomer, He comes after us again and again, reminding us that nobody else is ever going to love us more or treat us better than He will.

So, what are you waiting for? It doesn't matter how many lovers you've had. God has already forgiven you, and His arms are open wide. The only thing His home is missing is *you*.