

Session 1: The Prophet Hosea

I. The Prophet's Words

I5. A New Image

Hosea has used a DARING NEW IMAGE for the relationship between the Lord and his people. He has gone to the imagery of the Baal cult in which the relationship between Baal and the earth was seen as a sexual one and in which worship centred on acts of sexual intercourse. He has drawn from there the image of Yahweh's relationship with Israel as a husband and his bride. We can also see through the pathos of these verses something of the sadness of Hosea's experience of marriage, which the Lord called him to endure. Through his longing for the love of his unfaithful wife, Hosea has gained a priceless insight into the heart of God, who longs for the love of his people and not just the outward performance of worship.

Throughout chapter 2, there is a contrast between "forgetting" and "knowing". At the present time, Israel has "forgotten" the Lord, she does not "know" the source of her livelihood (verses 8 and 13). The verb "to know" has sexual overtones which are unavoidable in this chapter. It is the word used for sexual intercourse, such as in Genesis 4:1: "Now the man knew his wife."

When the Lord says in Hosea 2:20: "I will take you for my wife in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord," he is talking about a deep, intimate relationship of love and commitment.

But this is not the only meaning of "to know". It can also mean practical, heartfelt obedience. Read the following passage from Jeremiah 22:

Jeremiah 22:13-16

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice;
who makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their wages;
who says, 'I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms',
and who cuts out windows for it, panelling it with cedar, and painting it with vermillion.

Are you a king because you compete in cedar?

Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness?

Then it was well with him.

He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well.

Is not this to know me? says the Lord.

In this passage, Jeremiah compares King Jehoiakim with his father Josiah. Whereas Jehoiakim was an unjust exploiter, Josiah cared for justice. To "know" God (verse 16) means to keep his law from the heart.

God is calling Israel to a DEEP, INTIMATE, PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP of loving obedience and covenanted faithfulness, like that of a wife to her husband. Verses 16 to 23 set out what the consequences of that new relationship will be.

16. The Relationship the Lord Looks For

Instead of the word "Baal", Israel will use the word "husband". "Baal", which literally means "lord" could be used of a husband, emphasizing the relationship of ownership or dominance. The alternative, "husband", literally means "my man". It is the Hebrew *ish*, the counterpart of *ishshah*, or "woman". So here it means "my partner". Hosea wants Israel to understand her relationship with God in an entirely different way: not as a relationship of dependence in which she must manipulate him with correct ritual in order to maintain his favour, but as one of love in which she is free to respond with gratitude to all that he has given her.

The covenant of marriage that will follow when Israel returns to the Lord with all her heart will extend to the conditions of her life. He will guarantee her safety against both wild animals and human enemies (verse 18). The terms of the betrothal will be the qualities of life that the Lord looks for in his people: righteousness, justice, steadfast love, mercy, faithfulness and the "knowledge" of the Lord (verses 19-20). The fertility of the land will be restored (verses 21-23). and the meanings of Hosea's children's names will be reversed. Once again, Israel will be God's people and he will show them his love.