**Hosea: The Jealous Love of a Faithful God**

Welcome to Hebron’s House Groups 2018! We continue to pray that house groups will be an encouragement as we support one another to be followers of Jesus Christ. A key part of meeting together is reading and helping each other understand the word of God, but also to apply the Scriptures to our lives and hold each other accountable for taking on board what we hear the Lord say to us. You can really help someone to grow in their faith through your participation in this group.

This term we are going to study the book of Hosea. Hosea is one of the twelve “Minor Prophets” (called ‘minor’ because they are short books). With the exception of Jonah, these books of the Bible are not often read or spoken about but they are precious, and so too is Hosea, the first of them. The prophecy of Hosea is one where the intensity of God’s love for his people is revealed – Hosea describes *The Jealous Love of a Faithful God*.

**Background**

Because this part of the Bible is new territory for many of us, it will be helpful to give some background and therefore set the context of this book – it doesn’t make sense without it! Usually when we hear preachers speak about “Israel” in the Old Testament we think of a single Jewish nation with Jerusalem as its capital. Though that was the case in the days of Kings David and Solomon, after Solomon’s death the country descended into civil war and the once unified nation was split into two:

* **Judah** was the Southern Kingdom, with Jerusalem as its capital, and was made up of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.
* **Israel** was the Northern Kingdom, with Samaria as its capital, and made up of the other ten tribes.

By the time we come to the book of Hosea, the nations have been divided for over 150 years. Hosea’s message was primarily to the Northern Kingdom of Israel (which is often given the alternative name *Ephraim* in this book), though you will see that Judah is still referred to many times throughout this prophecy. The opening verse tells us that Hosea began his ministry when Jeroboam II was king in Israel (ca. 755 BC), which was by and large a time of peace, prosperity and expansion for the nation. Little did the people realise that it would not last; Israel (and Judah) was prospering because of the downturn in the fortunes of their neighbour Assyria – from ca. 745 BC this Empire would regain strength and eventually overthrow the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. The shadows of this future event are found throughout Hosea’s prophecy especially when he pronounces God’s judgement on Israel, and it seems that Hosea prophesied to the nation throughout these tumultuous years (implied by the names of Judah’s kings, also given in 1:1).

**Structure & Things to Look for**

The broad structure of Hosea is simple: Ch1-3 picture Israel’s unfaithfulness and God’s response; the remainder of the book (Ch4-14) is Hosea unpacking the details. However, another helpful way to think of the structure of Hosea is to see four sections; each emphasises some aspect of Israel’s unfaithfulness to God (Hosea puts Israel on trial), then pronounces the consequences of unfaithfulness, but always ends with the hope and opportunity for Israel’s restoration to God:

* 1:1-3:5 – A Picture of Spiritual Unfaithfulness
* 4:1-6:6 – Israel on Trial: Priests reject knowledge
* 6:7-11:11 – Israel on Trial: Unfaithful to the Covenant
* 11:12-14:9 – Israel on Trial: A Deceitful People

You will notice that almost the entire book of Hosea is written in poetic/verse form. Bearing this in mind can help us – poetry thrives by using imagery for dramatic effect, rather than to convey a precise point; e.g. *Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open* (13:8) is clearly not a desirable outcome for God’s people and speaks of utter ruin for them, but the imagery is not meant to give a precise description of how God will bring about their ruin – instead it conveys the jealous passion of God. In addition, the poetic form can help us to navigate the more difficult imagery (of which there is a lot in Hosea). Modern translations arrange the poetry into couplets – usually these are lines paired together (though some couplets have three lines). Within each couplet the lines are related; sometimes they contrast each other, most often they parallel each other. For example,God says through Hosea, *I am like a moth to Ephraim* (5:12). On its own, God comparing himself to a moth could mean many things (Small? Weak? Annoying? Attracted to light?), but the other line in the couplet sheds light on this:

 *I am like a moth to Ephraim,*

 *like rot to the people of Judah*

Now you can see the reference to a moth is not about the stature or appearance of the creature, it is about its ability to degrade things and cause them to waste away.

Hosea uses a lot of imagery here to describe both Israel and God – in fact some of the imagery you might find jarring – but it gets across how deeply Hosea had understood God’s feelings towards Israel as seen through his own traumatic marriage (Ch1-3).

Look out for

* The different metaphors that Hosea uses.
* The number of times that the prophet refers to Israel’s history with God – especially the covenant and the terms of the covenant.
* The condition of Israel’s worship – what mistakes were they making?
* The ways in which God keeps pursuing Israel; the expressions of his unending love for his people. [Don’t let the graphic imagery of judgement distract you from getting this!]