

Episode 222

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the God Questions Podcast. Today Jeff, Kevin and I are going to be continuing our Difficult Passages in the Bible series, and today we're going to be covering the story of Hosea and Gomer, which is the primary topic in the book of Hosea. For those of you who might not be familiar with the story, I'll read a couple of verses to you and then give a brief description, and then we'll continue the conversation from there.

Shea Houdmann

But in Hosea, chapter 1, verse 2, it says, The Lord said to Hosea, Go take to yourself a wife of Hortum, and have children of Hortum. And Hosea obeyed the Lord's command, married a woman named Gomer. And then later, if you marry a woman of Hortum, a prostitute, a harlot, to use other terminology we'd be familiar with, later in the book of Hosea, Gomer leaves Hosea and returns to an immoral lifestyle. And in Hosea, chapter 3, verse 1, it says, Even as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods, go and renew your love for your wife. Take her back. Essentially, and Hosea obeys that command at all.

Shea Houdmann

This is the traditional interpretation of the book of Hosea, that God told Hosea to go marry a prostitute. He had children with her, three children to be specific, and then at some point, Hosea—Gomer left Hosea, returned to her life of prostitution, and God sent Hosea again to redeem Gomer out of that lifestyle.

Shea Houdmann

So that's the traditional interpretation of this passage, and we're not saying that interpretation is wrong, but we do want to communicate that that may not be all that's going on in this passage. So Kevin, in your study of the book of Hosea, in preparation for this episode, what are some of the key points that you came across that particularly stood out to you?

Kevin Stone

Yeah, it's quite a story. In fact, I was doing a little bit of prep for this podcast, but last year I did a little Bible study series on the book of Hosea at my church, and so I went through that book as well in that context, and it's just, I mean, what do we do with this command that God gives the prophet to go and marry a wife of whoredom, have children of whoredom? Well, God gives the reason that the land of Israel has committed great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.

Kevin Stone

And so God is building a picture, he's compiling an illustration here for what's going to turn out to be his great faithful love in not forsaking Israel, even though they have forsaken him. And speaking of a spiritual adultery, a spiritual whoredom through all of this, is it possible that the traditional view is right, that God told Hosea to go marry a prostitute and he obeys, has children with her, and then she forsakes him, goes back to her life of prostitution and actually gets into the place where she is enslaved and has to be redeemed, has to be purchased with a price to bring her back into the home? That's entirely possible. I mean, when you just a plain reading of the text, it certainly seems like that.

Kevin Stone

Another view, though, is that this command that God gives to Hosea contains an element of prophecy, that there is an anticipation here that she will turn to prostitution sometime after the marriage, that Hosea is told to marry someone. But then God says up front, you know, just know this going in, Hosea, that she is going to be unfaithful to you, but I'm going to use this as an illustration of my love, my faithfulness to my people in Israel. So in this case, then Gomer would have been chased when she married Hosea, and that they had a regular wedding and everything was good up until that time when she ran away. And she went off and started practicing prostitution, and Hosea then was told by God to go and redeem her out of that lifestyle, bring her back into the home.

Jeff Laird

Definitely see a lot of those bits and pieces in there. And I agree that if you read this from a certain lens, it almost seems obvious that certain things are happening. But I also know that there's a lot of times where when we have a preconceived idea of what scripture says, then we go and read it, then that preconception seems clear as day when we're looking at it. And then sometimes we go back and look at it and we go, well, I can see that that interpretation fits with what's being said in there. Like that can be a way to interpret this.

Jeff Laird

But in this particular one, there's just so much that we are not told. There's so many details that aren't included in this. And people have asked questions about this. Why, for example, would God tell a prophet, supposedly a holy person, to go and marry somebody who's that level of immoral and sinful? Doesn't that contradict the idea of honoring God to deliberately go and do that? And that's where some of these other ideas get a little bit of their beginning is saying, look, first of all, we don't have that much information. And secondly, the theological parts of it don't necessarily require that.

Jeff Laird

So one of the options in this, like it was said by Kevin, is that God was telling Hosea, marry this woman. This is the person I want you to marry. And after that, at some point in time, she becomes immoral and that Hosea, in essence, is asking God, why, why did you, why is this happening to me? Why is this, why is this occurring? And God's answer is to say, this is exactly what I wanted you to do. And this is the reason why.

Jeff Laird

And that, that boils down to that idea that the big picture of this is a message about Israel and the way that they are interacting with God. And a lot of the Old Testament uses that imagery that the relationship God wants to have with Israel is supposed to be faithful. He provides, he protects, he supports and so on and so forth. And when Israel turns to other gods and worships idols, that is very much like a person cheating on their spouse. You're violating something that's sacred. You're taking something that's supposed to be holy and pure and you're going somewhere else with it. I think that's really where this comes from.

Jeff Laird

And to me, sometimes some of the questions that are in this are almost part of the, they're part of the appeal, if you want to call it that. Because there are so many things we can look at and say, I don't get this. I don't understand this. What about this detail? What about this detail? What about that? And the thing that we just keep coming back to is that's not the lesson. Like those two little statements about what went on between Hosea and his probably one spouse, maybe two, is actually a really tiny slice of the book of Hosea. The entire rest of the book is God's statements about Israel. So there's tons of stuff in here to look at and and see what's different. But I think part of the appeal is the idea that in the middle of all this, what is going on?

I don't know. I don't get it. I don't understand it. It's just that that consistent sense that you don't have to know, you know, the really important part and then you know what you're supposed to do with it, what God's real message is and his point is. And to me, that's a big that's a big takeaway.

Kevin Stone

This whole idea of spiritual adultery and our unfaithfulness to the Lord is a theme that's carried through the New Testament as well. I mean, we see it often in the Old Testament where God uses that analogy of marriage or faithfulness and love as being committed to the Lord. And then when we break that and people of Israel go running after idols, and that is tantamount to spiritual adultery. They're forsaking their vows, as it were, to the Lord.

Kevin Stone

But we see it in the New Testament as well. Book of James, he has a very startling statement there where he says he's addressing his readers saying, adulterers and adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? And so James picks up on that same metaphor and uses it for those in the New Testament times that are straying from God's will and in thinking of, you know, not being faithful to God.

Shea Houdmann

Hosea is not the only book in the Bible that talks about spiritual unfaithfulness, spiritual adultery, and Hosea is just the book that specifically relates it to marriage in this powerful way. To me, it's a beautiful picture of God's faithfulness in one, if you compare relationship, obviously in the passage, Gomer is Israel, Hosea is the Lord in the illustration. The Lord married Israel, so to speak, knowing what would happen. Hosea married Gomer knowing what would happen. And then God redeems Israel just as Hosea redeems Gomer. So it's that beautiful picture of God's faithfulness.

Shea Houdmann

And some people get so stuck on all they know about Hosea is, oh, he's the guy who had to marry a prostitute. It's like, well, yes, that's true. But like what Jeff was saying, that whole storyline is really like the first maybe three chapters and all the rest is prophecies both related to what that picture of Hosea and Gomer represent, and then also just a rebuke from Hosea against Israel for their spiritual infidelity.

Shea Houdmann

So again and again and again, Hosea repeating these themes after having given the very tangible example of what it would be like for a husband to have to go back and redeem his wife who had repeatedly cheated on him in a very disgusting way. And even like, I think it's powerful looking at the names of the children, Hosea and Gomer have three children, and the third child, I mean, who knows, it could be all three, but the third child, his name specifically means, not my people. And most people think that this child was not actually the child of Hosea and Gomer, but was a child produced through Gomer's unfaithfulness. So even to the point of Hosea is accepting not just a wife, but children who potentially were not his.

Shea Houdmann

So it's such a powerful story of God's faithfulness, God's love, God's forgiveness, God's mercy, and repeatedly forgiving us and accepting us back again and again and again, no matter how many times we've been unfaithful, not because of anything in us, but because of who he is, because of his love, because of his mercy. And that's what we need to take from the book of

Hosea rather than focusing on the details of what kind of unfaithfulness was Gomer and when did it happen or when did it start, those sorts of things. Those are important, those are interesting, but those are not the main point of the book of Hosea.

Kevin Stone

There's so much there when we start looking at God's love for us, or God's love for the people of Israel and his faithfulness to them, but then, you know, by extension, God's love for us as well. Gomer wasn't coming back. Hosea had to take the initiative in chapter three where God tells him, go find Gomer and buy her back, redeem her, bring her back into your home, into your life, bring her back to your side. And we were running away from God and God had to take the initiative to come to where we were. He sent his son into this world to seek and to save the lost. He pursued us just like Hosea pursued Gomer.

Kevin Stone

And then in chapter three, when Hosea has to redeem Gomer, scripture says that he did so with 15 shekels of silver and five bushels of barley. And I'm sure that was kind of a steep price, but how much did God redeem us for? I mean, what was the price for God redeeming us? It was the precious blood of his only begotten son, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. It's just, there are so many more parallels as well in the story of Hosea and Gomer, in the story of God and us.

Jeff Laird

I like the emphasis on the redemption. When you read this little passage in chapter one, little passage in chapter three, that's really the important, the beautiful thing that's being presented is those pictures of how God interacts with us and how he sees his people and the way he handles things like redemption.

Jeff Laird

The other details, I think it's just a natural human thing where we want to fill in all the really specific things in there. And even as we're saying this, strictly speaking, when you look at chapter three, that's the place where God says, and the Lord said, again, go love a woman who is loved by another man. Gomer's name isn't even mentioned there. So in the really strictest sense, we don't even know if this is the same person. If this could have been, maybe he married Gomer, Gomer was unfaithful. She left. And God said, yes, you're going to get remarried, but now you're going to go and you're going to redeem this person who's also a known adulteress. Maybe it was Gomer. Maybe it was somebody different. Neither of those is actually the point.

Jeff Laird

Then that's the idea is that it doesn't really matter whether it was Gomer or somebody else. The point is, this is the redemption. This is the sign.

This is the symbol that God is giving. In fact, a lot of the stuff that we read in here, we really just don't, we don't know. And the reason I'm emphasizing that is just because I like in a sense, the way that none of those details are included, because even though they drive us nuts, none of those details matter. Like none of that stuff has anything to do with the point that God's making through Hosea that we're supposed to understand.

Jeff Laird

I've heard interpretations that would even suggest that Gomer possibly was a normal spouse in that sense. Because when God refers to take a wife of whoredom, have children of whoredom, because the land commits whoredom, the suggestion is what that means is God is just saying, look, all of Israel is completely idolatrous and corrupt. So you marry somebody from that culture and then we're going to give the children these names and that's what it will mean.

Jeff Laird

But then on the flip side, you have things like it says that she conceived and bore him, meaning Hosea, a son for the first child. But then the ones after that, it just says she conceived and bore. She conceived and bore. Does that mean that they weren't actually his kids? What happened possibly to make her go back to the, again, we look through all this stuff and at some point in time, you find yourself going, yeah, but ultimately what's the difference?

Hosea never knows anything is bad about Gomer and nothing's bad about Gomer. It's the same prophecy. It's the same symbol. He marries her and then she turns unfaithful. It's the same thing. He marries her knowing that she's a prostitute or something, and then she leaves him and he goes and buys her back.

Jeff Laird

All of that stuff is interesting, but none of it changes the idea, Kevin, to what you were driving at. That the point of this is that God's perception of what it's like when somebody cheats on him spiritually, when they take what is supposed to be reserved for God and they take that somewhere else, and you do see that through Hosea where he shows, I'm going to bring Israel down. I'm going to bring them low. I'm going to let them experience the consequences of this, but then I'm going to bring them back. I'm going to do these things.

Jeff Laird

Some people compare this to the Babylonian exile because one of the things that he says is going to do after the redemption in chapter three is he says, I'm going to take, you take this woman to a secluded place and the two of you sort of separate yourselves from everybody else. And you're going to say, you're going to stay here. I'm not going to let you have access to other people. You're going to be faithful to me. I'm going to be faithful to you. We're going to make this happen. We're going to make this work out. And some people in Israel saw that that was the purpose of the exile was to purge Israel from this idolatry. But again, the themes that keep coming back are all about this message of the gospel and God's way of reaching out to us. Fascinating as it is, we have to remember that every time we say so-and-so did this or so-and-so did that, it's actually a lot of speculation.

Kevin Stone

I'd like to share with you guys Psalm 103 verses 10 and 11 in relation to this whole idea of the theme of God's faithfulness in the face of our unfaithfulness. But this passage from Psalm 103 says, God does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities for as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him. Even when we are faithless, He is faithful. God is a God who redeems people. He buys them back. He buys them out of the slavery of sin and makes them His own. And that love relationship in Christ is an eternal one, and we praise Him for that.

Shea Houdmann

Amen. I thank God every day for the fact that He never gives up on me, keeps drawing me back every time I fail. In preparation for this episode, I was reading different commentaries and different articles online about one passage or one idea I'd like to share that I'm not sure how completely biblical is, but I've got many analogies that eventually breaks down if you try to parse it too closely. But several people talked about how Hosea marrying Gomer is like God marrying Israel. So whether you place that at God's calling of Abraham or at Sinai where God officially went into covenant with the entire nation of Israel. So there's a point where God married Israel. Israel goes astray. That's the story of basically everything from the Ten Commandments onward is the story of Israel going astray. So when did God redeem Israel? When did He actually purchase her back? Well, that'd be at the death of Christ, when Christ died for the sins of Israel, but also for our sins to redeem us, to bring us back to God. So there's that picture as well, that this is how God—yes, God married someone, literally married the nation of Israel. Israel was unfaithful, and God purchased her back, redeemed her back, but it cost Him everything. This was no just, fine, I'll take her back. No, God actually had

to purchase Israel back. God had to purchase us back at the cost of the death of His only begotten Son.

Shea Houdmann

So that's another powerful illustration of what there are some similarities between this story and the grand story of redemption we find throughout Scripture. So the story of Hosea and Gomer, yes, it's about a man marrying someone who was unfaithful to him and having to redeem her back, but the story is far much more about God's relationship with Israel, God's relationship with us. So it's eminently practical to us in our relationship with God, and I think that's more important for us to remember than focusing on the very specific details of Hosea and Gomer and their not-so-perfect marriage.

Jeff Laird

There's definitely a way that you can look to see some themes in there that also apply a lot further down the road. A lot of what the Old Testament says about God's relationship with Israel kind of looks ahead to the end times when He's talking about this moment when everything's going to be completely and fully and totally redeemed. So when I'm reading through Hosea, I see a lot of that. It sounds like he's talking about, this is going to be what's going to happen when I come back and Messiah really returns and does this.

Jeff Laird

And you're right, there's a lot of different things from a lot of different commentaries that say things, and there's reasons for that. My understanding is that the actual language in Hosea, the Hebrew that's in there, is a dialect that's different from the dialect that the rest of the Bible is written in. I heard it described as a Northern dialect, which I guess means what it means, and that the only other prophet that we know of who's specifically associated with the Northern kingdom is Jonah. So it's not a stellar track record for the North when it comes to that. When Hosea and Jonah are your representatives for the all-star game, you kind of got an issue.

Jeff Laird

But that's one of the reasons that we have a lot of different interpretations, is some of the words that are used are a little obscure, they're hard to translate. So people have lots of different ideas. I read a commentary that suggested that when Gomer left, she went and joined the Marines in the United States. But you'd have to look that one up to get it.

Shea Houdmann

I will have to look that one up, so thank you, Jeff.

Jeff Laird

Surprise, surprise, surprise.

Shea Houdmann

Gomer Pyle, got it.

Jeff Laird

Welcome to the Bible.

Shea Houdmann

So, despite Jeff's little rabbit trail right here, I hope our conversation about Hosea and Gomer and what the main message of the Book of Hosea is has been helpful to you today. It's a powerful story of God's faithfulness, of God's redemption, and that's really what we should be focusing on. Yes, there are some difficult things about what God commanded Hosea to do and why, but the main focus is on God's love, God's faithfulness, and God's redemption, something we should all relate to and be able to apply to our relationship, and motivation for being faithful, but also motivation to come back when we have failed. 1 John 1-9 would be a good passage for how to remember how to reconcile with God by confessing our sins. He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Shea Houdmann

Got questions? The Bible has answers, and we'll help you find them.