

## **Chapter Twenty**

### **God Persists: Hosea, Joel**

In many ways the book of Hosea is the most beautiful book in the Old Testament. It is a love story--the story of a broken marriage and of the heartache which unfaithfulness brings into a life. Yet it is also the story of the persistence of God in fulfilling His promise of redemptive action. It pictures the New Testament promise of Philippians 1:6: "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

We are informed in the opening verse that Hosea ministered in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, the kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, king of Israel. This would make him a contemporary of Isaiah, Amos, and Micah. It was a time of spiritual declension within the nation and the people were paying lip service to the worship of God but their hearts were far from Him. It was a case with them as it is often with us that the spirit was willing but the flesh was ready for the weekend!

Chapter 1 opens with the remarkable command of God to the prophet to go and marry a girl who would ultimately prove to be a harlot, and thus to illustrate through the personal history of Hosea the heartbreak of God when He saw the people of Israel given over to spiritual harlotry. There is no reason to believe that Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim whom Hosea married, was a harlot at the time of their marriage, but it is clear that Hosea was told by God that this would ultimately come to pass. You can't read the prophecy of Hosea without seeing that he loved Gomer with all his heart and at first they must have been wonderfully happy together. When their first child, a boy, was born, Hosea went to God to determine the name for the lad. To his great surprise, God picked the name *Jezreel*, which meant "castaway" and was a name of shame in Israel. It recalled the story of Queen Jezebel and King Ahab who cheated their neighbor Naboth of his vineyard. Their treachery was avenged by the king's general, Jehu, who usurped the throne and ordered the servants to throw Jezebel out the window. Her blood was licked up by the dogs in the courtyard, and the courtyard was named Jezreel, for it was there that Queen Jezebel was cast away (see 2 Kings 9:30-37).

Obediently, Hosea gave this name to his oldest son for he understood that God was thus warning the people that they, too, would be cast away if they didn't recognize the folly of their actions. In the course of time another child, a daughter, was born to Hosea and Gomer. This one was named *Lo-ruhamah*, which means "not pitied." It meant that God would no longer have pity on His people if they continued their stubborn rebellion, for His patience was wearing thin. When this little girl was weaned, Gomer conceived again and bore a third child, another little boy. This one God named *Lo-ammi*, "not my people," for God was saying, "You are not my people and I am not your God" (1:9). Yet in the face of this clear revelation of coming judgment, the prophet was sent also to tell the people that there would come a day when Israel would be restored and their names of reproach taken away and they would be called by all "Sons of the living God" (v. 10).

In chapter 2, though no direct mention is made of Gomer's unfaithfulness, it is clear from the prophet's words that he is feeling great personal anguish over her harlotry. Though Hosea still warns of judgment to come and the fact that God would send the Assyrians raging across the land, he no longer announced this with thunder in his voice. Rather he spoke with tears, and tenderly described the day when love would at last triumph after the bitter lesson of disobedience was learned. He predicted Israel would yet turn back to the God who had loved her so faithfully, and instead of being called "not pitied," Israel would be pitied, and instead of "not my people," they would be named "my people" again.

The five short verses of chapter 3 describe how the prophet was sent to find his wandering wife and bring her back into his home again. Evidently her current husband had tired of her and she was to be sold as a slave, so

Hosea went to the marketplace and watched as Gomer was brought up and placed on the dock. She was stripped of all her clothing and stood naked before the crowd. The bidding began, and ultimately Hosea offered 15 pieces of silver and a bushel of barley. The auctioneer's gavel fell, and Hosea had his wife back again.

As he put her clothes on her and led her away, he spoke to her what is perhaps the most beautiful verse in all the Bible: "You must dwell as mine for many days; you shall not play the harlot, or belong to another man; so will I also be to you" (3:3). That this painful but beautiful action was symbolic as a message to the people is made clear in the next two verses: "For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or seraphim. Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days" (3:4,5). This prophecy seems to encompass both the return from exile in Babylon and the later dispersion among the nations of the world following the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, with an ultimate return in penitence and faith at the end of the age in view.

In chapters 4 and 5 the prophet summons the people to hear the Lord's controversy against the inhabitants of the land. Their sin is described in clear detail: "There is swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds and murder follows murder" (4:2). Such open sin is declared to be a result of their religious ignorance and lack of knowledge. Priest and prophet alike are guilty of greed and iniquity, and so the land suffers and the people are subjected to invading hosts.

But in the closing verse of chapter 5 and the opening verses of chapter 6 a clear note of hope is struck, for Jehovah says: "I will return again to my place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face, and in their distress they seek me, saying, 'Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn, that he may heal us; he has stricken, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord, his going forth is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth'" (5:15--6:3). It is remarkable that here restoration is promised the people "on the third day." Without doubt this has in view the resurrection of Jesus on the third day and the symbol this represents of a new beginning and a new kind of life.

The rest of chapter 6 and all of 7 describe the divine frustration at having tried various ways to reach the people of Israel and awaken them to their peril, yet all to no avail. They were like "a cake not turned" (7:8). That is, undeveloped on one side and burned on the other. Further they were like "a dove, silly and without sense" (v. 11), for they kept calling upon the nations around them for deliverance, only to find themselves trapped and destroyed by the ones to whom they looked for help. Like many today, they kept howling and complaining about their mistreatment, but would not repent and turn to the Lord from whom they might find full deliverance.

In chapters 8 through 10 the prophet employs various figures to describe the coming judgment upon the people and the inevitable invasion from Assyria and exile to that land. They are warned that Assyria is like a vulture over the house of the Lord who shall be permitted to descend upon the people and punish them for their sins. The population of the land will be decimated and the countryside left desolate. Though Israel was once like a luxuriant vine yielding much fruit, the vineyard shall be destroyed and their idols carried away with them to Assyria. Through the prophet, Jehovah speaks with great plainness: "You have plowed iniquity, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruit of lies. Because you have trusted in your chariots and in the multitude of your warriors, therefore the tumult of war shall arise among your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed" (10:13,14). Yet it must be remembered that Hosea does not pronounce these words with thunder and lightning, but with deep heart-anguish and an awareness from his own personal history of how Jehovah feels when He visits judgment upon His people.

Chapter 11 opens with the words: "When Israel was a child, I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and burning incense to idols." Here again God's loving heart comes bursting through the revelations of judgment as the prophet cries in the name of the Lord: "How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! How can I make you like Admah! How can I treat you like Zeboiim! My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender" (11:8). It is language reminiscent of the scene in the Gospels where Jesus sits on the Mount

of Olives and weeps over the rebellious city of Jerusalem.

Yet though God feels the anguish of His people and suffers with them, nevertheless He resolves upon judgment for He knows there is no other way to break the back of the people's rebellion and bring them at last in repentance to His feet. So He declares: "Samaria shall bear her guilt, because she has rebelled against her God; they shall fall by the sword, their little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open." (13:16)

All through this severe language one can detect a sob in the voice of God as He pronounces judgment. And finally in the last chapter, the love of God comes flashing through the darkness. He cries beseechingly: "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words and return to the Lord; say to him, 'Take away all iniquity; accept that which is good and we will render the fruit of our lips.'" (14:1, 2)

To this attitude the divine promise is revealed: "I will heal their faithfulness; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be as the dew to Israel; he shall blossom as the lily, he shall strike root as the poplar; his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden; they shall blossom as the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon" (14:4-7).

It should be clear to us as we read this beautiful story that it is really our own personal history. Ours is the blindness that, like Gomer's, cannot distinguish between lust and love. We try to run from God and drown our miseries in empty pleasures or in overwork; but as surely as we think we have escaped, as surely as we think we have run away, God touches our sleeve with His love, saying, "My child, my name and my nature are love, and I must act according to what I am. When you tire of your running and your wandering and your heartbreak, I'll be there to draw you to myself again." At Bethlehem God entered the slave market of this world where the whole human race was putting itself up for auction, prostituting its humanity to a cheapened life. But on the cross the Lord Jesus paid the price of our freedom and bought us back. Thus Hosea is but again the story of God's love and God's heart, revealing His loving desire to make us, His people, the whole persons He intended us to be.

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## JOEL

For centuries men have been looking for the principle upon which the events of history turned. Since the dawn of history there have been many guesses as to what that principle is. The great Greek philosophers declared that history moves in cycles, and a leading modern historian, Arnold Toynbee, agrees with that. For instance, Aristotle said that history follows a predictable course; first a tyrant rises, a man of iron, who seizes control of a nation and rules until his dynasty ends. Control gradually passes from him to a ruling family of aristocracy, and as their power deteriorates, control passes to the people in what Aristotle called democracy. But the democracy, too, will deteriorate and gradually bring about a breakdown of power until anarchy ensues. Out of anarchy a tyrant again seizes control and so goes the cycle of history.

Other men have felt somewhat differently. Thomas Jefferson thought the hinge of history was political; and when he wrote the Declaration of Independence he incorporated that idea in the prologue, declaring that human governments must recognize certain inalienable rights that are granted to men and, to preserve those rights, governments are instituted among men. He felt, therefore, that the forces that shape human history are political in nature.

In the last century, Karl Marx dipped his pen into the acid of his own embittered spirit and wrote the work that has dramatically influenced our modern time. His idea was that the controlling force of history is economics, and that it is the need to meet the material demands of life that shapes the events of any day. He called this force "dialectical materialism," the principle of material supply arrived at through dialectical discussion, that is, debate. Today millions around the earth feel that economics is indeed the controlling force of life.

H. G. Wells, however, was one of a number of thinkers who said that evolution shapes the course of human destiny. Schools often teach today that behind the events of human history is an evolutionary principle, forcing us on to higher and higher endeavor and making life better and better.

But in many places in the Bible we learn that these insights are all wrong, especially in the book of Joel. Joel declares that the hinge upon which history turns is spiritual--God's Spirit at work among men. Even as early as the great universal flood Noah was told, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever." In that brief phrase we learn that God's Spirit is in conflict with the spirit of the age, and that the Spirit of God patiently is restraining human evil so that life can go on. But at last God's patience will reach an end and then comes a time--often repeated throughout history--when God removes His Spirit from His restraining ministry and everything collapses, great catastrophes occur, and judgment strikes. It is what the Bible describes as "the day of the Lord." That is essentially the message of the book of Joel.

Joel was a prophet to the kingdom of Judah and also a contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea and Amos. His prophetic vision encompassed not only immediate events of his own day, but as with many of the prophets, he saw to the final stages of God's dealing with human events.

He begins in chapter 1 with a dramatic description of an invasion of locusts upon the land of Judah. As a boy I witnessed such an invasion in Minnesota many years ago. I can still remember how the sky was darkened by the great cloud of insects, and one could hear them descending into the standing grain fields, like hail upon the ground. There was a continual rustling of the noise of their wings as they covered the fields, and within moments every blade of grass, every bit of vegetation was gone, and the fields were left as though they had been plowed.

That is what happened in Israel in Joel's day. A locust horde had descended upon the land and devoured every living thing. The crops were ruined and famine was at hand. Joel calls the attention of the nation to this event, summoning the elders to take heed and even the drunkards to be aware of the disaster that had fallen upon them. His point is that God is behind such an event as this. It is not merely a freak of nature, but happened in obedience to the command of God who works through natural laws to teach His people the lessons they need to learn. Joel clearly implies that if the people will learn this minor-league example of the day of the Lord, they will save themselves the awful heartache that will come in what he later calls "the great and terrible day of the Lord."

In chapter 2 the prophet leaps a great span of time to the end days and uses the invasion of locusts as a picture of the invasion of a great army into the land of Israel in the latter days. He says: "Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been from old, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations" (2:2). This begins to sound very much like the language Jesus used in describing a time of trouble which would be, He said, "Such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be" (Matt. 24:21). The prophet describes how the land is scorched behind this great army as it advances, and he describes the army itself as having the appearance of horses. Fear grips the hearts of the people as they see this invading host. "The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining" (2:10).

Anyone who carefully compares prophetic passages from the Scripture will soon discover there are certain interpretational landmarks. Symbols appear again and again through various books of prophecy so that one can identify the events which are described. The darkening of the sun and the moon, and the withdrawing of light from the stars is one of these landmarks.

Jesus Himself refers to such an event in His great description of the last days in Matthew 24. It appears also in the book of Daniel and in Isaiah and in the book of Revelation. Whenever it is mentioned, it is an interpretational landmark pointing to the last days which mark the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord.

This section of Joel's prophecy then seems to link directly with the description of the prophet Ezekiel (chaps. 38, 39) of a great northern army which invades the land of Israel, destroying everything before them, and

ultimately capturing the city of Jerusalem.

But in each of the prophecies mentioned, God promises that the northern army will be dealt with by direct divine intervention. Isaiah says so, Ezekiel says so, Daniel says so. Now Joel also adds his voice: "'Yet even now,' says the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.' Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil. Who knows whether he will not turn and repent, and leave a blessing behind him" (2:12-14).

Then the divine promise comes: "I will remove the northerner far from you, and drive him into a parched and desolate land, his front into the eastern sea, and his rear into the western sea; the stench and foul smell of him will rise, for he has done great things" (2:20). Here also the great northern invader is found to be destroyed upon the mountains of Judah. The eastern sea is the Dead Sea and the western sea the Mediterranean, and there, according to both Joel and Ezekiel, the stench and foul smell of decaying corpses will fill the land. And afterward the land itself is called to rejoice and to blossom with fecundity and prosperity. The great promise is: "I will restore to you the years which the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army which I sent among you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame" (2:25,26).

This is always God's way of dealing with those who repent and return to Him. I shall never forget the agony in the eyes of a young man who a number of years ago looked at me and said, "You know I've become a Christian and it's wonderful, but when I think back to what I've missed and the years of my life that I've wasted, my heart is sick in remembering it. If I'd only had the sense to come to the Lord before I did all these terrible things." I had the joy of saying to him, "Son, God says 'I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten.' It is His delight to make up to us for the barrenness of our lives when we return at last to Him."

Beginning with verse 28 on through chapter 3, the prophet describes the means by which God will accomplish His great purposes. Verses 28 and 29 are a familiar and oft-quoted promise: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days, I will pour out my spirit." Perhaps you will recognize that these are the verses quoted by the apostle Peter when he stood up on the day of Pentecost and, interpreting the sign of tongues of fire and strange languages which the apostles were speaking, he said to the assembled multitudes: "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel" (see Acts 2:16-18).

Peter went on quoting from the prophet, pointing out that there would be signs in the heavens when the sun would be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the terrible day of the Lord shall come. It is clear from this that Joel foresaw both the beginning and the ending of the great period of time which we call now "the age of grace." The pouring out of God's Spirit on the day of Pentecost was to be the initial introduction of an entire age during which there would be no special priesthood or order of prophet, but all God's people would be equipped with spiritual gifts and be enabled to minister one to another.

But that age would end in a time of great universal disaster and the appearance of terrible judgments upon the earth. Those days of judgment will be introduced by a period of intense international warfare, for Joel is told: "I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, and I will enter into judgment with them there, on account of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations, and have divided up my land, and have cast lots for my people, and have given a boy for a harlot, and have sold a girl for wine, and have drunk it" (3:2,3). To bring this about, the prophet is told: "Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare war, stir up the mighty men. Let all the men of war draw near, let them come up. Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, 'I am a warrior'" (3:9,10).

Many have quoted the famous words from Micah and Isaiah, "beat your swords into plowshares and your spears into pruning hooks," but little mention is made of this statement from Joel in which the nations are summoned not to make peace, but to make war. It is clear that Joel's prophecy must be fulfilled first and the

present course of world events seems to indicate that there is no hope of universal peace until first there must come universal war and divine judgment.

Once again mention is made of the terrible judgments of the great day of the Lord: "Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining" (3:14,15).

But the final scene is one of beauty and glory: "And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water; and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord and water the valley of Shittim" (3:18). As we have already seen, this is the way Ezekiel's great vision ends, with a river flowing out from under the threshold of the altar and watering the land. Water in Scripture is a picture of the Holy Spirit and fulfills the word of Jesus in John 7:38: "He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"

It is apparent from Joel that the future is in God's hands and not man's. It is in the hands of One who is preparing something which is beyond anything eye has ever seen or ear has ever heard or has ever entered into the heart of man. God deals with us in judgment that He may capture our attention and wake us up to reality; but through these difficult things God in grace is simply saying: "Adjust your life to reality now that you may be ready for the great things which are yet to come." The promise to Israel is: "But Judah shall be inhabited for ever, and Jerusalem to all generations. I will avenge their blood, and I will not clear the guilty, for the Lord dwells in Zion" (3:20,21). Again, this is where Ezekiel ended his prophecy, with a picture of the restored city under its new name "the Lord is there."

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Originated April 2, 1997. Corrections? Email [Lambert Dolphin \(dolphin@best.com\)](mailto:dolphin@best.com)