

## The Tough Call

In this series we are looking at one of the most dysfunctional marriages of all time—the marriage between a preacher and a prostitute. And as we look at it we realize that this dysfunctional marriage is really just a picture of an even more dysfunctional marriage between God and his people. Of course, all of the dysfunction is on our shoulders. And see in Hosea 1:2 God's call to Hosea to “take to [himself] a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom.” This means he's not only going to have to pursue this wife; he's going to have to commit to her and endure her whoredom and even raise children that may not be his.

Notice that God does not say, “Take *for* yourself a prostitute.” That would be just a retail, consumer relationship. Hosea would use her, abuse her, exploit her, and discard her. No, he's not taking a prostitute for himself; he's taking a wife to himself. That's completely different and it's what we call real love. This is a tough call. Every prophet has a tough call, but it's in this tough call that we learn about real love.

We saw that Hosea's going to take to himself a wife with a past, but now we're going to see God taking to *himself* a wife in Hosea 2:19, because the relationship between Hosea and Gomer are really pointing us to the relationship between God and us. God says, “I will betroth you to me forever.” Betrothal is an ancient custom. Think of an engagement that is absolutely binding, where a ring is exchanged but also a contract. Where you begin to call one another husband and wife, but you are still awaiting that wedding feast and consummation. Hosea's going to take a wife of whoredom; God's going to take us, his people—forever, according to Hosea 2:19.

In other words, God is saying, “I will make a commitment to you. I will get down on one knee and give you the engagement ring; I will call you my wife and you will call me your husband and that will be forever.” I heard some wedding “vows” recently that went like this: “I love you and I want to be with you.” The problem with this is that it's not even a vow; it's just a statement. There's no future tense; there's only the present tense. But

historically, Christians have always known that vows must include the word “forever” in a sense. “In sickness and in health, for better or for worse...forever. I don’t just love you now but I’m making a vow to you that I promise to love you even in the tough times.” In Hosea 2:19, God is making a promise of future commitment.

That should prompt us to ask, “Why does God want to marry us?” Well, why does a man want to marry a woman? Why would he make that forever commitment? Men betroth women because they’re marriage material. Men are looking for someone to love, but that person needs to be loveable. If a man were to create in his own imagination a god, how would that god pursue marriage? The object of pursuit would have to be marriage material, because this is a god created out of the imagination of a man.

Think of the pantheon of our American gods. The god of success will say to you, “I love you and I want to be with you” only if you have earned it. He will marry you if you are marriage material, if you have labored, if you have put in the hard hours. If you have run on the rat wheel for the god of success, he will get down on one knee and offer you a ring, and the god of success will even stay married to you. He’s never promised to stay married to you forever, but he will stay married to you as long as things are better and not worse. As long as you stay richer and not poorer. As long as you stay healthy and not sick.

But as soon as you get off of the rat wheel, as soon as you stop working, he will abandon you. He will use you, exploit you, and marry you, sure, but not forever. And even if he stays married to you for a long time, the god of success will leave you on your deathbed. He may say now, “I love you and want to be with you,” but he doesn’t say anything like our God: “I will betroth you to me forever” (Hosea 2:19). The god of success will marry you if you’re marriage material. He is a god made up by men and that’s how men marry.

How about the god of people’s approval? He will get down on one knee and he will offer his hand in marriage as long as you walk on eggshells—as long as you compromise and as long as you work for him. The god of people’s approval would love to give you his hand in marriage if

you're marriage material, but as soon as it gets worse, rather than better, as soon as you get poorer, rather than richer, as soon as you get sick, rather than healthy, the god of people's approval will leave you. He'll say now, "I want to marry you. I want to be with you." But he will never say, "I will betroth you to me forever" (Hosea 2:19).

As soon as you stop being marriage material, these gods leave you. What do we call a lover who leaves you as soon as there's nothing left in you to exploit? A pimp. The gods of this world are pimps. They will use you, abuse you, and exploit you, and as long as you work for them, they will put their arm around you, but as soon as you quit, they will leave. But our God, the true God, says, "I will betroth you to me forever" (Hosea 2:19). And it's not because you're marriage material.

So why *does* God do it? I know why he doesn't do it—not because of the characteristics he sees in us. It's because of his character. If God does not marry us based on us being marriage material, and if he promises to be betrothed to us forever, there's a serious problem, and the problem is our faithfulness. I don't have any doubt that God will remain faithful, but I have plenty of doubts that I will. I have full confidence in Hosea; but I have no confidence in Gomer. The doubts that sometimes creep into my heart are, "How can I be there for him? I'm a woman with a past. What about my faithfulness? How can he make these promises and be sure I won't abandon him?"

The answer lies in the rest of Hosea 2:19-20. "I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness." In ancient times, when a man metaphorically got down on one knee, they would give a bride price. We give an engagement ring. And here we have the picture of God getting down on one knee and promising a bride price that is righteousness, justice, steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness.

## Becoming Marriage Material

God doesn't marry us because we're marriage material, but when he marries us he makes us marriage material. What god acts like that? None. What man acts like that? Only the man who has the love of God in his heart. Only the man who has real love can marry someone not because they're marriage material but in marrying them makes them into marriage material through their covenant relationship. What god is like that? Only ours.

In Hosea 14:4 God says, "I will heal their apostasy. I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them." God doesn't only want to forgive you; he also wants to heal you. He endures with you. He betroths you *forever*. In verse 5-6 he says, "I will be like the dew to Israel; [they] shall blossom like the lily. [They] shall take root like the trees of Lebanon and grow. [Their] roots shall spread out." This is beautiful poetry that says we are a desert and God lays down upon us like the morning dew, and his moisture—closeness, tenderness, relationship—causes us to bloom and to sprout flower and buds and leaves and trees like the cedars of Lebanon (Hosea 14:5). God doesn't marry us because we're marriage material, but because of his marriage to us, we *become* marriage material. We blossom from a desert to a beautiful forest. He turns the desert of our hearts into the paradise where we once walked with him before the fall.

Righteousness, faithfulness, steadfast love, mercy, and justice are the things he gives to us when he proposes to us. These things ensure that we'll be with him and that we'll stay there. Those particular characteristics are revealed in the character of Jesus Christ. In righteousness, he says, "I come to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). In mercy, he saved those who could never be righteous through their own works (Titus 3:5). In justice, he came to preach good news to the poor and oppressed (Luke 14). In faithfulness, he was the friend who sticks closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24). In steadfast love, he was the one who endured all the way to the end, to the point of death on a cross.

The characteristics that God promises in Hosea 2:19-20 point forward to the character of Jesus. Hosea didn't know the timing or the details. He was just prophesying. Did Hosea know that these characteristics would be embodied in the man Christ Jesus? When God marries you, he gives you a gift, and that gift is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gift is the person of Jesus and his performance in life, death, and resurrection. This gift is what makes you marriage material, transforms you, and heals you.

When does this take place? When will God betroth us to himself? When Jesus came to this earth, he performed his first miracle at a wedding. At the wedding, the groom had failed. His job was to provide the wine. So Jesus comes and turns all these giant barrels of water into wine. I believe that what he's saying to us through this miracle is this that there was the first groom, but Jesus is the second groom. He's the real groom. He's the one who will provide. He's the one who shows up at the wedding feast and provides the wine.

Jesus is giving us a hint about the timing of God's marriage to us, which is when Jesus Christ came to the earth to walk among us (Matthew 1:23). Jesus Christ came, we were betrothed, but when was it that God got down on one knee? When did he humble and lower himself and put himself out there for us to respond? He did it in the incarnation, but he also did it at the cross of Christ. It is at the cross of Christ where God got down on one knee and said, "I will betroth you to me forever. I will give you the gift of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I will transform you into marriage material."

At the last supper before his betrayal and death, Jesus said, "The cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). When married couples got betrothed, they would share a cup, and they wouldn't drink the second cup until the ceremony—until the feast and the day of the consummation, where they would drink it together. Jesus says that the cup poured out for us is the cup of the covenant and that he won't drink it again until he drinks it with us again in his father's kingdom. This is the cup of the covenant and one day we're going to get married for real—the real festival and feast—and then we're going to have consummation.

Christian, you have been bindingly betrothed, but we are still awaiting the feast. It's called the "marriage supper of the lamb," but a more accurate description is "the marriage *feast* of the lamb" (Revelation 19:9) And we are waiting for the day of the consummation of his kingdom (Revelation 19). We are betrothed, but "we ain't seen nothing yet" (Bachman-Turner Overdrive).

How do we respond to this marriage proposal? How do we respond when God gets down on one knee and offers to us the gospel of Jesus Christ? It says in Hosea 2:16, "'And in that day,' declares the LORD, 'you will call me your husband and no longer will you call me Baal.'" In one sense, this means that we must all turn from our gods—the gods of the American pantheon: the god of success, the god of the American dream, the god of people's approval, and the gods of fortune and fame. We must turn from those "Baal"s.

But there is a more literal application for Hosea 2:16. The word "Baal" means "lord" or "master." And what God is saying to you is that when he gets down on one knee and he offers you the gospel of Jesus Christ and says he will betroth you, you'll quit calling him your master and start calling him your husband. In other words, you'll relate to him as a husband and stop relating to him like you relate to all those other gods. All those other gods require you to be marriage material to stay married to you. But not our God. You don't clock in and clock out with our God. He doesn't just want your hands; he wants your heart.

If someone were to propose marriage to you, would you respond by saying, "Yes, sir! What would you have me to do today, sir? Where is my to-do list that you would have me check off bit by bit?" He doesn't want you to relate to him like that. That's how you relate to the false gods. He wants you to embrace him and say, "My husband!" When you quit working and start resting in him, you rightly respond to his marriage proposal. If God has asked you to marry him and you have said yes and stopped working for him like you used to work for all those other gods you used to work for, then you will become the kind of person that can propose to other people

(perhaps not literally). You can offer a covenantal love to other people even when they're not "marriage material."

## **Retail Vs. Covenant Relationships**

There are two types of relationships in this world: retail and covenantal. Cox Cable is a retail relationship. If they do not properly provide services, you cut them off. You get Netflix. You do not expect to receive a letter in the mail from Cox that says, "You hurt me!" It's just business; it's not personal. If your butcher doesn't slice the meat properly, you move on to another butcher. If the barber doesn't give you the kind of haircut that you like, you find another barber. If they're not meeting your needs, you find another one. If they're irritating you, you unsubscribe from them—you get new friends. That's a retail relationship.

But there are covenantal relationships, like the relationship between a mother and her daughter. Does the daughter have gratitude? No. Does she even understand her mother's love? No. The mother's love is too complicated for her to understand. She thinks her mother has all the power, all the candy, and wants it for her own. She's a taker, a little vacuum—taking, taking, taking—and yet the mother persists. She never gives up. She loves her when no one else loves her. No one else has a clue why she loves that brat. But she loves that daughter because she has a covenant with her. That is what a covenant relationship looks like. In our society, even covenant relationships are becoming retail relationships. Even the relationship between a mother and her baby in the womb is becoming a retail relationship. If the costs outweigh the benefits, she unfriends that baby. She finds someone else that will meet her needs. People deal with their churches in the same way. If the church doesn't meet their needs, if the music is not to their liking—unfriend! New church. Then they're bouncing around like they're surfing pages on the internet. They've turned a covenant relationship into a retail relationship.

In a retail relationship, if your needs aren't being met, you find a different vendor. In a covenant relationship, when your needs aren't being

met, you sacrifice for the good of the relationship. We have received the covenantal love of God—*hesed* in Hebrew. We have been promised to be betrothed to God forever even though we are not marriage material and will not meet any of his needs, even though the costs far outweigh the benefits. He has covenanted with us, the Church. If that gets down into your heart, you should become the kind of person who can covenant with other people, not because they're "marriage material," not because the benefits outweigh the costs, but because you have that type of love inside you that flows from our covenanting God. That's the response when God gets down on one knee for you; you get down on one knee for other people as well.

Today, God is proposing to you. When Gomer was proposed to the first time, she said yes. Then she went her merry way and chased after other loves and ended up a sex slave on the auction block. Hosea went and bought her back and said, "Move into my house. I'm going to be your husband and you're going to be my wife." But we have no idea how she responded this second time. It's left open-ended, and I think it's because God is thrusting out the message of the book to us. He's proposing to us. He got down on one knee two thousand years ago, and he's still on one knee, but one day he's going to stand up and we're going to get this marriage feast on the way.

One day he's going to stand up and the offer will come off of the table. But today he is proposing to you; today, he is down on one knee. Stop treating him like those other gods and call him your husband; he wants your affections and he wants your heart. I think everyone wants to be "spiritual" to an extent—even non-Christians and especially new Christians. Everyone wants to have an intimate relationship with the divine. Everyone wants their spirituality to have life in it, and not dullness and dryness.

If this is you, God is offering the most intimate relationship this world has to offer you. Marriage is the most intimate relationship that we have on this planet. Your husband or wife knows things about you that no one else knows, and they still love you. They still covenant with you. God is offering that type of intimate relationship with you. What other god would do that? What other god would offer you that type of intimate relationship when you

are not marriage material? The ancient Greek gods, the Western gods, the Roman gods would be intimate with people—very intimate. But only special people. And only one at a time. Only queens. Only beautiful people. Only powerful men.

The ancient Eastern gods will commune with you. You can go to the park and commune with Mother Earth. But she will only commune with those who have advanced in mysticism. You must climb the ladder; you must become a very well-trained monk. You must become an expert Jedi if you want to become one with the Force. Not so with our God. He will not marry you because you're marriage material; he will marry you when you are a prostitute—when you are a woman with a past, when you have roaming eyes and a wayward heart. He will marry you and then he will turn you into marriage material. That's the offer that he has for you today. There is no other god on the planet like that. And he is on one knee offering you that today.

Christian, if you have married him, why are you so worried that you're not married here on this earth? You *are* married. You may not have the symbolic marriage, but you have the *real* marriage. Married people, maybe your spouse is not fulfilling your fairytale dreams, but they're not supposed to. This marriage is symbolic and points forward to *real* marriage. You can spend 50 years with somebody with a little smidgen of unfulfillment because you are waiting for the day of the wedding. You are waiting for the consummation.

Do you see how if you get this into your minds and hearts it changes everything? So what if you're not loved and not affirmed here and now? God went down on one knee for you two thousand years ago and said, "I will betroth you to me forever." What more love and affirmation can there possibly be? When God goes down on one knee, what else do you need? Nothing. The gospel changes everything.