

At the Red Light

Imagine you're heading home after a hard day's work and you can't wait to lay in your warm, cozy bed or to sit on your La-Z-Boy and watch a little television. Heading home, you have to pass through the seedy side of town, with the sun going down, and you get stopped at a red light. There you are, impatiently tapping your fingers, listening to music, waiting to be home, and you hear a *tap, tap, tap* on the window.

It is a woman tapping on your windshield. She's obviously not "like you" in some ways. She's dressed immodestly. She's one of those "bad people," unlike yourself. Even though you can't hear her because her voice is being muffled by the window, you can tell that she's basically asking, "Is there anything I can help you with?" And just before the red light turns to green and you are able to get out of that situation, you hear another voice. It's not her voice, it's not the radio, and no one else is in the car with you. The voice says, "She's the one."

I don't think this is going to happen to anyone in the present times, but it did happen a long time ago to Hosea. A voice from the heavens said to him, "She's the one. I want you to take her to yourself as a wife—not take her *for* yourself as a prostitute, but to yourself as a wife, who happens *to be* a prostitute. I want you to endure with her with great patience. I want you to transform her and to heal her. I want all that you are to be all for her, relationally, economically, physically, sexually, and spiritually. You are to covenant with her. She's the one" (Hosea 1:1-2).

Back to our modern-day example: Like a good prophet, you roll down the window, and you ask her to marry her. It sounds absurd, right? But the Lord actually called Hosea to this. Anyone can have a prostitute; the Lord specifically called Hosea to covenant with a woman who happens *to be* a prostitute, have children with her, and even raise children who may or may not be his own. In fact, we know for sure that one of them was not his, because he named him "Not Mine" (Hosea 1:9). Why did God call Hosea to do this? In Hosea 1:2, he says, "For the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD." This call of Hosea is projecting us to another great

fact that the people of God reject the Lord in the same way that a prostitute rejects her husband.

God did not say, “Take to yourself *any* prostitute,” but he hand-selected Gomer out of the crowd and said, “She’s the one.” So he took the one called Gomer. Putting yourself into his shoes again, you’ve asked her to marry you, you’ve said before the congregation and before God, “I do—in sickness or in health, for better or for worse, etc.” You covenanted with her and God in front of the entire church. And then that night in the hotel, the honeymoon suite, the marriage was consummated. And you lay down in bed and think, “Maybe God can work something good out of this.”

But at 2 in the morning, the usual time she would wake up and go to work, she wakes up and she goes back to work. She’s married now; she does not have to do that. Those days are over. But here she is, once again, at 2 am, aroused and awakened out into the streets, back to where she came from. We call that rejection. Imagine how your heart would break in that moment. You put all of yourself on the line. You made yourself vulnerable, you pursued a woman with a past, with roaming eyes, and a wayward heart. And here she is betraying you and rejecting you. God says in the book of Hosea that the way that would make you feel is the way he feels when you sin against him.

We are not merely breaking the rules of a king; we are breaking the heart of a husband. But then, as you lay there in bed, brokenhearted and rejected, you hear the voice again, and this time the voice says, “Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress” (Hosea 3:1). You thought the first call was absurd. This is another call that says, “She has rejected you, but now I want you to go after her again. And again. And again.” Why would God call Hosea to something like that?

God called Hosea to love a woman who had been unfaithful to him “even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins” (Hosea 3:1b). Even though we are unfaithful to the Lord and betray him time and time again, he loves us. We don’t have to go to work anymore, yet we do. We learn from this tough call

that real love goes, is rejected, and goes again. Who was it that came after his bride, was rejected, and yet will come again? Hosea points us to the greater groom, Jesus Christ, and the greater love story between God and us.

Hosea 11 reveals that God feels rejected by us sometimes. When you are a parent and your child is between the crawling and the walking stage, you want to hold them, and of course they're always holding onto your pants, because they want to be held as much as you want to hold them. But if you hold them all the time, they're never going to learn to walk. They've got to learn how to walk at some point, so you meet them halfway. You hold their hand and you teach them how to walk.

Now imagine that little kid grows up into a teenager. They forget that experience of learning to walk and having their hand held. You remember it, but they slam that door in your face. They reject you. And you wonder how it is that they can't trust you. You cry out, "I've been here all along. I was the one who held your hands and taught you how to walk. I taught you how to ride a bicycle and break in a baseball mitt. How can you not trust me? How can you think that my motives are against you? How can you not know that I am on your side, that I am here and will always be here?"

It is natural as a human being to grow old and forget about being taught how to walk when you were young. If you can identify with that feeling of rejection as a parent, you can identify with God. God can identify with us because he sent his Son to suffer like us. But can you identify with his suffering? To break his rules is not only to break the rules of a king and not only to break the heart of a husband; it is to break the heart of a father who taught you how to walk.

In Hosea 11:1-3, God says, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them." They forgot God's grace; they forgot that it was he who healed their little "bo-bo"s when they fell. What do we call this? Rejection.

The Heart of God

In the famous Michelangelo painting, God has a big and strong and mighty hand. He has all the power, all the might, all the cards, yet his hand is limp towards us. It just sort of hangs there. He's like some sort of absentee father who's drifted off to his man-cave to be self-indulgent. We're the ones that have to reach forward to take his hand. That's the way the world sees God, but that's not the biblical picture, which is of a father reaching his hand out for the child who is shaking his fist at him. He has forgotten that hand has reached down and taught him to walk.

Jesus Christ is the one who reached down to us, raised us up, and taught us how to walk. Israel was in bondage in Egypt, enslaved to Pharaoh, like a pack mule with a heavy burden on its back and a tight bit in its mouth. God came to the people of Israel like the divine horse whisperer, stroked their nose, loosened their bit, and unhitched the wagon. Then he led them out of Egypt with "cords of kindness" (Hosea 11:4). He began to treat them like a pet and not like packmule. He bent down to them and fed them manna (Exodus 16).

Can you identify with a cowboy or a horse whisperer who wants to break in a horse? He sees the horse marked by years of abuse and all he wants to do is treat that horse like a pet, and the horse rears and bucks and kicks. Rejection. If you can identify with that, you know how God feels when we sin against him. Look at Hosea 11:4 again: "I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them."

God has done that for the Church today through Jesus Christ. He has led us out of Egypt, out of bondages to sin and slavery and to Satan. He has led us through the wilderness of life with the cords of kindness. The cord that stretches out from God to us is none other than Jesus Christ. In fact, the word in Hosea 11:4 can be literally translated as "human cord." There has been much debate over what Hosea could have meant by that, but some people think he's pointing to Moses, who is a type and shadow of Christ, who leads us through the wilderness of this life with human cords.

God has reached down to us as slave animals and is now treating us like beloved pets, feeding us the bread of life (John 6:32-33). Yet we forget about his kindness. We forget about the way he has dealt with us. We reject him. We return to the red light over and over again.

The stories of Hosea and Gomer, the cowboy and the horse, and the father and the child are all examples of when you try to love somebody and they don't love you back, which is heartbreaking rejection. God feels that. Hosea 11 is one of the most beautiful chapters in the whole Bible because it tells us what God is like on the inside. There aren't many chapters in the Bible that tell us what God is like on the inside. He's trying to communicate to you that he, too, gets his heart broken—by us! He feels, and it's so amazing that the God of this universe, who is absolutely independent—totally happy all by himself in the trinity—has attached his insides to us in a way that when we run away from him, he hurts.

Do you understand the mystery and beauty of that? God feels heartbreak, too, and he's trying to tell us that. Real love is the way that God keeps coming for those who have rejected him with real sin. How does God respond to this? Hosea 11 shows how Hosea responds to Gomer's rejection, and it is a reflection of how God responds to ours. He "goes," and what does he do after the rejection? He goes again. He is rejected and he goes back for his bride.

In the same way, God says, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away" (Hosea 11:1-2). They rejected him. They kept sacrificing to the Baals. They kept returning to the red light. What does God do after the rejection? God responds to their rejection in Hosea 11:8, "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?"

Imagine how you feel toward that little baby that walked like a chimpanzee, whose little hands you held; he's a teenager now, and he slams the door in your face and shakes his fist at you. What do you say to that child? "How can I give you up?!" A father and a mother cannot give up their teenager. Even when everyone else think that teenager is a

despicable human being, the mother and the father say with love, “How can I give you up?”

This is how God feels towards his children. He also feels towards his children in the same way a cowboy feels for that wounded horse he has taken in for a pet. He saw the animal in the roadside, abused by his previous masters. He let it out of the gate and loosened up its bands. Though it kicks and bucks against him, he says to that horse, “I’m never going to give up breaking you in. How can I? I’ve been here all along.”

God said that from the very beginning to Adam and Eve. He told Adam and Eve, “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). He had a covenant with Adam and Eve, and it wasn’t “until death do us part.” It was, “If you depart, you will die.” And when they departed—when they took of the fruit—did God kill them? No. He said, “How can I give you up, Adam and Eve? How can I give you up after I created you with my own hands? Your rejection is hurting me on the inside. I’m torn between justice and mercy. But how can I give you up? I was the one who was always there.”

To us, he says, “I was the one who taught you how to walk, who taught you how to throw a baseball, who put that Bible in the gym that you wept over. How can I leave you? How can I give you up?” He says that to us from his heart. Don’t you know God has one, and we break it every day? God says, “How can I give you up, Church, though you’ve wounded me?” Everyone has been wounded by a church in some way or another. The trend is, we go, we get rejected, and we stop going.

God was wounded by the Church and he goes and goes again. In his time of deepest trial, he asked his disciples to attend a simple prayer meeting, and they could not; they slept through it (Matthew 26:36-46). In his time of persecution, he needed a friend, and they all abandoned him. They all fled for their lives (Mark 14:50). They denied him and betrayed him with kisses (John 18:15-27, Luke 22:48). Yet he goes again and again and again. Real love fights through the rejection and pursues its bride. How can he do this? He’s not just a husband; he is also a judge. How can he

continue to pursue us every day at the red light as we pursue the gods of our ambitions?

Responding to Real Love

Jesus came to this earth and Matthew was one to write about it. In fact, his gospel account is the first in our New Testament. In chapter 2:14 he writes, “And [Joseph] rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod.” Herod was the great tyrant, the oppressor, the one who was trying to kill Jesus. “This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I called my son’” (v.15).

The prophet he is referring to here is Hosea. It is very interesting that the prophecy that points to Israel’s salvation from Egypt and subsequent rebellion, which speaks to us about how God saved us from the clutches of a greater king than Pharaoh—Satan—and our continual rebellion is the same prophecy that Hosea says is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was also saved from the clutches of an evil king, Herod, and ultimately Satan. And did he return to the Baals? Did he get up in the middle of the night and return to his block? Is he the one who rebels and rejects? No. He never rejected God. God loved him and was pleased by him and Jesus never once played the harlot.

Isaiah 53:3 says that he was despised and rejected himself. When he was on the cross, he said, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34) He had not done anything to deserve this heartbreaking rejection, but when he cried out to God, God didn’t say, “How can I give you up, Jesus?” God was silent. He rejected his own son so that when you reject him, he can keep going after you. This is how the judge can also be a husband.

So, how do we respond to this? In John 13:34, Jesus gives a new commandment. He’s speaking to you, to his Church, the one who would abandon him, deny him, and betray him with a kiss. He says, in light of what he is going to do for us, “A new commandment I give to you, that you

would love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” How, then, does Jesus love us? He fights through the rejection and the betrayal over and over again. His command is when others reject us, we fight through the rejection as well, over and over again.

When children have learned to walk, parents still want to teach them how to walk safely. The dad holds out his finger because he wants them to hold his hand with reciprocity. He wants to reach out to them, but he also wants them to choose him. He wants them to respond to his goodness with holding onto his hand. God held his hand out to us 2,000 years ago, and he’s still holding it out. But he will not hold it out forever. He does “go” again and again, but only for his bride. If you aren’t in the kind of relationship with him now, you had better take hold, receive the ring, and reciprocate, “Yes, I do.”

You must respond in faith. Take hold of his hand. When a dad is walking with his kids in a public place, especially in a store with toys and gadgets and all sorts of nifty things that are in reach, he knows as a parent that they’re walking in a minefield of temptation. As they hold his finger, he may begin to feel their grip loosening a little. And as their father, he warns them in a subtle way, “Return to me. Hold tight.” God says to some today, “The thorns of this world are coming in and choking you. You’re being pulled by the Baals of this world—success, ambition, the praises of men. I remember when I taught you how to walk; you have to hold tight!” (Mark 4:7,18-19)

There are other instances in which the dad won’t test his children, or give them any “leash,” like in a parking lot or a big crowd where there are cars or the danger of being lost. In these instances the dad engulfs his children’s hands with his own so that even if they let go, they can’t go anywhere. How can he let them go? They’re his children. Their walking with him does not ultimately depend on how tight their grip is but depends on their father’s unwavering love for them. But he wants them to hold on. You may be walking through some kind of trial and feel like you can’t hold on. God, the Father, would never tempt you over what you can handle. He’s got you. How could he let you, his child, go?