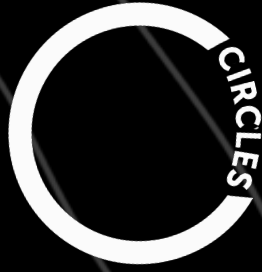


HOSEA



CIRCLE 01/03: **WE FOUND LOVE IN A HOPELESS PLACE**

READ: Hosea 1:2-3

When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, “Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord.” So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

“I am going to marry her one day,” I daydreamed while eating a slice of pizza in my school cafeteria. It felt like butterflies were fluttering around my pizza-filled stomach as I watched my new girlfriend from across the room. With the grace of an ice skater, she glided across the cafeteria right towards me. When she sat next to me and touched my arm, I felt like the luckiest guy in the world. This had to be true love.

It wasn't. We broke up eight days later. We didn't share true love; it was puppy love at best. We connected over mutual friends and a shared taste in music. There wasn't much else to it.

When we broke up, it felt like a thousand bee stings. Even though the pain was emotional, I could feel it physically. I convinced myself that I was never going to find a significant other. Sprawled across my bedroom floor that night, I thought that I was going to die. Then -- I didn't. I moved on. Life was back to normal in a matter of days.

I knew nothing about true love back then. Ruined relationships and unexpected breakups taught me that I was only scratching the surface of love. Real love is so much more than dates, text threads, gifts, slow dancing, and winning a stuffed animal at the carnival. Real love—authentic love—consists of commitment, sacrifice, serving, forgiveness, and a relentless commitment to the relationship.

The book of Hosea tells a love story unlike anything you've ever heard before. It's the story of God telling a prophet to marry a prostitute. Yes, you read that right. This is not the setup for an inappropriate joke; this is scripture. Hosea's dysfunctional marriage exemplifies the relentless love of God, despite the unfaithfulness of His people.

A voice from heaven proclaimed, "Hosea, I want you to marry a promiscuous woman" (Hosea 1:3). Can you imagine what went through his mind when God's message came to him? I assume he rebutted, "You want me to do WHAT?" God

confirmed the bizarre calling, and Hosea moved forward in obedience. As he was courting his new fiancé, I'm sure people asked curious questions like, "What does Gomer do again, Hosea?" "She's in the entertainment industry," he would respond with red cheeks.

Hosea was certainly full of doubt and disagreement with God's calling. His marriage shattered all cultural norms, especially for a professional prophet. Beyond the embarrassment, this marriage was just plain difficult. Gomer was already set in her ways. Thus, she struggled to remain faithful to her new husband. This caused them to enter into a long and vicious cycle of cheating and heartbreak.

Hosea is one of the minor prophets found in the Old Testament. However, this story is anything but small. The message of this minor prophet packs a major punch. Hosea was commanded to live his life as a parable. How? He was called to paint a picture of God's relationship with His people by marrying an unfaithful bride. Hosea represents God, while we represent the unfaithful spouse. I know it's not an ideal characterization, but it's true.

This love story is our love story. It's about the divine, but sometimes dysfunctional, relationship we have with God. We are prone to wander, but God pursues us. We become irrational, but God stays steady. We try to run from God, but his grace always catches up. This powerful story of relentless love teaches us three lessons about life.

We Can Be Restless.

Hosea was a prophet to the people of ancient Israel. This bold message was designed for them. They were prone to wandering, literally. As a nation, they were nomadic for most of their history -- moving from place to place. They didn't just wander through the wilderness. They also wandered away from God. Whenever things got hard, they turned to another god. This created a cycle of restlessness and unfaithfulness. We restlessly turn away from God during difficult times too. Restlessness often makes us cling to the wrong things.

We may turn to unhealthy relationships to help us cope with our feelings of loneliness. We may turn to perfectionism to help us cope with our feelings of insecurity. We may turn to mindless distractions to help us cope with our deep desperation. When we feel restless, our default reaction is to cling to anything that will give us a sense of control.

These restless behaviors are false idols that will inevitably fail you. Allow your restlessness to lead you towards rest in God. Augustine of Hippo famously explained, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." The peace that comes from God is the cure to our restlessness. When your heart wanders, let God be your compass.

We Can Be Reckless.

Gomer, Hosea's wife, allowed her restlessness to become recklessness. After leaving the altar with her newlywed husband, a wave of complex emotions swept over her. She

likely felt unworthy, insecure, and ashamed. Gomer returned to living life the only way she knew how. As the anniversaries passed, she cheated on her husband over and over again.

Everywhere he went, Hosea was haunted by rumors of Gomer's unfaithfulness. When he walked through the market, he probably heard whispers behind his back. He'd overhear comments like, "That's the pastor who married a prostitute. Did you know that their son isn't actually his?"

After restlessness comes recklessness. We make dangerous choices as a result of our complex emotions. Our exhaustion creates an argument. Our shame leads to abandoning church attendance. Our emptiness triggers an addiction. Jesus teaches that every reckless action starts in our hearts before it even takes place. Essentially, sin starts from within. This is why it is crucial to turn back to God when we begin to feel reckless. He's not going to judge you or punish you. He just wants to love you and protect you.

But, God is Relentless.

Hosea's dysfunctional relationship illustrates God's enduring desire to be connected to his people. When Gomer failed, Hosea forgave. When Gomer fell, Hosea picked her up. When Gomer was unfaithful, Hosea was faithful. The first few chapters of this powerful book symbolize God's desire to have a relationship with you. Despite what you've done, despite how far you've fallen, God wants you. When you run away from God, he will continue running towards you. Not to discipline you, but to embrace you. Not to abandon you, but to accept you.

Even when you are restless, God is relentless.
Even when you are reckless, God is relentless.
God's love remains constant and unending.

God wants to break down every barrier that comes between you and Him. You don't need to look for any further proof than the cross of Christ. Sin had separated you from God, but He didn't sit back and wait for you to figure it out. He fought for you. He went to the cross for you. Jesus died for you. The cross is proof that God will go to great lengths for those He loves. That's the power of relentless love.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: Introduce yourself and share this week's highs and lows (the best part of your week so far and the lowest part of your week so far).

Q2: What does it mean to wander away from God? What does this look like for students our age?

Q3: When you go through something difficult, what do you try to control to feel better? How would drawing near to God look different?

Q4: We learned that Hosea's love for Gomer represents God's love for us. So, what did today's message teach us about God's love for us?

Q5: When we wander away from God, what can we do to turn back to Him?

Q6: What's one thing from today's message that stuck out to you about God's love that you want to remember in future moments of hardship?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Isaiah 40:31

Amos 3:7

Joel 2:32

Isaiah 53:5

Hosea 14:9

Isaiah 14:12

Micah 7:8

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 02/03: **BAD ROMANCE**

"It's a boy," the doctor smiled before handing Hosea his newborn son. His smile turned upside down when he noticed the infant looked absolutely nothing like him. Literally, this baby could not look more opposite than the man holding him. The reality hit Hosea like an atomic bomb. "This is not my son," he likely thought. Hosea probably put on a smiling face, but his heart was shattered. Regardless of the letdown, he still celebrated the gift of new life in his household. Unfortunately, the sorrow in chapter one pales in comparison to the soul-crushing pain in chapter three.

READ: Hosea 3:1-3

The Lord said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes." So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley. Then I told her, "You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will behave the same way toward you."

When we look at the story of Hosea, we see two key truths that sum up the entire Bible from begging to end. This bizarre tale examines our failures in the midst of God's faithfulness. This story reveals the following two principles:

Sin is strong.

In chapter three, we discover that Gomer is not even living with Hosea anymore. It appears as though she packed up and moved out. Morning after morning, Hosea woke up in an empty bed to care for children that probably weren't even his. Every day was a different battle, but Hosea fought hard and pressed forward. I'm sure the sadness swept over him though.

Sin is serious. When we read this story, our hearts go out to Hosea, right? The sheer thought of an unfaithful relationship fills us with remorse and resentment. Why? Because sin hurts people. Sin can create unthinkable hurt and heartbreak. This is why God puts so much effort into protecting us from the pain and suffering that comes from sin.

You've seen this play out. The sin of dishonesty leads to the pain of broken trust. The sin of greed leads to hundreds of people without jobs. The sin of adultery leads to the earth-shattering sting of divorce. When we see this, we automatically become an advocate for justice. We want the wrong to be avenged. We want the perpetrators to get what they deserve. From greedy bosses to Gomer, we crave vengeance when we see someone's sin hurt others. On the flip side, we rarely want the same treatment for ourselves. We don't want to face the consequences. We assume our sin is harmless. Refuse to take sin lightly, because it nailed Jesus to the cross.

People strive to avoid the word "sin" at all costs. We often rebrand it. We call it bending the truth when it's really lying. We call it a drive for success when it's idolatry. We call it innocent browsing when it's really lust. We call it a struggle, but the Bible calls it a sin.

Here's the truth: Sin is serious. Paul teaches that the price of sin is death. But there is good news. While the "wages of sin is death, the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus."

Our savior is stronger.

We don't know exactly what happens, but this is what I imagine. Gomer found a new man who made a bunch of promises that turned out to be lies. She was swept off her feet and decided to run away with a new man. Unfortunately, the same cycles continued with Gomer, but this hypothetical new man was not as gracious as Hosea. He woke up one day and walked out. This is the problem with sin. It will take you further than you want to go, then it will abandon you. Sin will feel good at first, but it will eventually leave you feeling empty and alone.

Bad decisions ultimately led Gomer to find herself in a hopeless situation. She was being sold in the ancient slave market. Hosea hears of this travesty and travels to the market to save her. Try to comprehend the scariness of this scene for Gomer. She was standing in front of hundreds of people about to be auctioned off to be a slave. Just as the bids started, she heard a familiar voice yelling from the back, "I will take her! I will give you the max possible price! Just let her come home with me."

When we look at the ancient laws of Israel in Leviticus, we can see that twenty shekels is the maximum amount, but Hosea offered fifteen and a bunch of other goods to make the value twenty. What does this ultimately mean? He gave everything he had. The guy emptied out his savings account for his unfaithful wife. He didn't care what it would cost, Hosea just wanted her to be safe.

Just like Hosea paid it all for Gomer, Jesus paid it all for you. This is the gospel. You were in slavery. You were unsafe. You were stuck. Then, in your darkest hour, the voice of Jesus shouted, "I want you back. I will do whatever it takes." Jesus sought you out and paid the highest price possible for you.

Regardless of where you've been, Jesus wants you to come home. If you were to examine your role in this story, you would come to a conclusion that's both unfortunate and glorious. You are Gomer. You have turned your back on Jesus. You have been unfaithful. You are enslaved and need to be set free. The story of Hosea and Gomer is the story of Jesus and His people.

Even when you are unfaithful, God is faithful. Even when you are enslaved, Jesus will save you. Jesus is calling out from the crowd, "I am willing to do whatever it takes to win you back." How amazing is that?

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: Introduce yourself and share this week's highs and lows (the best part of your week so far and the lowest part of your week this far).

Q2: Hosea and Gomer's relationship is a metaphor for our relationship with God. What does today's message about Hosea and Gomer teach us about our relationship with God?

Q3: How do you think Gomer felt when Hosea saved her from slavery?

Q4: How should Christians feel when God saves them from their sins?

Q5: What does it take to receive God's forgiveness and freedom from sin?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Micah 6:8

Matthew 5:44

Isaiah 7:14

1 Peter 4:8

Jeremiah 31:3

Proverbs 8:17

Isaiah 9:6

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 03/03: **IT'S A NICE DAY FOR A WHITE WEDDING**

Our culture is obsessed with weddings. Do you need proof? Look no further than the classic Disney movies made for children (but mostly enjoyed by adults). Every movie has roughly the same plot. A woman with a tough family situation goes on a quest. Whether she is defending her Kingdom from the Huns, trying to earn her legs, or just trying to find her shoe, there is always some sort of journey. During this quest, the girl and her animal companion meet a partner who slowly captures her attention. Together they overcome obstacles, accomplish the quest, and fall in love. Most of the films end with a wedding scene featuring a beautiful dress, a powerful song, a passionate kiss, and maybe even some fireworks. The screen fades to black, and we assume that they live happily ever after.

Here is the kicker though. Why do these movies always end at the wedding? This shouldn't be the end of a love story. It's only the beginning. There is so much more in store for the kissing couple. These animated Disney movies likely end at the wedding because people don't want to see what happens next.

They don't want you to see Prince Charming struggling to communicate his true feelings.

They don't want to show Snow White stressing out because her husband is always disappearing.

They don't want to show the Little Mermaid and Prince Eric arguing about where to raise their family.

They don't want to depict two people crying in two different rooms because they don't know how to recover their relationship.

We love weddings, but hate acknowledging that relationships are extremely hard work. When two people come together, their hearts and lives are intertwined. Their sins are also combined. Their struggles are also multiplied. Marriage is like a microscope that reveals the very worst in people, because that kind of intimacy reveals your flaws. We want to experience happily ever after, but that takes hard work. Couples recite, "for better or worse," but sometimes the better comes after the worse.

This was evident in the story of Hosea and Gomer. Sin tried to tear them apart, but Hosea fought to keep them together. It was hard, but it was worth it. Their marriage required tough talks, couple's therapy, and a truckload of forgiveness. The name "Hosea" literally means savior. This ancient prophet actually shares his name with another major New Testament figure. Care to take a guess? It's Jesus—our savior and relentless redeemer.

READ: Revelation 19:7-9

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God."

The Bible ends a lot like a Disney movie. There is a wedding. Who is the bride walking down the aisle? We are. Jesus is the groom and the Church is His bride. As you can imagine, our relationship with God is very similar to the tumultuous relationship between Hosea and Gomer. We are sinful, but Jesus is forgiving. We are broken, but Jesus is a healer. We are incomplete, but Jesus wants to complete us. Regardless of what you have done, Jesus will commit to you.

This is the culmination of the entire Bible. Jesus will return to earth by throwing a party that looks a lot like a wedding. You aren't just invited; you are part of the ceremony. Using familiar imagery, the Apostle John says the Church is "clothed in fine white linen." You can imagine that, right? This is a reference to the ornate white and lace dresses worn by brides on their wedding days. Bridal gowns represent purity and innocence.

Let's be honest though. We are not pure or innocent. We have all fallen short. We have all been unfaithful to Jesus, our groom. Our white linen outfits have been stained and tarnished. Here is the good news. You didn't buy the gown for yourself—Jesus did. His relentless love and perfect sacrifice made you clean. When prophesying the sacrifice of Jesus, Isaiah wrote, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18).

On your own, you aren't worthy of this perfect wedding and this pure linen outfit. It's not about our own purity though. Instead, it's about the unrelenting love of Jesus that sealed your fate by taking your place. With His supernatural grace and never-ending mercy, Jesus paid the ultimate price for you to experience happily ever after.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: What's your favorite Disney movie and how does it end?

Q2: What are common challenges you've seen in families, friendships, or romantic relationships?

Q3: Do you see how any of those common hardships of relationships could be evident in the way you treat God?

Q4: What does it mean (metaphorically) when we say that Jesus is the groom and the Church is His bride?

Q5: What's one aspect of your relationship with Jesus that you'd like to work on improving. How can you start this week?

Q6: Does anyone want to renew their relationship with Christ tonight? Let's talk about what might be making you feel that way, then pray together.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Isaiah 53:4

Exodus 34:6

Numbers 23:19

Isaiah 54:6

1 Kings 8:22-24

Isaiah 1:3

Ecclesiastes 12:13

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.