

January–April 2024

A photograph of a young girl with her hair in two buns with pink bows, wearing a purple jacket, and an elderly woman with glasses and a brown sweater, leaning in to look at a book together. The scene is set outdoors with a bright, hazy background.

Day by Day with God

Rooting women's lives in the Bible

FEATURING HELEN WILLIAMS, RUTH AKINRADEWO AND DI ARCHER

Jan–Apr 2024

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Ministries

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Edited by Jackie Harris

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Writers in this issue

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Welcome



Happy New Year! We're excited to share God's word with you as we move into 2024. Whether you have been reading your Bible for years or are just beginning to establish a daily routine, we hope these notes will nourish and inspire you.

I must confess I haven't always been disciplined in my Bible study, but joining the team at BRF has really helped me to rediscover the joy of spending time in God's word. It's amazing how sometimes studies I commissioned or edited months ago minister to me as I use them as part of my own quiet time or even as I am working on them.

In the weeks I was editing this issue, my sister was rushed to hospital with pneumonia and sepsis and put in an induced coma. The day I heard the news I was working on Chine's study on the names of God and found it both a comfort and an inspiration as to how to pray for the situation. Thankfully, God brought my sister through that ordeal, and throughout those weeks there were nuggets either in the studies I was editing or in the daily notes that gave me hope or something to focus on.

As I have read through this issue again, I realise there is a lot about dealing with difficult or challenging situations. We begin with the story of Joseph and how God was with him throughout all the twists and turns in his life. We consider what the Bible teaches us about praying for our leaders and living as single people, and we delve into a psalm that teaches us how to live in an imperfect world. Elsewhere, we focus on God's love as revealed through the prophet Hosea, listen to what Matthew tells us about Jesus, the Messiah, and ponder what it means to be a 'living sacrifice'. Whatever you are facing in the next few weeks and months, I pray that you will find something in these notes that will speak to you.

There is just space to introduce a new contributor to our team of writers. Jane Walters is a Christian writer and speaker, based in Norfolk. She says she loves making the Bible accessible and helping readers to connect with both its stories and the God who appears behind and through them all.

As we spend time together in God's word, may we be able to make that connection and let his word shape what we think and are, and what we do.

Jackie

Jackie Harris, Editor

Hosea: God's redeeming love (part 1)



Helen Williams writes:

Apart from delighting in some of its reassuring verses about God's love, I confess I have paid little attention to Hosea over the years. Even finding him among the other eleven minor prophets can be a challenge! Having discovered (and wept through) the novel *Redeeming Love* by Francine Rivers (Multnomah, 1997) – which adds a gripping 464 pages of flesh to the bones of Hosea's own marriage story – I assumed I now completely understood Hosea. In reality, the story of Hosea's marriage to the prostitute, Gomer, occupies only part of the first three chapters of Hosea. There are a further eleven chapters, making for some challenging reading. It may be challenging but it is worth trying to read through the whole of this astonishing book. It should only take about 30 minutes, and it would give you a great overview before we dive into some of the themes.

You'll find there's an opening verse (1:1) from the book's compiler, setting it in its historical context, and a closing verse (14:9) placing it firmly in whatever context you, the reader, find yourself – in other words, its message is utterly relevant for today. Chapters 1–3 contain the story of Hosea himself, with God's instruction to marry Gomer and to stay faithful to her, come what may. This is followed by two sets of accusations and warnings for Israel (chapters 4–11 and 12–14), each of which concludes (thankfully!) with a poem full of God's mercy and of hope for the future. This tension between judgement and mercy is the essence of the book.

Hosea's own name comes from the same Hebrew root as that of Joshua, meaning 'salvation'. This anthology of some 25 years of his prophetic preaching is all about this very thing. God's chosen people entered into a covenant with him in the Sinai desert but repeatedly broke it, disobeying his commandments and falling into waywardness and idolatry. We see God's heart for his people utterly broken; the inevitable judgement that has to come; and (spoiler alert!) that he can only be true to who he is, the God of love. He cannot not be merciful! From our post-New Testament vantage point, we know that ultimately, the only answer to deserved judgement for all people would be for Jesus to give his own life. Hints at the one who is to come are woven through these prophecies.

You cannot be serious!

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. (vv. 2-3, NIV)

After Solomon's death, the twelve tribes of Israel split into two kingdoms. Judah and Benjamin formed the Southern Kingdom of Judah with its capital Jerusalem, and the remaining tribes became the Northern Kingdom – Israel (or Ephraim), ruled from its capital, Samaria. Two hundred years later, somewhere between 753 and 729BC, we find Hosea living in this Northern Kingdom and we read that God 'began to speak through' him. Isaiah, Amos and Micah were also active around this time. Good kings and bad kings have come and gone, but Jeroboam II has led the people through a prosperous age. It's a tough time for a prophet to speak of sin and judgement, but with Jeroboam's death things start to unravel and the fall of this dynasty is imminent. Prosperity has led to spiritual complacency, and this to serious infidelity.

The book opens with God's extraordinary command to Hosea to find and marry Gomer, known for her promiscuity. Some commentators think she may even have been a cult prostitute, a follower of Baal worship with its many fertility rites.

Can you imagine what Hosea thought when God asked this of him? He must have wondered if he'd heard God correctly. He must have been terrified for his reputation. What about his hopes and dreams of love, a good and godly wife and a happy family? We don't know how long he waited before answering God but there is no suggestion that he did anything other than jump up, go and find Gomer and marry her immediately. We can only wonder what her reaction was too!

All this because God needed Hosea to speak to his people from the depths of his own heart, with authenticity, with empathy, with the desperate knowledge of how it feels to be spurned and rejected.

'Every revelation of God is a demand, and the way to knowledge of God is obedience,' wrote William Temple. We obey when we trust. Dare we pray for ears like Hosea's to hear God and an ability like his to trust and obey?

HELEN WILLIAMS

What's in a name?

Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the Lord said to Hosea, 'Call her Lo-Ruhamah (which means "not loved"), for I will no longer show love to Israel.' (v. 6, NIV)

Two days ago, it was my birthday – a celebration of the day I became Helen. My name's not fashionable anymore but I have always loved that it means 'light' and my middle name, Ruth, means 'friend'. I often pray to live true to my name. Last year, before my first grandchild was born, the whole family spent hours discussing what he would be called, amid cries of 'You can't call him that!'

In today's reading, we hear of three children who were given, under God's instruction, what appear to be the most awful names. I wonder how those children coped with their names, once they were old enough to play with others.

Jezreel, the eldest, has a name synonymous with 'bloodshed'. It harks back to the dreadful massacre of King Ahab's family by Jehu at Naboth's vineyard (2 Kings 10). God had not forgotten the cruelty, injustice and ambition of this attack. Punishment was overdue.

Second, came a daughter – 'not loved' was the meaning of her name, for she was to be a symbol to the people of the fact that God was withdrawing his love from his people.

When little Not Loved was weaned (probably at the age of two), her mum gave birth to another child, a child with a name showing God's determination to disown his people forever – 'not my people'. It seems hard to us, reading this now, to think of this little family with its terrible reputation and the blood-chilling names. God had tried everything to woo his people back to him – it was time for desperate measures.

In Revelation 2:17, God promises a new name to those who follow him. Why not spend some time thinking about your own name and asking God what his name for you is? Your identity in him is all.

My loved one

‘Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” they will be called “children of the living God”’.
(v. 10, NIV)

If you ever saw the film *The Prince of Egypt*, you will remember the extraordinary way the Red Sea parted into a dry pathway, with huge walls of water on either side, in which you could see a myriad of beautiful sea creatures! I’ve snorkelled in those waters, and they are truly vibrant with colour. I mention it because I know I sometimes miss the sheer miracle of the way God delivered his people from slavery. Miracle upon miracle. He rescued them because of his passionate love for them, leading them through the desert as he prepared them for life as his chosen people in the land he had promised them. At Mount Sinai he made a covenant of faithful commitment with his people, through Moses. It’s a powerful and profound moment in the relationship of God with his people as he promises lifelong protection, blessing, a home and a way to live well. In response, God’s people promise, ‘Everything the Lord has said we will do’ (Exodus 24:3).

The desert years are a complex story of bitterness, lack of trust, temptation, idolatry and reneging on this promise. Even when they finally reach the land flowing with milk and honey, the Israelites end up taking all its abundance and dedicating it to the worship of Baal. It’s no wonder their Faithful Husband is agonised.

Despite what sounds like the ultimate condemnation: ‘You are not my people, and I am not your God’ (1:9), here we see God’s compassionate remembrance of his promise to Abraham and his promise of relationship restored and covenant renewed. Not only this, but God also promises that one day the two kingdoms will be reconciled under one leader (1:11). Finally comes God’s personal promise for each individual: ‘Say of... your sisters, “My loved one”’ (2:1)!

Wherever you feel you are with God today, hear him say to you, ‘My loved one,’ for that’s what you most assuredly are.

Falling out

‘I will punish her for the days she burned incense to the Baals; she decked herself with rings and jewellery, and went after her lovers, but me she forgot,’ declares the Lord. (v. 13, NIV)

‘It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But it is a much more fearful thing to fall out of them,’ begins the powerful poem, ‘The hands of God’ by D.H. Lawrence. He continues: ‘Save me, O God, from falling into the ungodly knowledge of myself as I am without God. Let me never know, O God, let me never know what I am or should be when I have fallen out of your hands, the hands of the living God.’

Chapter 2 of Hosea presents us with such a life – a life alienated from God after choosing to fall out of his hands. It’s serious. It’s bleak and, if truth be told, it’s not the God I like reading about. It’s talking about broken promises, deceit, sin, pride, idolatry and sheer contempt for a covenant. This is God’s desperate cry to, and condemnation of, his people, but we know from what comes next in chapter 3 that Hosea himself must have been living through a similar marital hell.

In his warning, God takes Israel back to her birth (v. 2) – the moment when she officially became his at Sinai – threatening to let her return to how she was before and lose the precious identity he has given her. In his desperation he threatens to ‘block her path with thorn bushes’ and ‘wall her in’ (v. 6), as if he is trying to save her from herself. I wonder if you’ve ever known God do that with you, almost wrapping you up and holding you close to his heart so you don’t harm yourself or do something you’ll regret. God gave his people not only identity but also gifts for a thriving life – his pain at her forgetfulness is palpable: ‘She has not acknowledged that I was the one’ (v. 8) and ‘me she forgot’ (v. 13).

O God, I so often forget to acknowledge who you are, who I am in you, where my blessings come from, how faithful you are and how much you love me. I’m so sorry. Amen.

Just deserts

**‘Therefore, I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope’
(vv. 14-15, NIV)**

Having pursued his bride by withdrawing his blessing, God tries a different tack – luring Israel back to the beauty of their original covenant, winning her love and restoring her fortunes. The wilderness or desert might seem a strange place to take her to, but not only will this be a barren place away from distractions, but it’s also the place where God and his people had known one another best, where he had daily provided for her. He will speak to her heart and woo her, and he is sure that she’ll respond. The Valley of Achor means the valley of ‘trouble’, but God can make even this place a ‘door of hope’ (v. 15).

Can you think of a time (it might even be now) when God allowed you to face some trouble, leading you through your own Valley of Achor, which at the time felt desperately hard, only to find later that going through this had led you to a ‘door of hope’? I love C.S. Lewis’ ‘Valley of the shadow of life’ (*The Great Divorce*) – it’s a reframing of the valley of the shadow of death in Psalm 23, a ‘let’s look at this in a different way’, an attempt to understand with the ‘eyes of our heart’ what God might be doing or showing us through this time.

Sometimes we find ourselves entering a desert time and we hear God speak tenderly to us; sometimes that desert time is accompanied by a demanding silence. Waiting in that place and breathing in deep God’s love for us, despite often feeling a bit confused or empty, can mean we grow and deepen in faith. I’ve found God often leads us to such a place ahead of a time of new ministry (think of Joseph, Moses, Elijah and especially Jesus).

I long to hear your voice, Lord, to hear your call, to be restored in your likeness. As I sit with you now in stillness, I ask you to breathe new life into me and tune my heart to yours. Amen.

HELEN WILLIAMS

A marriage made in heaven

‘Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety. I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord.’ (vv. 18–20, NIV)

Although God has focused on going back to where they began, reminding his bride of the overwhelming love upon which their covenant was founded, there is a prophetic sense of the future in these verses. ‘In that day’, says Hosea three times. For us, we know that this heavenly vision of a relationship, and a world, made right will ultimately find its completion in Jesus, but Hosea could only hint at the coming Messiah.

First, to the heart of the relationship. Cunningly, Hosea uses a wordplay which would have resonated deeply with his audience, this nation who’d grown complacent, forgetting their godly identity as his chosen people and straying into serious worship of local Canaanite gods. ‘Baal’ means ‘master’ or ‘lord’ and Hosea makes it clear that the subservient relationship Israel has sought with the Baals falls so far short of the mutual, loving marital relationship he’d intended (vv. 16–17).

Second, he paints a picture of what her home, this promised land, should look like; of how he had designed it to be. It’s a land where all is at peace. As I write, war rages in so many countries and this vision of a world at peace, as God intended it to be, is a heartbreaking and urgent prompt to pray more fervently for his reign across our world.

There is hope though! He is the God of new starts – the names he gave Hosea’s children will be reversed! Even Jezreel, the ‘bloodshed’ boy, will be renamed ‘God plants’ (v. 22)! Remember 1 Peter 2:10: ‘Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.’ Notice the fruit of the Spirit in God’s wooing of his people in verses 19–20 – three times he says ‘I will betroth you’ – it’s a marriage that is to last, characterised by righteousness, justice, love, compassion and faithfulness.

Shall we pray today for a world where ‘all may lie down in safety’, and that many who are ‘Not my people’ will be compelled to turn and say, ‘You are my God’?

Love with no limits

The Lord said to me, 'Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress'... So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley. (vv. 1–2, NIV)

In chapter 3, we return to the story of Hosea and Gomer, and I am struck by just how vulnerable Hosea is, as he speaks of the mess of his own marriage and shares God's instructions to him. I know that, as a Christian, I'm so often tempted to present myself as good, strong and capable, almost as if I think God's reputation depends on how I appear to others. Even our churches face this temptation. It's quite a reminder that God's most powerful work often happens when we are prepared to be vulnerable with others about our own mess. If 2 Corinthians 12:9 about God's power being made 'perfect in weakness' means anything, it is surely about this. So much focus in our society is on looking good, looking young, looking invincible, looking successful, but God literally brings Hosea to breaking point so his story will speak all the more powerfully to his precious people.

Not only is Hosea to love his Gomer, despite her utter rejection of him and her promiscuous lifestyle, but he is to redeem, restore and reinstate her. Buying her back (presumably doing a deal with her current lover) came at a huge cost: around 170 g of silver and 195 kg of barley! In 1 Peter 1:18–19, it says: 'For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ.' Tomorrow, we begin the journey with Jesus through Holy Week to the cross where that blood was shed – where we ourselves were redeemed.

And here we leave Hosea for now, returning to look at the rest of the book in May.

As we come to Palm Sunday tomorrow, we pray, Lord, that you will lead us through this Holy Week captivated all over again by the depth of your unfaltering love for us, the love that cost you everything. Amen.

HELEN WILLIAMS



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