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**Introduction**

I think sometimes it is helpful to look at a familiar subject from a different angle - to get a new perspective on things. I heard the story recently of a man who was talking to an aboriginal pastor. And this pastor made a bold claim, he said that if it had been an aboriginal couple in the garden of Eden instead of Adam & Eve, then mankind wouldn't have fallen and the world now wouldn't be full of sin.

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This man was intrigued and so asked why? Well explained the pastor, the Aboriginal couple would have thrown the fruit away and eaten the snake and so there would have been nothing left to tempt them. I think he was being a bit tongue in cheek!

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But I do think when we come to God, we at times need a new perspective, so as we can more easily comprehend what he is like and how he deals with us. That is why the Bible keeps on giving God different names or titles. For in the Bible God is called our King, our Saviour, our Shepherd. He is the commander of the heavenly armies, is the El Shaddai - the one who provides. He is our Father.

But this morning I want us to think about one of the most unusual titles that God gives himself. It firstly appears in the OT book of Hosea and then it is picked up again in the NT & especially the last book, the book of Revelation. And that title is that God is our husband. That God is married to the people of God.

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This idea is an incredible one, as the marriage relationship is the closest relationship which we possess. It is a relationship that most of us can relate to. Even if we ourselves have never been married, most likely our parents were. And although some of the marriages we know are full of hate and anger and sometimes even violence, there is something about the marriage relationship which we know deep inside, also produces much joy, much happiness, much emotional and physical support. So much so that one of our greatest hopes in life when we are young is to be happily married.

And it is into this kind of relationship that God enters. It is this idea in mind that God wants us to think through. So he speaks to a prophet, the prophet Hosea, in probably about 750BC and he says to him I want you to act out a parable. I want your life to be a picture of my relationship with my people. So I want you to get married.

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1. **Grace**

Try to imagine the scene with me. You have a prophet who is a young man. A young man with hopes for the future, a young man with a desire for a future, a family, a ministry to his God. And he hears God speak to him to get married. "Hey this is great", he thinks to himself. "There are a couple of possibilities that I have had my eye on. There is Miriam over there, boy is she good looking. And there is Deborah, she is so caring and kind hearted. And what about Ruth, her dad is the richest guy around here."

But no it’s not going to be Miriam, or Deborah or Ruth, its going to Gomer. Gomer! She's a prostitute! She sells her body to others! Gomer is the one that everyone looks down on and despises. Yet the call is clear. Hosea is to marry Gomer and they have three children, even though Hosea is pretty sure the first child's his, but not so sure about the next two. But Hosea doesn't name the children, God does.

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The first is named Jezreel, the site of an ancient massacre - a bit like calling one of our children Waterloo, or the Somme, or Hiroshima. The idea behind the name is that God is going to bring on a similar punishment on his people Israel.

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The second two children also have quite strange names. The first is called Lo-Ruhamah or unloved. What a name for one of your children. And the third child is called Lo-Ammi or not my people. Each is to describe what will happen to the people of God.

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Now let’s just stop here for a second and think a little about what this acted parable is saying so far. Just as Hosea has married Gomer, so God has entered into a relationship with his people. But Gomer is no stunning bride, Gomer is not the best looking, the most intelligent lady around, instead she was a prostitute, someone who right from the start has a reputation for being unfaithful.

In the same way God has pledged himself to a people who have a reputation for unfaithfulness. God hasn't chosen a pure, spotless bride, he has chosen people like us. People who have been unfaithful to him in the past. People who have constantly let him down. People whose sins weigh heavily against us.

Friends doesn’t that remind us that our relationship with him is not based on merit, it is not based on our good works, it is based on God's wonderful grace, a gift to us that we don't deserve. And here the book of Hosea is saying the same thing but in a pictorial way. Just as Hosea commits himself to a woman with a reputation for unfaithfulness, so God commits himself to a people who in the past have been unfaithful to him. He doesn't choose us because we are more beautiful than any other. He doesn’t involve himself in people whose good works are attractive to him. He chooses people who have wandered away from his standards and have gone their own way.

This is the marvel of grace. That God would welcome back the prodigal son and throw him a party. This is the wonder of grace that he would give the worker who worked for just one hour, the equivalent of more than a day’s wages. This is the heart of God's grace that God chose us, men and women, who are not up to standard, not because he had to, but he choose to love us and commit himself to us, in order ***to win our love*** for him. In order to win our love for him.

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1. **Disgrace**

This is what God's love is like. But the book goes on and we see the response that Gomer gives Hosea. Firstly she bears him a son but then she conceives twice more and gives birth and chapter 2 implies they are not Hosea's children. The implication is that despite Hosea pledging his love to Gomer, despite him being faithful to her, she is not being faithful to him. She may still be up to her old tricks. Gomer is not giving herself fully to her husband.

But if that is not bad enough, she soon openly defies Hosea and leaves the family home. She goes after her lovers. She is seduced by offers of food and wine and clothes. She no longer lives with her husband, with the result that he becomes the laughing stock of the town. His wife has publically humiliated him. The whole world now knows that Gomer has rejected her husband's love.

It is a sad, sad scene. And as we read through the book we see that Hosea emotions just swing from one extreme to another. He is angry and rebukes her. He is distraught. He even plots revenge, all emotions that in these circumstances seem pure. How dare she do that? Boy, she deserves everything she gets.

Yet in the midst of Hosea's anger, we see that he still wants her back. And he makes plans to win her back. Slide 10 We read in 2:14, Hosea say "*Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt.* "

Like any jilted husband, Hosea has mixed emotions. He has been hurt, his love has been spurned and he struggles to respond to the one whom he not only married, but whom he greatly loves. He wants to kill her, but he wants to hold her again in his arms. He wants a divorce, but he also wants reconciliation. Thousands of responses fill Hosea's head and all of them are fuelled by strong, very strong emotions.

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And yet as we think through Hosea' response to Gomer, we remember that this is an acted parable about us and God. This is a picture of God's relationship with his people. And we realise that when we walk away from God, this is exactly how God feels about us. When we only think of material things - the homes we live in, the money we earn, the consumer goods we enjoy, it is like us turning our back on God.

When we play with other gods whether they be other religions or other ways of thought or whether we just succumb to a selfishness where we put our own desires before God's ways, it is like we have a committed a form of spiritual adultery. We have shared our love with others. We have failed to keep ourselves entirely for God. We have let another come between us and God.

And as the book goes on God begins to spell out the implications. And in the remaining chapters he outlines what Israel has done to scorn his love. And the thing that surprises us is that Israel has not been irreligious. It is just that in the midst of their religion they have not desired to know their God. They have been too interested in ceremonies and less interested in a personal relationship.

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Listen to God speak in chap 8, and from verse 11, "*Though Ephraim built many altars for sin offerings, these have become altars for sinning. I wrote for them the many things of my law, but they regarded them as something alien. They offer sacrifices given to me and they eat the meat, but the LORD is not pleased with them.”*

Being religious is not enough, you must be seeking the Lord. You see coming to church, putting money in the plate, taking the bread and the wine are good things. But if your heart is not with you, if you are doing these things to be seen by others, or to get a spiritual high and not to know God better, then God isn't pleased.

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But God isn't just unhappy with how we worship, for some the problem is deeper. They don’t just worship the true and living God. In Hosea chapter 4, we hear God say: "They sacrifice on the mountaintops and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar and terebinth, where the shade is pleasant. "

Here we see the Israelites having a bit each way. Sure we will worship God, but we will also worship at pagan altars. Sure we will do our bit to keep God happy, but we will also serve the gods of materialism, the gods of happiness, the gods of family, the gods of gambling, the gods of astrology, the gods of success. For we can despise God's love by sharing our devotion with other gods rather than by just giving ourselves exclusively to him.

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But also God is not pleased when our lives do not reflect his ways. Listen to the litany of actions that hurt God. In chapter 5 "*Israel's arrogance testifies against them.... They are unfaithful to the Lord, they give birth to illegitimate children."* They are not waiting for marriage to have children.

In chapter 7, *“They practice deceit, thieves break into houses, bandits rob in the streets; but they do not realize that I remember all their evil deeds. Their sins engulf them; they are always before me.... They are all adulterers*"

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And almost like a summary, we hear in chapter 8 *"Israel has forgotten their maker*." I find it quite amazing as I read through Hosea because the very things that Israel were doing, is what we do now in Australia. We believe in God, yet we are arrogant. We deceive others, we have an increasing amount of children outside marriage, yet we still want to baptise our kids. We are greedy and yet so many will turn around and say that each night they pray to God. That they are Christians, yet they forget about him for the other 23.50 hours of the day.

God gives us grace and our response to God's grace is a disgrace. Even the best of us hurts our God by our love of this world. So what is God going to do? What is his response?

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1. **Grace Abounding**.

Well the answer we get is the same answer that Paul gives to the Church at Rome - "*Where sin increases. Grace increase all the more.*" Or in the old language, *"where sin abounds, grace abounded much more.*"

We see in our acted parable that despite Gomer's unfaithfulness, Hosea has her back. But notice how he has to get her back. She will not come on her own bat, she has to be bought back. Hosea has to buy her out of her prostitution. Amazing isn't it. He has committed himself to her, he has married her, he loves her and now he has to buy her back.

But isn't that what God had done for us. He made us, he committed himself to us, he gave us the closest possible relationship with the king of kings and the Lord of Lords and when we still went our own, he sent his son Jesus to die for us. His one and only son's blood was used to purchase us back, to forgive us ours sins, to cleanse us to make us acceptable to God.

God's grace cannot be defeated. For no matter what we have done, we can be forgiven. No matter how far we have strayed, no matter how high we heap up our sins. God's grace increases to cover them. When sin abounds, grace abounds much more.

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And we see this also in the book of Hosea. We hear God say such things as *"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love;*"

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Then a little later on "*How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is charged within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man-- the Holy One among you*”.

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And in the beautiful final chapter we hear, "*I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily. Like a cedar of Lebanon he will send down his roots; his young shoots will grow. His splendour will be like an olive tree, his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon. Men will dwell again in his shade. He will flourish like the grain”*.

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This is God speaking to the wayward, this is God speaking to us today. Come home. Return. You don’t have to come under my fierce anger, if you would just repent and follow Jesus. For we see in Hosea, God's exposed heart. We see his wonderful compassion. We see his amazing grace.

Tell me, are you going to ignore your husband? Are you going to turn your back on God's call? Are you still satisfied to play with God, to share your time with both the true and living God and the gods of this world? To just remember him once a week or once a day, when he loves you like this? Let none of us be that foolish and go our own way. Let us not take God's grace for granted. Remember Gomer and come back home. Home with God.