

The Overwhelming Love of God

Hosea 11:1-11

Introduction

The concept of "Love" is among the most significant on the planet. Consider the countless songs and ballads that have been sung about love. Consider the many storylines and poems which have been written around the expression of love. Consider the movies which have tugged at our hearts with wondrous portrayals of love; the famous "tearjerker," "double-kleenex," dramas which leave us blubbering in the embrace of spouse and family members. At our house there is a disagreement about whether the more potent performance is presented in "Sleepless" or "You've Got Mail." However, we all agree that nothing tops the eye-swelling and nose-running production of "It's a Wonderful Life" climaxing with George Bailey's cry "**I want to Live!**," and the rediscovery of "Zuzu's peddles!!!"

It appears that Love is a primordial aspect of our being. I have been told that studies have demonstrated that even if physical necessities, such as feeding and cleaning, are provided for an infant, a human child will die without appropriate expressions of love. We need to love and be loved. We need to know that we are loved. Love is a source of acceptance, security, assurance, and sustenance for the human creature.

In our fallen world, characterized by judgments, separation, rejection, broken promises, and neglect; we are desperate for a foundation of love.

As Christians, we find such grounding in the love of God. Yet, even in the midst of pursuing righteousness, we don't always feel God's love. Perhaps it is because of a more stoic personality, or due to feelings of guilt over some sin, or due to painful circumstances in which God seems distant, or some other dilemma. In any case, even as Christians, we often need reminders of the strength of God's love. One place we can turn for such a reminder is to the words of the prophet Hosea.

-(Read Hosea 11:1-11)-

I. LIFE IS INITIATED AND SUSTAINED BY GOD'S LOVE

The historical circumstance reflected in this passage is that of Israel's crisis in the 8th century B.C. The mighty army of Assyria was threatening to devastate the land. God's people sought refuge in a variety of ways. Some fled to Egypt for safety, as military leaders negotiated an alliance with Egypt to fight against Assyria. Others turned to the worship of the Baals, false gods of the land of Canaan. As God's people placed their trust in these other sources, God calmly, yet with heartfelt emotion, reminded them of how their life had begun.

-(re-read vv. 1-4; note v. 4b, may translate "I was to them like those who lift a baby to their cheeks.")-

When the nation of Israel was still young and dependent, God had called His children **out of** Egypt. He taught them to walk, He held them in His arms, He healed them, He lifted them as a baby to His cheeks, He bent down to feed them. The reminder of intimacy and love from God is unmistakable here.

Israel's dependence upon God is pictured like that of a young child. Of all the infants in the animal kingdom, the most helpless and dependent of all is that of the human creature. The human baby can't walk, can't talk, can't feed itself, and carries no survival instincts. Basically all the human infant can do is eat, sleep, cry, and mess a diaper.

It is during this state of helplessness and seeming worthlessness that almighty God initiates and sustains the life of His children with abundant love! Before He considers what they might do, who they might become, and how they might respond to Him; God acts to love and care for His creatures! In these first four verses, God's love for His child, Israel, is described with the images of a caring parent. Such images easily evoke memories of our own intimate experiences with our children:

- Teaching a toddler to take his/her first step.
- Tossing a giggling baby in the air, only to land in secure arms.
- Playfully spoon-feeding solid foods to young child.
- Staying up late nights holding a cool rag to a feverish brow (example of my father when I was a child).

This is the kind of love that we all share as God's creatures! The fact that we were created, the very fact that we continue to breathe, is an initial statement of God's desire for our existence. The Psalmist reminds us of God's involvement in our lives from the very beginning:

[Read Psalm 139:13-14]

But, it is not simply our existence which God desires. His love seeks our prosperity in relationship to Him. Again, the Psalmist reminds us of God's gracious dealings with humanity.

[Read Psalm 8:3-9]

Just consider the countless blessings which God has placed in your life. In addition, consider the remaining places of glory, unspoiled by human pollution, which speak to God's creative gifts for all of His children. Whether seen in a snow-capped mountain, a golden field of wheat, a crystal clear lake, acres of robust prairie, or a colorful painted dessert; each is a testimony of God's love for humans, to whom He has granted all these wonders.

The greatest demonstration of God's love for humanity, however, is evident in His death on the cross in order to lead us to salvation and an eternal relationship with God. We recite this truth from childhood in the church. Say it with me once again. Let us **recite together aloud the words of John 3:16.**

{Recite John 3:16 together}

This everlasting life in relationship to God, initiated and sustained by God's love, requires God's presence and the acceptance of God in one's life. This is illustrated within the next three verses of Hosea 11, which communicate that life is endangered without God.

II. LIFE IS ENDANGERED BY THE ABSENCE OR REJECTION OF GOD

(re-read vv. 5-7)

The message from God's prophets to His people often focused on instruction to put their trust, and recognize their security, in the Lord. God calls His people to right relationships with God, and with neighbor. His people were to be a kingdom of Priests, a holy nation whose purpose was to bless and minister to all the families of the earth. The business of God's people centered around a covenant of obedience in which God promised Divine protection and provision in the face of any threat or need.

The testimony of the sacred history reminds Israel that God was the one who fought their battles for them (Deut. 3:22). In fact, the nation is warned against saying in it's heart, "My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth" (Duet. 8:17). The inspired text proclaims that it is God who provided the nation with prosperity. Thus, the absence or rejection of God could only lead to the endangerment of life. Without God, any battle against the infamous war hosts of Egypt, or Assyria, or Babylon was hopeless.

Despite such assurance, when Israel was threatened, security was sought through military schemes and rebellions, seeking refuge in foreign lands, alliances with powers such as Egypt, promises of tribute to threatening empires such as Assyria; and ironically, security was sought through appeals to other alleged deities such as the Baals. As a result, without God in their midst, the sword was beginning to whirl against their cities, their gate bars were being demolished, and the people of God were on the verge of being consumed.

The message to ancient Israel communicates an important truth for all of us. The absence or rejection of God endangers the fulfillment of life. The stresses of time and finances, the demands of work, the needs of family, the pain of loss and brokenness; death, divorce, failure, sin, depression, fear, sickness; all of these and so much more drive us to find sources of security and means of victory.

We may lean on selfish schemes which misuse our gifts of intellect, skill, and talent. We may seek refuge in temporary places of shelter, such as drugs, alcohol, or webs of deceit created by lies. We may form alliances which compromise our values. We may appeal to false deities such as money, power, or pride. In any case, the message from the prophet warns us that without God, all our attempts will ultimately lead to destruction.

In the light of human tendency to turn away from God and seek our own means of security, how is God to respond? He may walk away and give people over to their own destruction? God might react with violence and wrath, raining down fire or stirring up earthquakes in order to annihilate such apostasy?

Instruction from God's law lends some direction in relation to this question. At the beginning of this passage in Hosea 11, Israel is described as a disobedient son, sacrificing to the Baals and burning incense to idols. The law in Deuteronomy (21:18-21) states that when a mother and a father have a "stubborn and rebellious son," they should take that child to the elders of the city, and the child shall be stoned to death. Thus, it seems fitting that the prophet implies that God's response will be one of anger, with a sword whirling against the cities of Israel. **YET**, God seems to express the pain of a parent who suffers over having to punish a beloved child.

The anguish of a father who feels that he must go so far as to forsake his child who has broken faith, is dramatically displayed in the film "Fiddler on the Roof." I was immediately drawn to the character of the Jew named Tevia, a father of daughters. As each of his first three daughters fall in love, he experiences a sense of compromise with tradition and faith. The oldest daughter falls in love with a good, hard-working, Jewish boy. However, her parents had already arranged for her to marry an older wealthy man in the community.

In a critical scene which is repeated as each daughter asks for father's permission and blessing, everything in the background freezes as Tevia contemplates the decision. "On the one hand, a daughter should follow tradition and marry according to the arrangements of the parents and the matchmaker? On the other hand, isn't a daughter entitled to happiness and to marry the one she loves?" Tevia gives in and grants his blessing to the first daughter.

The second daughter presents more of a dilemma as she falls in love with a radical Jew with wild ideas of reform, who does not even ask for the father's permission, only his blessing. Again, the background freezes in the scene, as Tevia contemplates: "One the one hand they are not asking permission; and on the other hand she loves him" Of course, he talks himself into granting his blessing.

The third daughter presents the most traumatic request of all. She falls in love with a gentile, outside of the faith. For the third time, the background scene freezes as Tevia struggles with the pros and cons of whether to sanction such a union. He goes through a short series of reasonings, "One the one hand can I deny everything I believe in; on the other hand can I deny my own daughter; ... How can I turn my back on my faith; on the other hand ..."

However, this time the compromise is too great, and Tevia's heart hardens and breaks all at the same moment as he cries out, "There is no other hand!" As he waves his daughter away, he knows the rejection of her apostasy means the banishment of his little girl. How can a father survive the rebellion of his children.

More than Tevia, the God of Israel is confronted with a child who has broken faith. The message of Hosea proclaims God's own agonizing response to wayward children. Though his children deserve the sword, God's mercy overwhelms His anger.

III. Life is Restored by the Overwhelming Compassion of God.

In verses 8-11 of Hosea 11, the passion which God experiences for His creatures is revealed. In verse eight the pronouns shift from 3rd person to 2nd person. Thus, God no longer refers to his people as, **him** or **they** or **them**; but rather God intimately cries out:

"How can I give **you** up ...?"

"How can I surrender **you** ... ?"

"How can I make **you** like Admah?"

"How can I treat **you** like Zeboiim?"

"My heart is turned over within me."

"All my compassions are kindled."

The words of the Lord seem to reflect emotional turmoil over what to do with this stubborn and rebellious child. The words of the prophet on behalf of the Lord express God's anger over the sin of His wayward children.

Yet, God's love for these creatures restrains God from executing the capital punishment decreed by His own law; that is, that a stubborn and rebellious child should be stoned to death. Instead, overwhelming compassion bursts forth with a commitment to restoration and reconciliation:

(v. 9) "I will not execute my fierce anger."
"I will not destroy Ephraim again."
"I am God and not man ...!"

The passage finishes in verses 10 and 11 with God's promise that His children will walk after the Lord, and God will settle them in their homes! A similar promise is reflected by the prophet Ezekiel.

-[Read Ezekiel 28:25-26]-

The anguish which God expresses over His children, prompted by the tension between wrath against sin and overwhelming love for humanity, is ultimately revealed in the mystery of the cross. Instead of the death of a stubborn and rebellious son, in itself a torment too great for God to bear; incredibly God endures the death of an obedient and righteous Son!!! The sacrifice of self on behalf of others; suffering the innocent on behalf of the guilty. No greater love has any god than this, that God lay down His life on behalf of His creatures!

The mystery of the cross expresses the very message which Hosea has preached to Israel. God's love and compassion overwhelm any wrath, and redeems any human defiled by sin. No matter what we have done, where we have been, or what we have thought; God has broken His own body and shed His own blood in order to save and restore His children. He is committed to keeping us walking after Him, and He will establish us secure in His kingdom.

Life is endangered by rejecting God; but is restored and sustained through the acceptance of God in our lives. If there is anything which hinders your walking after God, anything which interferes with your full fellowship with the risen Christ, our Lord; I urge you to surrender to God's overwhelming love. Renew your relationship, revive your adoption as God's child. God has certainly revealed a desire to forgive, and to pour out overwhelming love upon you.