

## Hosea 11:1-4 – The Love of God

I'm going to read you a letter from an internet parenting help page. I want you to imagine that you're the parent in this situation.

Please help me. I don't know what to do about my teenage daughter. We love her dearly and have provided for all her needs from the time she was born. But we have reached desperation point with her out-of-control behaviour. She has been treated for drug & alcohol abuse twice in the last 4 years, she has wrecked and totalled 3 of our cars. Stolen them each time, (no of course she didn't have 'permission' to drive any of our cars! She was only 13 at the time she wrecked the first one)! Thankfully no injuries to anyone - including the school bus loaded with 1st and second graders). She has been arrested and jailed 3 times for various and sundry actions: shoplifting, excessive alcohol consumption, drug possession, and of course, car theft and property damage. She has been expelled from 3 different schools. She has threatened to 'kill' each and every one of our family (her father, myself, her two brothers). She lies about everything...compulsively, her whereabouts, her actions, her successes, her failures. We are heartbroken and desperately sad at the damage she has caused both in our family and to herself. We are not bad parents- we have worked hard to love and care for her in every way. Help us, we don't know what to do.

Question: She's your child. What do you do?

The story of this rebellious, ungrateful teenager is very much reminiscent of the story of God's ungrateful son- rebellious disobedient Israel. The Old Testament tells of God, a loving generous father, providing for his chosen child, the nation of Israel. And again and again, throughout the Old Testament, we see Israel behaving disobediently, ungratefully and in complete disregard for God. Now and again they came back to obedience, it's true, but on the whole, the path of Israel throughout the OT is one that would make any parent shudder!

This term we've been looking at the character of God in our sermon series. Today we look at God's love- particularly focussing on his father-like love for his people.

If the nation of Israel was a child, there would have been nothing to make him stand out from the crowd. And yet God set his sights on this nation choosing to make them his special people and the object of his love. Not that God didn't and doesn't love all people, of course- the bible is very clear and consistent in its teaching that God loves all mankind- but God chose Israel to have a unique place in his affections- a distinctive role in demonstrating his love for all through his love for them. Through a loving relationship between God and his chosen people, all would see God's glory and goodness and worship him as a result.

So- see verse one- God called Israel out of slavery in Egypt. He summoned them and kept them under his divine guidance and protection. As they muddled from one disobedient action to another, he remained faithful and consistent. He fed them manna and quail in the desert. He guided them by his presence. He ushered them into a land that was prosperous and fruitful. He

did that not because of any inherent goodness in them. He did it because he chose to love them.

The book of Exodus describes the way in which God miraculously rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. In Exodus 4:22 God told Moses to say to Pharaoh, 'this is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, "Let my son go," And why? "So he **may worship me.**"

Israel's response to God *should have* been to worship him. But if there's one thing we know about Israel, it's that they didn't worship God- in fact they seemed to worship just about anything but God! And that was despite repeated warnings and punishments and reminders of God's love for them. Just like a disobedient child for whom nothing seems to get through!

This went on for centuries, and by the point in time that we're looking at this morning, God's people were running into the end of their chances. At this point in history – about 727- 723 BC- (show timeline) (there they are); content, prosperous, enjoying all the benefits and blessings of a safe, flourishing and well-to-do society. What they didn't know, but we do know, is that Assyria was looming large to the north- about to wipe them out. But they were blissfully unaware of the destruction that was on their horizon; instead they were happily going about their business. Their society was wealthy and stable, but that had come at the cost of others- they oppressed and exploited the weak and defenceless, they were covetous and greedy, they worshipped false idols and even more outrageously- attributed their prosperity to false gods and refused to credit God with their fortunate situation. Look at what God says in verse 2- "the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images". Think of God, that faithful parent, calling to his child. But also calling to them was the allure of idolatry. Can you imagine a parent's pain as the child he loves turns his back on his father to chase after evil emptiness that would lead only to destruction?

What could be done?

Well, I wish we had time to read the first ten chapters of Hosea- because they make very clear what Israel's crimes were, and warned them of the just judgement and punishment they deserved and that was imminent. And when you get a sense of just how serious Israel's sin was, these verses that we're looking at today are breathtaking. Here's a taste-

Chapter 4, verses 1-3:

'There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying'.

And chapter 10, verse 13;

' You have planted wickedness, you have reaped evil, you have eaten the fruit of deception.. you have depended on your own strength'.

They were utterly depraved, and they had no excuse.

Let's go back to my story about the rebellious teenager. I asked what would you do? What *would* you do if you were the parent in that scenario? Tough love? Boot camp for teenagers? More hugs? Special time together? Or is it too late for that? Does there come a time where a parent has to say enough's enough?

Every good parent knows that a child needs to know the limits, the boundaries and the consequences. Well, in the situation of Israel and God, the boundaries had already been laid out. And they couldn't have been clearer! Have you read the books of the law? Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy?! It's laborious reading! Because every detail was covered for them. They were without excuse.

I could go on for hours specifying the laws that Israel had ignored and violated. But, don't worry, I won't! I want to look at just two.

First, remember how the ten commandments begin?

'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol...'

Need I say more? The book of Hosea repeatedly spells out that Israel had made for themselves gods of wood and silver and gold, and sacrificed to them, and worshipped them.

Second, listen now to these words from Deuteronomy 21:18-21;

'If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard." Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid.'

(and let that be a warning to the teenagers among us!)

See? What would you do? The course of action to deal with the sort of behaviour that Israel was practicing had been set out in the law given to Moses hundreds of years before.

That was the law. Those were the boundaries.

Now, without going into the questions that inevitably come out of a seemingly harsh law like that- talk to me afterwards if you'd like to discuss that!- here in Hosea when God describes Israel as a son, this punishment for the rebellious son is implicitly referred to. The punishment for a disobedient child- and we're talking out of control, unrepentant and not going to change- not just a slip-up here and there- the punishment is death! The punishment that was clearly spelled out in the law that God had given them.

Israel had badly violated their special relationship with God! And so with all that in mind, come to these beautiful verses in Hosea 11. Look at God's love for his child. Look at his grief over his disobedient son. Look at his passionate, active, caring pursuit of his child Israel.

Look at his father-like tenderness. He taught his child- who started out cherished, with so much promise- to walk; intimately involved; taking an active role in his child's development. You can sense the feel of pleasure in his doing that. It's obvious that God was not reluctant to do it- rather he loved to.

Look at how God's love is active. He was involved. It's interesting isn't it- that's often something that fathers aren't- but he taught his child- Ephraim refers to the largest tribe in Israel- he taught his child to walk, taking him by the arms. He led Israel. He lifted the yoke- he

bent down, he fed them. He didn't sit back and passively and dispassionately observe history unfold. He was engaged and involved. And Israel? Well God's people didn't even realise (verse 3)! Imagine them arrogantly and blindly crediting themselves for their successes, completely oblivious to God's gentle hand working for good in their lives.

Go down to verse 8 and look at how God's love is passionate. Look at how he cries "how can I give you up, how can I hand you over?" Listen to the emotion in that. God's love is not cold or indifferent.

And look at how God's love provides boundaries. He took away the yoke of slavery, but that didn't mean there were no limits on his people. He led them with *corde*s of kindness, with *ties* of love- loving, firm boundaries- not allowing his people just to do any old thing they wanted, not necessarily sparing them from pain, but giving them rules and guidelines- loving ones that were for their own good. Because he's the parent. He knows best- he sees more.

That's God's love for his people. It's passionate, active, warm, relational - it's firm and unwavering, despite the atrocious behaviour of his child!

What do you think about this? When I read this and get that sense of God's intimacy and tenderness and kindness- of his nurture, and of his grief!- I'm almost embarrassed. Because this isn't just any parent- it's God, who is sovereign and powerful and self-sufficient and successful, who doesn't want or need for anything or anybody. But this father bends down and pleads for his arrogant, self-righteous, weak-willed son, who's proud of what he's got- without realising that everything he has is only his because it's been handed to him on a platter.

God unashamedly declares his love for this most unlovely son. And we know the end of the story! We know what this child will do. This child will throw it back in his Father's face.

I want to take that child Israel by his arrogant teenage shoulders and shake him and say 'how dare you!!! How dare you? Look what you've been given! You didn't deserve that! Stop your arrogance and your scorn for God and look back. Look back where you came from. You didn't get to this position yourself! You think you earned your wealth? You think it was because of something you did that you were born into prosperity? Do you think that you somehow deserve to have been saved? This is outrageous behaviour! It's unfair and it's wrong! Wake up to yourself!!! How dare you.'

How dare I? How dare I be indifferent towards God? How dare I be cold to him and turn my back to him and take pride in what I've got or what I've done. I don't deserve my salvation any more than that ungrateful son Israel. And in so many ways I don't behave any better than they did. How am I playing my part in my relationship with God? How am I responding to his love and generosity and tenderness to me? His mercy? How are you?

Thank God for his love. And thank God for Jesus.

There's a little prophetic reference to Jesus here- do you see it? Blink and you'll miss it! It's the second layer of meaning in verse one. If we go forward to the New Testament, we read in Matthew 2 about Jesus as a baby escaping with his parents from Herod to Egypt. Matthew 2:15 says,

‘And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son”.

That tiny little reference is not there by chance. It’s through Jesus that God exemplifies his love. It was through the sacrifice of his true son, who was all that Israel was called to be- it was through Jesus that God once and for all redeemed his hopeless people Israel, and not just Israel, but all people. And that’s the big picture of the Bible- through Jesus, God showed the extremity of his love for mankind- his passionate love. Imagine the pain of that- his true, obedient son, dying on the cross to save the ones who didn’t deserve it. How he must love us.

God loves us. Why don’t those words bring us to our knees? It is our privilege and our misfortune to have been born into a society like ours where the phrase “God loves you’ is a cliché and jargon. I can go to Koorong and buy a pencil sharpener that has ‘God loves you’ written on it. Or a coffee mug, a ruler, a sticker. The motive behind that is good, isn’t it? But the result is that those words, those astonishing words have become meaningless. Like a little inoculation against God’s love. Is that what it was like for the ancient Israelites? Has our familiarity with the knowledge that God loves us bred in us contempt for him?

A few questions for you.

One, if we have chosen to follow Jesus, then there’s a sense in which we are Israel. We are God’s people today. How much like rebellious teenager Israel are we? Am I? Do we show disdain for God by refusing to engage in a relationship with him and by choosing our own ‘better’ way to live?

Author Tim Keller says- ‘we prefer our own wisdom over God’s wisdom, our own desires to God’s will, our own reputation to God’s honour’. Sounds like Israel.

Two, are there idols in our lives? You know the obvious idols- wealth, status, but what about the others? Our families, our happiness, even love itself? Don’t think you don’t have idols! Anything good that you pour your energy into- that you hope will give you meaning, that takes God’s place in your life is an idol.

Three, are we indifferent to God’s love? Are you? Do you even give him the time of day? What could be worse- his passionate, fervent, involved love met with indifference- the very opposite of love. Are we unconcerned to fulfil our calling as God’s people? What a high calling that is! What a privilege!

As I finish, if you’ve ever been tempted to think- as I have- that God is distant and hard- just waiting for me to make a mistake and get me into trouble- look at these verses and think again. Look how compassionate he is, how tender- how he’s saying, “let me help you. You think you can go it alone but you can’t. I’ll teach you, I know you’re weak- I know you’ll get it wrong sometimes- but turn back to me and I’ll forgive you. I love you. Can’t you see I want good for you?”

Do you see what’s on offer here? The almighty sovereign God holding out his loving arms to you. Are you weary? He’ll hold you. Are you helpless? He’ll guide you. Are you hopeless? He’ll pick you up. Are you self-sufficient? Don’t be. Remind yourself that you started with

nothing. But God has given you everything! Have you really engaged with God? Have you participated in a relationship with him- and experienced his kindness and his loving involvement? Because you know that God loves you- you do, it's on your pencil sharpener!- but have you allowed yourself to experience that- through trusting him enough to obey him? Or is it as trivial as some words on a pencil sharpener?

Finally, back to that letter. What was the advice to that grieving mother? Enough's enough. What happened to Israel soon after these words were recorded? Well- enough is enough- they were wiped out by Assyria.

There will come a day when God says enough is enough. But the good news is that if you've been in the throes of rebellion and you've wrecked the car- so to speak- he'll take you back. Because now is the day of salvation- now is the time of God's favour. Now is the time for us to respond to his love for us, to his call to us- with trust and obedience and in a responsive relationship with him, a relationship that grows and develops, that we- and he- both enjoy.