1:2 The first three chapters of Hosea are about his marriage to a prostitute, who had children by other men and who were therefore not his children. Yet Hosea loved her, and oscillates between anger and passionate pleading with her. He fantasizes about how wonderful it would be to have her committed to him, and speculates as to how he might bring her to this. His relationship with her represented God’s with Israel, and chapter 4 onwards speaks of God’s situation with Israel in the language of marriage and intimate relationship. It may be possible to reason back from some of these chapters to understand other aspects of the Hosea: Gomer relationship.

*The beginning*- He’d have been tempted to just ignore it, to think he’d been dreaming something, to run away from it. But to his credit, he obeyed. According to the Mosaic Law, a whore should be burnt, not married. Hosea was told to break the letter of the Law, and marry a prostitute; thus he began what was to be quite a theme in both his life and his prophecy- that in the face of sin, God shows His grace. We’ve likely all seen this in our own lives- at our very weakest moments, the kindness and care of God for us is revealed.

1:10 *Yet the number*- “Yet” is the challenging word. In the face of all Israel’s sin, in the face of the inevitable judgment which this attracted, in the very moment when it is declared, God goes on to speak of His loving salvation. This is so hard for humans to take on board, called as we are to manifest this same grace of God. In the heat of the moment of others’ sin against us, we rarely find it in us to think let alone speak of their ultimate hope of salvation by grace. But this is the challenge of Hosea.

2:3 *Lest I strip her naked… and kill her*- The punishment for a prostitute, a punishment which she should’ve had at the start. But instead of this punishment, Hosea had married her. We are perhaps nervous to equate our sinfulness, our rebellion, our unfaithfulness, with Gomer’s prostitution. But this, surely, is what we are intended to do, and to thereby perceive the extent of God’s patient love toward us, to the end that that grace and goodness might lead us to repentance. Because Hosea had so loved this woman, he had legitimate feelings of anger- as does God, having loved us so much. Hosea was the wounded lover, the betrayed man. And these are exactly the feelings of God over the unfaithfulness of His people. The threat to strip her naked was what was done in the case of divorce for adultery. "She is not my wife, neither am I her husband" (2:2) is a verbatim quotation from various Babylonian divorce formulas, and was later incorporated into the Talmud as a divorce formula. Likewise the threat to withdraw her clothing, her "wool and linen” (2:9) likely refers to the obligation a husband had to his wife. Yet for all this talk of divorce, Hosea keeps wanting Gomer to return to him; in his heart he keeps coming back to her. This was an exact reflection of God's feelings for His people. Hosea did everything for this worthless woman. He gave her “the grain, the new wine, and the oil, and multiplied to her silver and gold, which they used for Baal” (2:8). He was a wealthy man, and yet gave it all to his wife, who in turn blew it all with her boyfriends on Baal worship. It’s like the millionaire marrying a worthless woman who manipulates him into giving her his money, which she blows down at the casino day by day, and sleeps with the guys she hangs out with down there. But “she did not recognize that it was Me who gave her” all these things (2:8)- i.e. she didn’t appreciate it. And so Hosea decides that he will withdraw this generosity from her, and then, he surmises, “she will say, ‘I will go and return to my first husband’” (2:7). This was Hosea’s hope, and in his own mind, he put these words in her mouth. The hopefulness of Hosea was a reflection of the love he had for her. And all this speaks eloquently of the hopefulness of the Almighty Father who thought “*surely* they will reverence My Son” when He sent Him. And the purposeful anti-climax of the parable is that no, they don’t and won’t reverence His Son, and even worse, they kill Him. In the same way as Hosea had this plan to get Gomer to “return” to him, so God likewise planned that “afterward the children of Israel shall return, and seek Yahweh” (3:5). Both God and Hosea thought that their beloved would return if they distanced themselves from her (5:15). But it didn’t work out like this. Both God with Israel and Hosea with Gomer ended up *pleading* with her to return (14:1); “yet they do not return to Yahweh their God, nor seek Him, for all this” (7:10). It was and is a tragedy. In our preaching to Israel and to humanity generally, we are pleading with them to accept this most unusual love. The pain of God, the way He is left as it were standing there as a tragic figure, like Hosea was, of itself inspires us to plead with people all the more passionately; and to respond ourselves, to be the loving woman to Him the ultimately faithful man.

4:12 *The spirit of prostitution*- Gomer’s sexual addiction was reflected in Israel’s chronic unfaithfulness to Yahweh. The very process of sinning has a tendency to push people into a downwards spiritual spiral from which there is no easy exit (see 5:4).

4:15 Gilgal and Beth Aven were border towns between Judah and Israel. The nominally faithful people of Judah were slipping over the border to do quick idol worship and then returning, protesting their loyalty to Yahweh. This kind of hypocrisy can so easily be slipped into.

5:7 The way Hosea’s final child is called Lo-ammi was because “you are not My people” (1:9). This suggests that although Hosea did presumably have sexual relations with Gomer, these children were not actually conceived from him- i.e. she was continuing her relations with other men; her conception of the children is said to have been “shameful” (2:5) because they were the result of her prostitution (2:4). He calls them “*her* children”. Gomer appears to reason in 2:4 that the children were her lovers’ payment to her for her sexual services. And in the parallel relationship between God and Israel, Israel were unfaithful to Yahweh and “begotten foreign children” (Hos. 5:7), whilst at the same time claiming to keep the sacrifices and Sabbaths of the Law (Hos. 5:6,7; 2:11). This would confirm that Gomer acted as Hosea’s wife, assuring him of her faithfulness, in the same way as the sacrifices and Sabbaths were intended to reflect Israel’s exclusive faithfulness to Yahweh. Our unfaithfulness to God is this painful for Him.

6:6 *I desire… the knowledge of God* - Israel and Gomer were “destroyed for lack of knowledge” (4:6). Yet they cried out that “My God, how we know You!” (8:2). Israel’s attitude to the Law can so easily be our attitude to the principles of the Gospel, the New Covenant, in which we stand. We can ‘know’ it all, and externally keep it… but in reality not know it at all, focusing on the external sacrifices whilst knowing nothing of the God we supposedly worship. All this was exemplified by Gomer being an observant Jewess, whilst worshipping Baal and living a shameful life.

6:10 God’s realization of Israel’s prostitution, committed as it was amidst protestations of love for God (:4), was mirrored in Hosea’s tragic and heartbreaking relationship with his prostitute wife Gomer.

7:2 *I remember… ever before My face*- Sensitive Hosea remembered every unfaithfulness of Gomer; and in this sense God too remembered every sin of His people. This is what makes His patience and grace all the more remarkable, given that He doesn’t mentally function as human beings do, forgetting sins against us just because of the nature of our fading memory rather than because we have forgiven them.

8:2 As in 7:14,16, the pain of God was that Israel’s words of devotion to Him were meaningless. This was the pain Hosea would’ve had as Gomer protested her faithfulness to him, whilst sleeping with and getting pregnant by other men. We must ensure that the words we say in prayer and sing in song to God are really meant sincerely by us, and that we realistically live according to them.

8:13 *They will return to Egypt*- This is repeated in 9:3 and yet God says the very opposite in 11:5. We have God showing His extreme emotion, just as a betrayed and angry husband would- shouting threats one minute and then cancelling them out in expressions of deep love the next. The most hurt man on earth would, however, be nowhere near the pain and hurt felt by God Almighty at the unfaithfulness of His people. The huge extent of His love for Israel is reflected in the depth of His pain and the emotional nature of His outbursts. God has emotion and passion- for us, we who are but water, calcium and complex chemicals, specs of dust on the earth…

9:1 *You love the wages of a prostitute*- Israel are presented as sexually addicted, even paying men to sleep with her (8:9). It’s one thing to sin and hate ourselves for it; it’s another to love and revel in sin as Israel did.

9:4 Their offering of wine and bread to God would make them yet more unclean, just as it is possible to keep the breaking of bread service to our condemnation rather than to our blessing (1 Cor. 11:29). This stark reality means that the memorial meeting brings us to a T intersection in our lives; either we are drinking to our blessing (1 Cor. 10:16) or to our condemnation.

9:10 *I saw… as*- God looked upon Israel *as if* they were perfect when they left Egypt (Num. 23:21), even though they were not. He was in love with them, as He is with us, having counted His righteousness to us as we emerge from our Red Sea / baptism into Christ.

9:15 *I hated them… will love them no more-* And yet God protests His eternal and free love for Israel (14:4). See on 8:13.

10:11 *Her beautiful neck*- This isn’t sarcasm, rather is it God recognizing the beauty of the woman He was having to judge. Such is His love even for those He has to reject.

11:8,9 Here we have one of the deepest windows onto the extent of God’s hurt and variation of thought within Himself as He considers the behaviour of His people. His changes of mind are as it were ethically allowable exactly because He is God and not man; they are driven by the passion of the deepest love ever known in all existence.

11:12 *Ephraim surrounds Me with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit* - Gomer must have lied to Hosea *so* much. Israel are criticized throughout his prophecy for just the same (see 7:13 too). The untruthfulness became compulsive and obsessive: “he daily lies more and more” (12:1). Gomer would’ve lied about where she was going, about how she spent Hosea’s money, about whose the children were… The key proof of our spiritual sincerity is whether we are in the core of our beings *truthful* , both with our God and with ourselves.

12:3 *In his maturity he had power with God*- This suggests that Jacob reached spiritual maturity that night he wrestled with the Angel. To be that familiar with God that we can reason with Him, struggle with Him in prayer, seek to change His will over an illness or situation... this is spiritual maturity. It was by his prayer and tears that he had this “power with God” and in a sense prevailed over God’s intention to slay him (:4). This whole characteristic of striving with God was memorialized in his new name: Israel, implying 'striver and prevailer with God and men'. And this must be the characteristic of Israel after the Spirit too. There is a confusion in the Hebrew between ‘striver’ and ‘prince’- for the struggle comes before the crown. Our relationship with Him, our attaining of salvation, is a struggle, a wrestling, a desperate clinging on, a pleading with tears. Yet Jacob that night really is a type of us all, for we are to turn to God as Jacob did then (:6).

13:10 Often in Hosea, God appeals to Israel to let Him be their ‘king’ (13:10). But there is a Hebraism whereby a husband is called the ‘king’ of his wife. God’s appeal was reflected in Hosea’s desire for Gomer to as it were re-marry him, to let him truly be her king / husband. And yet she felt like Israel: “What then should a king do [for] us?” (10:3). She was so selfish that she didn’t see anything in it for her… when *so* much love was being offered to her.

14:3 Hosea’s prophecy ends with God protesting His eternal love for Israel, and a description of them in the Kingdom, when they will have ‘returned’ to Him. Remember that the God / Israel relationship was a reflection of the Hosea / Gomer situation. I take this final, majestic section to be a reflection of Hosea’s fantasy, his day dream, that one day Gomer would return to him and blossom as a person. For fantasies are all a part of true love. “From Me you will acquire fruit” (14:8) is perhaps his fantasy that *somehow*, this worn out woman with dry breasts and a miscarrying womb (9:14) would *somehow* one day still bear him children of their own, and that in him “the fatherless” [a reference to Gomer’s illegitimate children] would find mercy in being accepted into the family (14:3). Hosea died with his dream unfulfilled. We are left with the question as to whether this similar loving intention of God for Israel will in fact be fulfilled, or whether it was what was potentially possible for Israel; or whether His fantasy for them will be fulfilled through a new Israel. If the latter, and we are that new Israel, then we can imagine what passionate joy the Father finds in our bumbling attempts to respond to Him and be His loyal and faithful wife. Whatever, the simple fact is that it all reflects an amazing grace, an ineffable love… and this God is our God, and Hosea who reflected all this is truly a pattern for ourselves in daily life. The very existence of such passionate love for us, love beyond reason, carries with it an inevitable warning as to our responsibilities.