



A Father's Heart

Hosea 11:1-11

Many of you are parents and you'll know like me the struggle that having children often is. As they get older, they do what you would like them to do less and less! So often we can see the dangers as parents, but the child just can't see them. Do they learn from our experience – or do they learn from bitter experience?

Up until now we have seen Israel in terms of the unfaithful wife – Gomer. And we have seen the pain of God as the jilted lover, but also as the gracious lover who is willing to accept the wife back despite her unfaithfulness.

But there is another theme in Hosea – the Father who struggles with His difficult petulant teenager! With a very difficult older child there comes a point as a parent where you just have to let go. That's particularly difficult when you see they are going to come to harm but there is always that point where they have to stand on their own two feet.

Here we have the Father – He loved His child Israel. *3 Yet I was the one who taught Israel to walk. I took my people up in my arms, but they did not acknowledge that I took care of them. 4 I drew them to me with affection and love. I picked them up and held them to my cheek; I bent down to them and fed them.* And what did they do? They thought someone else's parent was better than Him! Perhaps we've been there too – where your kids were always around someone else's house. And then of course are all the adverse comparisons. There's nothing more demoralising for a parent when they start to say "Johnny's mum lets him do this". Or "I prefer going to Johnny's because Johnny's mum is nice and you're just a grump." "Why can't I stay up and watch telly late – everybody does". My reply always was "you're wrong – everybody doesn't because you don't". Israel thought it was OK to run after Baal because it was much easier to follow the superstitions of the world than the ways of the living and true God. They also had their own version of Judaism because it meant that they did not have to go to Jerusalem, which was effectively abroad. With the loving Father, none of that washed.

And that's how it is today. It's easy to take on the values of folk religion or tradition whether it's right or wrong, rather than wait on God and seek His will and seek to hear His voice. I've talked about this several times in the last few weeks. It's easy to come to church and do all the things we've done for years – but waiting on God is something else.

But it got worse for the people of God. We have learned so often in this prophecy that we have a God who is ready to forgive and ready to restore. He is a wonderful persevering God – His grace means that we can come back to Him and He accepts us. I used to teach teenagers and what was noticeable around the ages 16-19 is their attitude towards authority. Younger teens push the envelope – if you show flexibility – then they push the envelope. If I gave them an extra day for their homework once, the young ones would push every lesson afterwards for an extra day on their homework. The mature ones would recognise that I was doing them a favour and produce something better with the extra time.

God is phenomenally patient. Look through scripture and you'll find it a major theme. He doesn't act immediately, but extends His grace to give His people maximum opportunity for His people to turn to Him and gain maximum benefit from all He has to offer them. But he has His limit. Shall I repeat that. He has His limit. He gives lots of warning and plenty of latitude. Not because He's an easy parent, but because He is gracious, giving each person that opportunity to turn back and come to Him in repentance asking for forgiveness. *2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow to do what he has promised, as some think. Instead, he is patient with you, because he does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants all to turn away from their sins.*

For Israel in Hosea's day the limit had been reached. *5 "They refuse to return to me, and so they must return to Egypt, and Assyria will rule them. 6 War will sweep through their cities and break down the city*

gates. It will destroy my people because they do what they themselves think best. 7 They insist on turning away from me. They will cry out because of the yoke that is on them, but no one will lift it from them. That was it and within a generation Israel was gone.

As far as God's people today are concerned, are we petulant teenagers or maturing individuals? The tragedy is that attitudes about God can be so meek and mild, so based on love and grace that it's easy to forget He is a holy God and there are just some things that He draws a line at. He is wonderfully persevering but He will eventually cut us loose to face the consequences of our sin if we do not seek His face and obey Him. If you think this is too OT then look at this verse in *1 Tim 1:18 Timothy, my child, I entrust to you this command, which is in accordance with the words of prophecy spoken in the past about you. Use those words as weapons in order to fight well, 19 and keep your faith and a clear conscience. Some people have not listened to their conscience and have made a ruin of their faith. 20 Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have punished by handing them over to the power of Satan; this will teach them to stop their blasphemy.*

That's rough but Hymenaeus and Alexander had certainly come to the end of the process as far as Paul was concerned and they were about to find out about their sin the hard way. It's an interesting question for leaders. How long do we persevere with someone running off the rails? The evidence from scripture is that we must persevere, but there comes a time when God wants them to learn the hard way.

However there's a final theme here in Hosea 11 that I would like to cover. I know of very few parents that cut their children off, but I know of plenty who reluctantly have to let their children learn the hard way. When we look at the rather frustrated Father in Hosea 11, He laments about the destruction He is going to bring on them but let's read on. *8 "How can I give you up, Israel? How can I abandon you? Could I ever destroy you as I did Admah, or treat you as I did Zeboiim? My heart will not let me do it! My love for you is too strong. 9 I will not punish you in my anger; I will not destroy Israel again.* He's a loving God and He had no intention of wiping Israel out of existence – but it's latter existence was going to be quite different from the former as we know from previous chapters, but the restored Israel (the church) will be greater than the former. What's interesting about this passage is that Israel as a nation disappeared, with it's people scattered out of existence into the nations, yet in previous chapters we learned of the reconstituted Israel that is drawn out of the nations – and we associate that with the Church. Whatever happened, God has not destroyed Israel in it's entirety, but has drawn it back from out of the nations to Himself in Christ.

What were Admah and Zeboiim you may ask. If you look at Gen 10:19 you'll find that these were the five cities on the plain that included Sodom and Gomorrah. God totally wiped out these cities you'll remember with Lot and his daughters the only survivors. The fate of Israel was not the same and out of disaster we see blessing for all the nations.

Let's conclude.

What do we learn from this four our town and country? Firstly that our persevering God has limits and if we exceed them, our lives can become seriously unstuck and disaster may follow. The call of God in this generation where the church is crumbling is to listen to God before His patience ends.

Secondly, God has a future for His church in this country I believe and if His local churches won't listen, then I believe He'll just wipe them out. But don't worry, He'll just bring in something new, vibrant and better. But that need not be the case, whilst we are here our gracious God waits for all who turn to Him and obey Him. Look at vibrant, growing church in the UK and you'll see a mixture of old church renewed and new church rising out of ashes.

I believe God wants to mould and shape us into a vibrant growing church for the 21st century. It doesn't start in the place where the world would suggest – by looking at the latest church theory or at what others do (although all these are useful) but it starts when the people of God truly connect to Him as a people of prayer. That is our challenge now and for the coming year.