

Hosea 11 Sermon. 24th February 2008

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Big Idea: The covenant love of God is guaranteed

* (Runaway) Around 39,000 young people in Australia will not go home tonight. Children run away from home for different reasons. I did once run away from home for 78 seconds, but returned because I had no shoes on, and the neighbour's lawn had bindies!

One girl I knew, Caroline, left home when she was 17. She had rich parents, she had a trust fund that gave her about \$1000 a week since she was 16. But she ran away from home and lived on the streets, spent her money on drugs and alcohol, and slept with men she met on the street in return for shelter. Her life was confusing. Why does a girl with money and rich parents live on the streets?

Because, she said, my parents don't care about me. They're never home. They never spend time with me. They don't care. They don't love me. So I left. And I guess we could understand that. If you're ignored or abused, if you're simply not loved, you would probably want to run away from your parents.

But what would you say to a runaway child whose parents *did* love them? Whose parents were the perfect parents – gave them everything they needed, looked after them in every way, cared for them, spent all their time with them, never left them, never hurt them, always loved them.

That's the situation God finds himself in with Israel. In the opening chapters, God compares his people, Israel, to an adulterous wife. Israel has cheated on God by turning to a false god, Baal, to provide them with food and good weather and prosperity.

Now, in chapter 11, God compares Israel to a child. An ungrateful child. A disobedient child. A runaway child with no excuse to run away. Have a look at verses 1-4:

* 1 "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

2 But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me.

They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images.

3 It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms;
but they did not realize it was I who healed them.

4 I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love;
I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them.

Here is God simply saying: "These are my children!" I rescued them from slavery in Egypt, I taught them how to walk, I carried them through the difficult times, I showed them kindness and love, I provided for them, but the more I called them back to me, the more they ran off with Baal! Israel has behaved like a rebellious, runaway child.

God is the perfect Father, and Israel is a rebellious child. And now this rebellion has reach breaking point.

* **(Boat) III** – On Men's Convention, one of the speakers told us an old story about a boat owner who was trying to find a skipper for his new boat. His boat was very valuable, so he handed it over to three different skippers to see how they handled his beautiful expensive boat.

The first skipper guided the boat through these rocky waters close to the shore at incredible speed, impressively manoeuvring between the rocks and shore.

The second skipper came even closer to shore, at even faster speeds, showing even more amazing skill at even faster speeds.

The third captain sailed nowhere near the rocks or the shore. No impressive speed. Just sailed smoothly in the deep, open, safe water.

And who was hired as the skipper? The third man. The owner said “I don’t want someone who puts my valuable boat in danger! I want someone who keeps it out of danger!”

You see, for years and years, God’s people had been sailing close to the edge, weaving between rocks. They had moved into the promised land and instead of removing all the other nations, and instead of having nothing to do with them, they intermarried with them. And instead of having one God, they started worshiping the gods of the other nations, like Baal. They had sailed close to the rocks and crashed. Time after time, God warned them of the dangers. Time and time again God said – “Go out into the safe, deep water. Keep away from these nations, keep away from their gods. Worship me alone and you will be safe. I will bless you, I will make you into a great nation and I will keep you safe.”

But his children didn’t listen. And now they’ve crashed. Hosea 11 is not a warning. It’s a prophecy of judgement for their adultery with other gods, their unfaithfulness, and their disobedience. Look with me at verses 5-7:

* 5 "Will they not return to Egypt
and will not Assyria rule over them
because they refuse to repent?

6 Swords will flash in their cities,
will destroy the bars of their gates
and put an end to their plans.

7 My people are determined to turn from me.
Even if they call to the Most High,
he will by no means exalt them.

What is the judgement? They will return to Egypt – in other words, to slavery. This time Assyria will take them as slaves. Their plans as a nation end here. God will not rescue them.

God made a covenant with them to look after them, and God has kept his word. But Israel have chosen **Baal** as their lover and provider. They have chosen not to be loved by God. They have chosen not to be God’s people, but to be Baal’s people.

So God steps back. He will let Assyria take them over. He will not protect them.

I want to ask you a question at this point:

Do you think that God will NOT judge?

A lot of people think this is true about God. When it comes down to disobedience, going to heaven or not, many people think, quite simply, God is nice. He won’t punish us. He won’t send us to hell. At least not forever. God isn’t that cruel. God can’t possibly be that mean.

* ***The Lie: “Don’t worry about God!”***

But that’s not what God says in his word! All through the Bible, God shows himself to be a God of love AND justice. God is a God of mercy AND judgement. The devil has a wonderful lie for us – don’t worry about God. He’s a pussycat. He won’t hurt you. But **God’s** promise is that he WILL judge. There IS an eternal hell. There IS punishment for those who disobey him. If you keep sailing close to the rocks, and ignore his warnings, you WILL crash and you WILL face the consequences!

But this is not something designed to make us panic about sin in our life. But it should make us take disobedience to God seriously. Last week Richard spoke about the gods of astrology, tarot cards, palm reading, horoscopes – all ways in which we say to God: “I have decided to trust in these other things instead of you.” “I trust the stars with my future.” “I trust a medium with my future.” These are ways we prostitute ourselves to other gods.

But Richard also talked to us about the god of “*self*” in Western society. It’s not as easy to see when there are no 40 foot idols around the house. So what does the god of self look like? It is many gods all rolled into one. It is the god of money, the god of pornography, the god of power, the god of possessions and even the god known as family. These are some of the things that are a big part of our lives, but they can also become our gods.

God warned the Israelites again and again about the gods of the other nations. “Keep away from them!” he said. They didn’t listen and they crashed. And they faced God’s judgement.

Do we think we can sail close to the rocks? How important is money to us? How hard is it to remove pornography from our lives? How much do we desire power? How difficult is it to let go of our possessions, or to at least stop building them up here on earth? How much of our commitment to God do we sacrifice for family?

Why do we risk our eternity for the god of money or the god of pleasure or the god of self? Do we think that we will never crash? Can we ignore the warnings? Do we think we are indestructible when it comes to sin? Do we think that gossip will not consume us? Or malice? Or envy? **Or do we think that God will not judge us when we put these gods before him?**

We *must* learn from this warning in Hosea. We must recognise and deal with the gods in our lives, or we will crash.

Finally, we can’t finish today until we also look at the last verses of chapter 11. Because here is the most amazing part...verse 8 and 9

* 8 "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? ...
My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.
9 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.
I will not come in wrath.

Here is God saying “*But how can I leave you?!*”

There is the depth of God’s love. He rescues his people, watches them turn away from him, allows them to face the consequences, but still says: “I can’t leave you! I am God and not man!” And that’s exactly the point. Man makes covenants that are broken. Marriage is a covenant that people break all the time in our society through adultery or selfishness. But God shows us covenant love and commitment. No matter how much WE break the covenant with him, he will *never* break it. Even when we walk away from him, reject him, and cheat on him, God still remains faithful to his covenant.

In verse 8 it says: “*My heart is changed within me.*” It’s not God changing his mind. He has always loved his people. What that means is that God’s heart is stirred. The word is better translated as “my heart yearns” or “my heart is churning”. God’s heart is upset. God’s love for his people is so great that seeing them face judgement upsets him deeply.

And so what these final verses talk about is an event that WILL COME. A promise that God will keep his covenant until the very end. Verses 10-11:

* 10 They **will** follow the LORD; he will roar like a lion.
When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west.
11 They will come trembling like birds from Egypt,
like doves from Assyria. I will settle them in their homes,"
declares the LORD.

They WILL follow the Lord. God WILL lead his people out of slavery again. God's people WILL be settled in their homes again. God WILL call them and bring them home. This is the promise of God's faithful love. Even though his people have deserted him, he will still be there for the faithful who return to him.

And when will this happen? Well it didn't happen in the next few years. Northern Israel was taken by Assyria. Then Southern Israel was taken by Babylon. The temple was destroyed. Even when Jesus came, the people of God were under a Roman government.

And even now as we read God's word, we know that we ourselves are not "at home" with God. We are not settled, because Jesus promises us a home in *heaven*. Jesus promises to deliver us FROM this world. The day that God is speaking about is the final day when Jesus returns and God brings his faithful people home forever.

Even when we are unfaithful, God is faithful. Even when WE break the covenant, God keeps it. And this is fundamental in understanding who God is. God has made a promise – a covenant with his people. A covenant to bless them, to look after those who follow him, a promise to deliver his people. And God makes the terms of the covenant. **God** says: You follow my laws, you live under my rule, you worship me alone, and I will take care of you in eternity, like the perfect husband, like the perfect father. God says "I will NEVER EVER go back on my word. You follow me, and YOU WILL BE DELIVERED."

God's covenant love for his people is infinite and never ending. He allows us to turn our back on him. He allows us to walk away. He allows us to face the consequences of our sin. He even allows us to turn our back on him completely and face the eternal judgement of hell. But he also allows us, today, to repent and return to him. And his promise is that he will be there. He will not go back on his word. Even when we do.