

Hosea 2:2-23
How to have a wonderful life
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool
13th January 2008

We started last week by looking at 1:1 to 2:1 where we were introduced to the idea that sin, doing wrong, is, essentially, about breaking a relationship with the God who made us and who loves us. And Hosea brought that home to us forcefully by using the picture of adultery, unfaithfulness, even prostitution, to describe what it is like when we ignore God.

In this next chapter of the book, as you'll have gathered from our reading, that metaphor or idea carries on. But this is not simply repetition. For in chapter 2 we're going to see in much more detail the consequences of our sin and rebellion against God and why living in right relationship with him is in every way a better path to follow.

Or, to use the imagery of Hosea, we're going to see that marriage is in every way better than adultery.

Let's start by thinking for a moment about doing bad things. And I want to reflect for a moment on this question. It might sound like an odd question. But just hang in with me and ponder it for a second:

How interesting is evil?

At first sight it's tempting to think that wickedness is very interesting.

After all at the personal level what do most people would say was a more exciting prospect – a bowl of pasta cheese with your family and an evening with your wife or husband. Or a romantic seduction from a stranger?

Which life is more thrilling. The rich drug baron – or the honest office clerk?

And it's not just as individuals that it can seem that evil is where the action is. Think about the things we make movies of. How many exciting films are set in happy communities where people care about one another and get on with regular lives? And how many exciting films are set in times of war? In prisons? Around murder and rape and adultery and theft?

At first glance it can seem like evil is where the colour is.

Religious people often think like this too. I frequently have conversations with people where someone says something like: "Well it was

obviously necessary for God to allow evil into the world because if there wasn't evil we wouldn't know what good was."

It's as if somehow we think evil gives colour – dark colour perhaps – but colour nonetheless to a world that if it was entirely good would be a bit safe, a bit dull, a bit sterile.

Well I want to tell you this morning that both our experience, rightly understood, and, even more importantly, the book of Hosea, teach us that in fact evil is profoundly dull, dismal and grey. And that goodness, being in a right relationship with God, is astonishingly exciting. Beautiful and colourful.

We're going to see that in two halves as we look at Hosea chapter 2.

I Forgetting God is boring (v2-13)

God starts his speech here by focussing attention on the lives that the people of Israel, his people, were living at the time Hosea was preaching – around 755BC.

God speaks as if he is in a court room, starting proceedings against the people, his bride, for committing adultery. He calls the children, the individual citizens of Israel, as witnesses against her, v2: *rebuke your mother* he says.

What has she done? Well Israel, God's people, has done evil. And not just in some sort of abstract, corporate way. The individual people have been wicked too – they are, v4, "the children of adultery."

That doesn't just mean children conceived outside of marriage. Rather God is saying that the children, the individual people of Israel, are characterised by adultery themselves. They are just like their mother.

It's exactly true of our society too isn't it. Let's take one example. You could say that the UK is a materialistic society – that our nation derives its status and security from how much stuff we have. That is demonstrated every time someone says that the UK is the world's 5th richest country.

But of course we are only a materialistic society because there are materialistic individuals. If no one person derived their status and security from their

individual wealth then we would not be nearly as bothered about our national wealth in a global league table.

So with Israel. It is a wicked nation because it is full of wicked individuals.

What have they done? What is their crime? Hosea summarises God's charge against Israel in v13 – *"she went after her lovers, but me she forgot."*

What have they done? They have forgotten God. They have forgotten that they are a married woman. Forgotten that they owe their life, their allegiance, their everything to Yahweh, the Lord.

How does God know? What tells him that they have forgotten their creator and rescuer? Their unfaithfulness to him and their pursuit of other gods.

God describes their worship of foreign idols in terms that are breathtakingly clear. Adultery, unfaithfulness, whoredom.

Their false worship is evident, God says, in all sorts of ways.

It is evident, v2, in their appearance. They have an adulterous look and unfaithfulness is perched between their breasts. The image here is of the brazen prostitute – all made up with garish finery, half undressed and provocative.

In v13 God tells us that they dressed up for the false gods – rings and bracelets and jewellery were never brought out for their husband. But they were draped all over for their illicit lover.

It is evident, v5, in their speech. The people of Israel attribute all the material blessings that they have received not to the Lord who truly gave them those things but to the false gods they are worshipping instead.

These gods, Israel says, gave them everything that is necessary for life – food, water, clothes, light, heat and wine.

It is evident, v11, in the very calendar of the nation. The way that Israel has turned the celebrations that were intended to be times for remembering the Lord, the annual remembrances, the new moon feasts and the weekly Sabbath, into pagan rituals.

So what about now? What does forgetting God look like today? After all few of us are tempted to engage in ritual temple prostitution or to honour a sky deity for rain or a corn deity for the provision

of our bread. Few of us engage in the celebration of pagan rituals instead of Christian festivals.

Well I'm not so sure. I suspect that, in fact, in our culture, and in the churches too we are not as far away from 8th century BC Israel as we might like to think we are.

You see the essence of what they had done was remove God from the centre of their everyday life. God is quite clear, v8, that he is the one who provided for them. He is the one who "gave her the grain, the new wine and oil." All the essentials of life are God's provision.

They forgot that. We might not be tempted to think that our loaf of bread is provided by Baal. But are we not often tempted to think it is provided by our own industry and hard work? Or by an efficient economy?

We might not be tempted to worship the sky god on the Sabbath. And of course we have no God given special days like the Old Testament Jews had. But in how many Christian homes over the last month has Father Christmas, that manifestation of works religion who only brings presents only to good people, been more important than Jesus?

We might not be tempted to temple prostitution. But are we often not tempted, just as they were, by the possible thrill of illicit sex?

Are we not drawn in by the possibilities of what one commentator describes brilliantly as: "the exciting exchange of Yahweh's broad daylight for the twilight world of violent gods, with their raw passions, cruelties and ecstasies"?

Our culture, our friends, and, secretly, many of us believe that the neon lit, night-time world of sexual promiscuity, massive consumption of alcohol and other drugs, money, power and deals is more exciting than living in relationship with the Lord.

Isn't that precisely one of the things our friends say all the time about Christianity – it's boring living a Christian life.

And isn't it something that we all too often betray when we give our testimonies – I used to be really into going out, getting drunk and meeting boys but I gave it all up to be a Christian.

But hang on a minute. Doesn't this sound like the precise opposite of what I suggested at the beginning? Doesn't it sound like Israel's unfaithfulness, and ours, actually IS much more exciting, fun and thrilling than goodness and virtue?

Surely the testimony of experience is that the tempestuous adulterous affair is more exciting than sex with your spouse?

Well I think not. You see wickedness does make great fiction. It make great TV. It makes brilliant films. But the reality is that it is unremittingly dreary in real life.

Let's start with a really extreme example. The Nazi holocaust. One of the consistent testimonies of holocaust historians was just how dull all the horror is. The whole story is one of paperwork and reports and mud and routines and systems. They were systems to do something astonishingly wicked. But to live through it, as perpetrator or victim, was for the most part unremittingly dull. The testimonies of many concentration camp survivors is not that they spent most of their time in a high state of adrenaline rush trying to escape, fight death or start a revolt. It is the tale of a daily routine of toilets, eating, trying to sleep, trying to stay invisible and unnoticed and hope that you wouldn't be outstanding for anything. Because to be noticed was deadly. Evil is unremittingly dreary.

Let's take a slightly less extreme example. I watched the movie *The Departed* recently. Director Martin Scorsese at his best. It's a brilliant piece of fiction; a bent copper who is a mob informant and a guy who dropped out of the police academy as a mole inside the Mafia. Chases, action, shootings, the whole bit. But just imagine for a minute what it would be like to really live in that world. Checking under your car for a bomb every time you get in it. Avoiding whole neighbourhoods where rivals rule and you'll be shot. Facing every day with the threat of violence. Looking out for getting arrested all the time. All the guns, drink and women in the world don't disguise the face that, as great a movie as it might make, it's not a life any sane person would want to live.

Or take a much more mundane example. A columnist in *The Times* recently wrote about his experience of multiple sexual partners – short and long term relationships, most of them unfaithful and one night stands. And very honestly and movingly admitted that some of loneliest experiences of his life had been in the bedroom with someone he hardly knew. His life might have made great TV – but it didn't make much of a life.

Whatever the temporary excitement, a life as either the doer or the victim of great wickedness is, in the end senseless and grey.

And that's not a new idea. Because it's exactly what God was determined to show the people of Israel 2,800 years ago.

You see all the exciting bits of their spiritual adultery were actually built on things that belonged to God.

The scanty clothes that gave allure and promise were God's gifts. When God strips them away and leaves the people naked in the middle of the street what will happen? V10 no one will take her out of my hands. When these people are seen for the pathetic, useless, ordinary group they are without the Lord's favour no one will pay them the slightest attention.

The wine and oil and food that form the basis of their great feasts to their new gods come, v8, from the Lord. And when he takes them back what will be left? Nothing. Notice how clear God is about that – v9 I will take away **MY** grain when it ripens, and **MY** new wine when it is ready."

Their enjoyment of their own wickedness is built not on anything that is attractive about evil but on beautiful things that belong to God. Take them away and what is left? Nothing. V3 – a desert.

What will it be like to be Israel when God withdraws his favour? Look at v6 "I will block her path with thornbushes; I will wall her in so that she cannot find her way. She will chase after her lovers but not catch them; she will look for them but not find them. Then she will say, '**I will go back to my husband as at first for then I was better off than now**.'"

What a tragedy. Those who claim to be God's people, who have known his blessing and his husbandly care, race around looking for anyone else to satisfy them. And only when God pulls the rug from under their feet, only when he takes away his blessings, do they realise that they have been living a sad lie and repent.

And are we not often much the same? Is it not often the Christian man who gets caught who repents of his internet porn habit?

Is it not when our house prices come tumbling down that we realise we have built our security on the markets not on the Lord?

Is it not when we fail our exams that we realise we have made an idol of medicine, vet science or accountancy?

How kind God is to expose the stupid, dull, rubbishness of evil and wickedness.

And we do well to learn that now – because for each individual there will come a day when it will be too late to learn the lesson of the pointlessness of

evil. A day when Jesus Christ will send those who do not know him, who have forgotten God, to the dullest place in the universe – a place of endless night and weeping and pain. Of eternal utter boring nothingness. To hell.

Forgetting God, contrary to what our world says, is boring.

2 Knowing God as your lover is amazing (v14-23)

Twice in this passage God has told us what he will do as a consequence of Israel's sin.

“Therefore”, v3, I will cut her off from her pagan lovers.

“Therefore”, v9, I will bring poverty and deprivation.

And now, in v14, he begins his third and final judgment.

“Therefore I am now going to allure her.”

Sorry God, what did you say? I will speak tenderly to her... I will give her back her vineyards.

What will God do? His final sentence on these rebellious and wicked people? He will bless them. Not every human being. But his people. Those within his covenant family. Those who call him husband.

There will come a day, God says, when the blessings he has taken away from Israel will be restored to his people. A day when the valley of Achor – a place of shame and great wickedness in Israel's history, will become a beacon of hope.

God is not simply going to forgive his wayward people like husband grudgingly welcoming back a fickle wife. No he is going to romance her. He is going to go back to the good old days when he first met her.

The history of the people of Israel began, in many ways, when they first escaped from slavery in Egypt and, literally, followed God into the desert.

They were far from perfect then but that time has come to stand for a wonderful period in the life of God and his people. When they went with him.

But although this new start will have all the romance of the desert it won't have any of the hardships of the desert. God will provide, v22, grain and wine and oil. Everything luxurious and bountiful.

Imagine an old married couple. They've had some rocky times. But the husband woos back his wife with real love and affection and tenderness. Their love is rekindled like when they were first married at university. There is every bit as much adoration and joy. But now, in addition to that, there is a comfortable home not a dingy student room. A beautiful meal not a take-away pizza. A stunning king size bed not an Ikea sofa.

Everything will be not just as good as before – but better.

What will this look like in reality?

Well it's revealed to us in v19-20. God will be betrothed to his bride. Betrothal was a much more certain thing than our engagement. It happened after the husband had paid the bride-price to the girl's father. He had made a promised, backed with what he owned, that they would be together forever.

And what does God give as his promise? Not money but something much better. Righteousness, justice, love, compassion and faithfulness. Or, of you want to sum it all up, they will, v20, know the Lord.

The NIV has acknowledge, which is a bit feeble to be honest. It sounds like they might just recognise his existence. But what it says is that they will know him. As you may be aware to “know” somebody in the Bible can be used as a way of saying “have sex with them.” It's a verb of intimacy. They will know God – they will be intimate with him. They will, v23, call him their God. And he will be intimate with them. He will call them, v23, my loved one and my people.

What does that mean for us?

Well it means that anybody who joins in with God's covenant. Anybody who call God “my husband” – who acknowledges that he is our maker and, in Jesus Christ, our rescuer. Anybody who trusts God and listens to his word can enjoy all of this.

This morning it may be that your only reason for coming to God is that God has removed his blessings from your life to expose the dull emptiness of a life in rebellion to him.

It may be that God has taken away the things that are his kindnesses to you – money, success, relationships – to show you that without him there is nothing worth having in the world.

And even if that is the only reason you are going to come he will still have you.

Is that not astonishingly gracious this morning? That God takes back a wayward people who do nothing more than say: "I will go back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off than now."

But he will do that. He will seduce you with his love and kindness. He will bless you. He will give you righteousness and justice, love, compassion and faithfulness.

That is a colourful way to live.

What life is more thrilling? Well there is no life more thrilling than knowing someone who loves you perfectly. There is no life more wonderful than the life lived knowing the one who made you and who rescues you.

Of course none of us completely live that life yet. Because all our lives are made dull and dreary by the constant power of sin in ourselves and in others.

But even now, before the return of Jesus when the promises of Hosea 2 will be fulfilled in all their glorious perfection. Even now the plain and honest reality is that there is no happier life, no better life, no more joyful life than one lived out in the knowledge of God.

The security of knowing the giver of every gift you have in your life. The confidence of a world wide family who share your deepest values and commitments. The certainty of never ending perfection.

I am not for a minute wanting to play down the hurts, pains and sadnesses of trying to live as a Christian. I know them myself and I see them week by week in many of you.

But, this morning, I urge you not to be taken by the lie that says there is a better, happier way to live. It may seem so. Indeed, while God maintains his blessings even in your wickedness it may be so – just as it was for the ancient Israelites.

But the truth is that sin is the least interesting thing in the universe. And the more of it there is the more miserable the world becomes.

So listen to Hosea. Recognise that every good thing you have comes from God. And embrace the lover of your soul.

Andrew Evans