

Hosea 3:1-5

A costly purchase for something worthless?

Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

20th January 2008

This week American Investment bank Merrill Lynch announced losses for the three months (that's 13 weeks or 63 working days) of \$9,830 million. They lost \$156 million a day.

As a result of the massive mess up by the big banks American homeowners with difficult credit records will lose their houses. Governments around the world will face pressure on funds for health-services, education and defence. People who run and work in shops are already struggling as consumer confidence falls.

And the man responsible? Well at Merrill Lynch it was Stan O'Neal. He retired last month with immediate effect when the scale of the losses became known. His payoff package? Apparently it's \$159 million.

Sometimes it just seems as if whatever happens, good news or bad, the main result is that most of us just struggle on and, from time to time, suffer and that a few untouchables at the top get richer and richer and richer.

Last week we saw the punishment of the nation of Israel, a group of people who claimed, as a nation, to be followers of the Lord God of the Bible. They had spent many years chasing after the idols of other nations – the weather gods, corn gods and fertility gods – the Baals as the book of Hosea calls them. As a result of their failure to acknowledge that he was the provider of everything good that they have, God said, he was going to judge them. Another nation, Assyria, was going to come and take over their land and enslave them. Using the picture of a marriage god told them that if they really preferred the company of other men they could have it – and plenty of it. Their land would be destroyed, their houses obliterated, their crops a failure. Only after a long period of discipline would God call the people back to know his blessings. Only after much hardship, suffering and misery would the people really see the inevitable and just result of their sin and be rescued by the Lord.

And it's easy to think of God as a bit like Stan O'Neal. Stan O'Neal receives nothing more or less than the just dues under his contract. But nothing touches him. Nothing seems to cost him. It's hard to doubt the justice of God's punishment of Israel. After all they had promised, again and again, that

they would serve the Lord only. They had made solemn covenants to him and bound themselves to God as a wife binds herself to a husband – in faithfulness for life.

But it's painfully obvious what the cost of sin is to Israel. And, as we saw last week, it's equally obvious to the thoughtful person what the cost of sin and wickedness is to us. But how about God? What does it really cost him? You could read chapter 2 of Hosea and see that God will justly punish his unfaithful bride and also that he will, one day, restore her to a place of blessing. But what does it cost him?

After all there God is, sitting up in heaven and manipulating every atom, proton and quark in the universe. God is the one who owns everything that exists and who has, himself, existed eternally.

What can it possibly cost him to deal with this little problem of a small group of people on a medium sized blue-green planet, orbiting an average sun in the western spiral arm of a perfectly ordinary galaxy?

If the chief exec of a big bank is, seemingly at least, untouchable by the woes that afflict the rest of us, how much more must that be true of God? What sort of meaningful love can such a God ever engage in with people like the Israelites – or with people like us?

Well, as you'll have guessed, in Hosea 3 we see that, as much as their sin was painful and costly for the people of Israel 2,700 years ago and is painful and costly for us today, the cost of sin is not less for God – but greater.

1 God's love hurts (v1)

Gomer, Hosea's wife, is in many ways as significant in this book as the prophet Hosea himself. Hosea was the one who God called to speak his word, his message, to the people of Israel. But it was his relationship with her that brought the message alive in a living parable of what was going on in the nation.

Gomer was a whore. We don't know the details. She may have been a prostitute before she married Hosea or only commenced her life of unfaithfulness

after the wedding. She may have been an actual street prostitute or part of the sex-for-money “worship” at the pagan temples in Israel at the time. Or she might just have lived with a series of men trading sexual availability for a place to live and food to eat.

We don’t know the details. But we know that by the time chapter 3 opens, she is no longer living at home with Hosea. Imagine what turmoil of life that must have created for Hosea and his three children. Some of you will know, or may even be, people in a very similar situation – abandoned by a spouse who has decided to chase their own pleasure. You will know, and the rest of us can envisage, the pain and misery such a situation brings.

But that is nothing compared to what God asks Hosea to do next. *Go, God says, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress.* Hosea is being asked to take his wife back. Not in circumstances where she has returned begging for his mercy and forgiveness and desperate to put the past behind her.

It seems, as we’ll see in v2, that in fact Gomer is in no position to return even if she wanted to. But there is no hint anywhere in the book of Hosea that she had repented of the lifestyle she had chosen.

Hosea has to go and get her. His love for her is not going to be demonstrated by sitting around at home feeling terrible about the situation. He has to go and do something. He has to find her. Seek her out and bring her back. He has, God says, to love her just like God loves his people even though they turn to other god and love the sacred raisin cakes.

The presence of Eccles cakes (or something similar!) in the Bible always raises a chuckle. Nobody knows exactly what they were. They were definitely a delicacy. They had sensual connotations – they get a mention in the Bible’s erotic love poem – Song of Songs. And it seems that, amongst other things, they were used in pagan worship; possibly being eaten by the ritual prostitutes and their clients.

Can you see the contrast? Hosea loves Gomer. Gomer loves another. God loves Israel. Israel loves raisins.

It’s deliberately ridiculous. It shows how pathetic the people of Israel are. What have they spurned the living God for? The one who rescued their whole nation from slavery in Egypt? The one who made their nation great? Dried fruit.

It’s unbelievable. And can you imagine how hurtful that is to God? His people prefer garibaldi biscuits to him. It’s like the husband who leaves his wife, his children, his home, his friends and his church for another woman. It’s unbelievably stupid. It’s totally irrational. It’s astonishingly hurtful. And it happens all the time.

Of course an injured wife can, to some extent, heal the wound by shutting herself off emotionally from that stupid man. She can build a new life for herself and her family and move on. What she cannot do is do all that AND keep on loving her husband as a husband. To persist in holding on to the relationship is to keep the wound open. It is to look the agony of hurting love full in the face all the time. But God says that his love IS persistent love. He loves his people even as he sees them, in plain view, sleeping with another.

We need to acknowledge that God *feels* very strongly about this. Later on in Hosea God describes his own emotions: *“My heart is changed within me, all my compassion is around.”*

For all that God’s emotions are not like ours, his feelings are real. In fact our feelings are, in a very real sense, only pale imitations or reflections of his feelings – part of being made in his image. God’s love for Israel is not some cold analogy of Hosea’s for Gomer. Rather his massive compassion for his wayward people is reflected dimly in the love for Gomer that was still kindled in Hosea’s heart.

God’s love hurts.

2 God’s love costs (v2)

I wonder how difficult it was for Hosea to write, or preach, whichever he did first, the first 4 words of v2: “So I bought her.” There must have been a lot of pain wrapped up in those words.

Again we don’t know whether Gomer was being held by someone because she had got herself into debt. Or whether Hosea was paying off some “boyfriend” – which shows how little she really was “loved by another.”

But two things are made clear by this verse.

Firstly Gomer wasn’t worth very much. The total value of what Hosea gives for her comes to slightly less than the regular price paid for a healthy, adult slave. Gomer was no £10,000 a night high class call

girl. She was nothing special. Nobody walking past would have marvelled at her especially.

She was, in fact, exactly like Israel. A nothing nation. A nation with no great distinction. Not the world's greatest warriors, or the best architects, or the most creative scientists. Just a bunch of farmers of olives, grapes and grain. Some fishermen and a few merchants. Ordinary.

They were, in fact, just like Christians. Not a group of people you would give a second glance to in the street. *God chose the foolish things of the world... God chose the weak things of the world... He chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things and the things that are not*, as the apostle Paul puts it.

God's love is not dependent on the loveliness of the object. So this morning if you feel unlovely that is no barrier to God loving you. And if you harbour in your heart a secret feeling that God wants you on his team because of something about you – well you're wrong.

The reasons for God's love are nothing to do with you. He has his reasons. They are not revealed to us; but he has them. And they are nothing to do with what you are.

In any way that could be determined by another human being Gomer wasn't worth very much. But Hosea bought her. Israel wasn't worth very much – but God would buy her, redeem her. You are not worth very much – but that does not preclude God's love for you.

The second striking thing about this transaction is how Hosea pays. The silver (which makes up a bit more than half the value of the transaction) weighs about 6ozs. The barley would be the equivalent weight of about 250 loaves of bread.

Which of those would you rather carry around with you? Why on earth would you pay with barley, the least valuable of all the cereal crops in the ancient near east? Surely only if you didn't have any more money.

The second striking thing about the transaction is that it as good as bankrupts Hosea. He puts everything into getting this useless, faithless woman back again. Everything.

Can you imagine the conversation with his friends in the put the night before?

"Hosea I see you sold your sheep this morning – what's going on mate?"

"Yeah and I heard you were trying to get rid of that lovely sundial you've got in the garden?"

"And didn't I see you in the post office trading in your tax disc for the donkey?"

"Well I'm trying to scrape 30 shekels together. I'm going to buy Gomer back."

"You're going to do what? That worthless woman? After all she's done to you? She made a total fool out of you? And your kids – she just abandoned them. How can you even think about bringing her back into the house?"

"But I love her."

"I bet she's not even sorry is she? What? She doesn't even know? You're a love fool that's what you are."

Well who knows if anything like that ever happened. But it's what we'd say, isn't it, if something like this happened to one of our friends. You're completely mad. He's not worth it.

Sin doesn't just bring pain and misery to sinners because of God's justice that demands punishment. It also brings pain to God. Because his great love and compassion means he desires to buy his people back. He loves his people. So he has to ransom them from bondage and slavery to sin and from the consequences of his own judgment on them and their sin.

The concept of ransom or redemption is one of the most important in the whole of the Bible. It involves somebody paying a price to liberate somebody else from slavery.

What price did God pay to liberate the Israelites from their slavery? Well he worked mighty acts of power – raising up empires and bringing down kingdoms so that, some 200 years or more after Hosea spoke a tiny number of people from the 10 tribes of Israel returned to the city of Jerusalem.

But that is only a tiny shadow of the true ransom price that God pays to liberate the Israelites of the best part of 3,000 years ago, and Christians today, from slavery to sin and a destiny of God's own righteous judgment.

As the Lord Jesus Christ put it: "I came to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many."

God is not like the oil oligarchs, the premiership footballers and the investment bankers. He is not above the world, serenely floating on a cloud and watching its misery. His love costs. It cost him the life of his own Son, the treasure and majesty of heaven. God's love for us bankrupted him – it led him to give everything.

As Hosea pawned his last possessions the cost of his love was but a reflection of the love of God for his people.

Last week we saw that God was willing to have Israel back even if she came only because she did not like the alternative of misery in her sin. And we said that God still takes people back even if we only come to him because we do not like the alternative and because we have seen the emptiness of life without him.

And that's true. God asks no questions of the returning rebel. If we are sorry for our folly and trusting Jesus for rescue that is enough for him.

But sooner or later you have got to realise the cost. You can come to the Christian life with nothing more than relief that someone else has paid and that you can escape the nightmarish consequences, now and in eternity, of your sin.

But you cannot go on in the Christian life, you cannot mature and grow and flourish unless you increase in your understanding of the cost. It's the difference between a regular contract and a marriage. Between religion and relationship. Between churchgoer and Christian.

God has paid a great price to make it possible for you to be ransomed. Growing in the relationship which he gave himself to create is only possible where we are willing to engage with our whole selves in appreciating what that price was. We will never understand it fully – it is beyond our comprehension of value.

But we will never love God as he is unless we appreciate that his love costs.

3 God's love disciplines (v3-4)

As he took Gomer home Hosea gave her instructions. She was his now. Even more his than she was before as he had bought her back, just as

he would have paid a bride-price for her when he first married her. She was twice his.

And she will follow his rule. Her former profession must be left behind. She will move from promiscuity to celibacy – even with her husband.

What would this mean for Israel?

It would mean that they would be hedged in, caged, prevented from their worship of false gods. And, indeed, from full relationship with the true God.

Look at v4. They will live for many days (the same phrase as in v3) without some of the most important things in the life of their nation.

They will have no king or prince – no independent rule. They will be an occupied nation.

They will have no sacred stones or idols – God is going to put them in a situation where they will not physically be able to carry on the pagan worship that they did before.

And they will have no sacrifices and no ephod. The sacrifices and the ephod (one of the garments worn by the priests) were a vital part of the way that God had told his people they were to worship him.

Not only will they not be able to worship the false gods – they will not be in a full relationship with the true and living God either, just as Gomer was to be Hosea's wife but without enjoying the full intimate pleasures of the marriage relationship.

For the people of Israel this meant that they would be exiled, far away from their home land. They would be taken away from the ancient gods of the pagans in the land and also taken away from all the signs and symbols of the Lord. They would, like Gomer, be chastened – the word means made chaste, made faithful.

We're not told whether Hosea ever resumed marital sex with Gomer. But I suspect not. Because I think one of the things that Hosea needed to picture, to show forth through the struggles and pain of his own marriage, was that the day of restoration, of new intimacy, lay beyond his lifetime. But there would come a time when...

4 God's love perfects (v5)

Israel, like Gomer, was redeemed reluctantly. The people of God were not beating his door down shouting and wailing for forgiveness and mercy.

But God promises a day when his people will respond wholeheartedly to him and his grace. A day when they would come trembling – in great awe because they know who he is – to his blessings. A day when they would seek God.

A day when they would look to a new David to be their king – a sign that God's people were once more united.

When did this happen?

Well 200 years after Hosea retrieved Gomer from her whoredom a very small number of the people of Israel returned with the people of Judah to the city of Jerusalem, rebuilt the temple and started offering the daily sacrifices again. But they were never really free. Ever after their land was occupied – by the Persians, the Greek and the Romans. Their “kings” were nothing more than political puppets doing the bidding of the latest emperor. Despite the wishful thinking of some these were not the final days.

700 years after Hosea a young man from the north of Israel announced, in word and deed, that he was the new King David. The anointed Messiah. The ruler God had promised. Jesus Christ promised the end of exile – exile from a relationship with God. He promised the end of the greatest of all exiles – exile from the garden of Eden and instituted a new age when God would come and live with his people once again.

So as we sit here today what's the deal? Well it's not simple.

The costly love of God has come and, in the death of Jesus on the cross, has paid the ultimate price for faithfulness to his people. The redemption is here – we have been bought back from our foolish slavery to sin and death and judgment. And we, the people of God, those who trust in Jesus, the church, are no longer in the position of chastisement that Israel was in Hosea's day. We now know God intimately through Jesus.

But God's love still has to discipline. Because we still chase after sin. God's love disciplines individual Christians – with church discipline, with rebukes from our fellow believers, sometimes with illness the New Testament teaches. God's love disciplines churches – with reformation, bringing to repentance and, sometimes, closing them down.

We have come to the Lord's blessings – because he has given us of himself in Christ who died for us and through the Spirit who lives in us.

But we know that we are not receiving all that he has promised; because we see Christ now by faith not by sight and his Spirit is only a deposit, a seal of all that is coming in the future.

It may be that you are here this morning and you are not a Christian. You know Christians. You hang out with them. You come to church occasionally. And you think it's all fine. They're quite nice people. Church seems like an OK place to be. Talks are a bit boring but the coffee's good. But your experience doesn't seem to you to justify the hype. It's good – but it's not that good.

Well what you need to know from Hosea is two things.

Firstly the fact that there is anything. Anything good at all is a remarkable testimony to God's love and grace. In fact, the more you look at the world and, especially, at the church, at the people sitting around you this morning, it is utterly incredible that God should do anything other than judge such a adulterous, wicked, selfish and useless bunch of people. God's love is very great.

And secondly you need to know that this is just the beginning. Yes this is good. To know the God who made you is wonderful. To meet with his people and share the joys and sorrows if life is a great privilege. But this is just the beginning. For a new world is coming. A world where the Lord alone is acknowledged as God and Jesus Christ his son is the unchallenged king. A world where every good thing is abundant forever. That is what the God who loves us has won for us, at infinite cost to himself.

He is not simply a kindly master looking after his unworthy servants – though he is not less than that. The Lord God is also a faithful and extravagantly generous husband seeking, redeeming, disciplining and, eventually, perfecting us, his faithless wife.

And it is as that perfect husband that we need to love and respond to him if we are to experience all the blessings that he has to offer.

It's easy to think, as you sit in the sermon – and I know because I do it too – that what I need is something practical to take away with me. I want to be told that I need to do x, y, and z more to help me

keep going as a Christian. I want top tips on prayer and bible study and evangelism.

But as useful as those things are they are not what will keep you going as a Christian.

It is the message of Hosea 3 that will. The only thing that makes it at all possible for you to respond to God and love him and honour him as your husband is this – that he loved you first and has ransomed you for freedom.

So come now to him. Whoever you are, whatever you have done. Return the love that he makes possible.

Put your trust in Jesus.

Andrew Evans