

The Revelation of God's Unconditional Love

To speak of *God's unconditional love* is to utter a wonderful fact about God's nature. He loves because He chooses to love. His love is not dependent upon finding something in us that merits His love. His love is without conditions — it is *unconditional*. This kind of love is expressed in the Lord's words to Israel, ⁷ "The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you *because* you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; ⁸ but *because* the LORD loves you . . ." (Deut. 7:7-8a). In other words, God loves not "because" of a reason, but simply "because" He chooses to love.

God's unconditional love is revealed throughout the Old and New Testaments, but in no other place in the entire Bible is there such a detailed description of His love as in the book of Hosea. When we touch this book that unveils the nature of God's love, we are treading on ground we have never treaded on before. We see God's unconditional love coming to the least likely object of love. May the Lord by the Spirit give to us a fresh unveiling of God's unconditional love as we look into the book of Hosea.

The Effect of the Revelation

Let us consider how the revelation of God's unconditional love affects us. First, it affects our relationship to the Lord. Knowing His love, even understanding what God's unconditional love is, will have a tremendous effect on how we relate to the Lord day by day.

Second, God's unconditional love also affects how I relate to myself. It affects how I feel about myself and how I understand myself in light of my relationship with God. Third, understanding and enjoying this realm of God's unconditional love greatly affects our relationships with each other as brothers and sisters. Fourth, it affects our relationship to humanity — to fallen man, to those who are lost. And fifth, God's unconditional love affects our relationship to His eternal purpose. God's love toward us always has a goal in view, and that goal is absolutely related to His purpose being worked out in this universe. So we can see that this matter of God's unconditional love affects all these areas — my relationship with God, with myself, with the saints, with every human being, and with God's eternal purpose.

At the same time, if we lack the revelation of God's love toward us it will also affect all these areas. We may have known the Lord for 20 or 30 years, and yet not know the extent of God's love toward us. Zephaniah 3:17 says, "The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet [rest – LXX] you in His love, He will rejoice over you with singing." God wants to quiet us and rest us in His unconditional love. Our resting place is the love of God.

The Demonstration of God's Unconditional Love

To apprehend the unconditional love of God, we need to see it demonstrated in the book of Hosea. The

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only way to describe this love is to look into the Word and see God's own utterances about His relationship to His people. We can look at the book of Hosea in two ways: first, look at the condition of the ones that God's love is directed toward; second, look at the nature of the unconditional love of God toward the ones He is loving, especially in light of their condition.

Hosea 1:2-3 says, ² "When the Lord began to speak by Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea: Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry, for the land has committed great harlotry by departing from the Lord. ³ So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son." God uses Hosea's relationship with Gomer to demonstrate His relationship with His people. By telling Hosea, a righteous, godly man who was the Lord's prophet, to take a wife of whoredoms, or harlotry, God is depicting the nature of His love toward us. He tells Hosea to take a woman of harlotry to be his wife. Then He interprets the deeper significance of this act by saying, "for the land has committed great harlotry by departing from the Lord." Thus, God wants us to understand through His Word that just as Hosea took a wife to himself in her repulsive condition, so God takes His people to Himself in their repulsive condition. Hosea's act demonstrates and reveals the nature of God's unconditional love toward us.

The name of the woman Hosea was to take as a wife reveals even more of the nature of God's unconditional love. Gomer is derived from a Hebrew word (*gamar*) that means "cease, come to an end, and fail." In other words, "Go take *failure* to be your wife." Or, "Go take *that which has come to an end* to be your wife." This is the nature of God's love. He loves us when we have no potential, no victory, when we have come to an end — when we are nothing but failure. The Hebrew word Gomer not only means failure, but it also has the meaning of "completion," or "perfection." So, this woman is complete or perfected in her harlotry. She has filled up the measure of harlotry to the uttermost. She has not committed merely one transgression, but a thousand transgressions. She has reached a state of completion and is ironically spoken of as being perfected in harlotry. She is that low, that base. She is perfected in her harlotry because she is fully experienced in sinning and in rebellion. She is fully developed, perfected, and completed in the realm of failure. She is not partially a failure, but she is failure in totality.

Gomer was the daughter of Diblaim, whose name in Hebrew means "dried, rotten, corrupted figs." So Hosea was to marry a failure, a woman perfected in her sins, in harlotry, whose mother's name means corrup-

tion and rottenness. These verses at the very beginning of the book of Hosea depict the nature of God's love toward us.

God tells Hosea to take Gomer, this wife of harlotry, to be his wife. Later in chapter 3, God tells him to love her. First He says "take"; then He says "love" this woman. This demonstrates the Lord's love toward us. He both takes us, and then He lavishes His love on us.

This Old Testament description of Gomer has a New Testament counterpart. Ephesians 2:1-3 says, ¹ "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, ² in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, ³ among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others." These three verses describe us as failures, perfected in sinning, rotten and corrupted, living under the dominion of the devil, living out the drives of the flesh, and being by nature children of wrath, even as the rest of mankind. This is the New Testament description of Gomer.

Then verses 4-5a say, ⁴ "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ^{5a} even when we were dead in trespasses . . ." Even when we were in that situation, God loved us. Here again is God loving people who are failures, perfected in their failure, and who are spoiled and corrupted to the uttermost. And verses 5b-6 show God demonstrating His love: ^{5b} "[He] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶ and raised us up together, and made us sit together in [the heavenlies] in Christ Jesus." This unveils the nature of God's love toward us.

We usually live in the realm and on the level of *our* worthiness and *our* condition. In this realm, whether or not God loves us depends very much upon whether or not *we* feel we are lovable. If we feel we have "measured up" a little bit — that we have had a better week, or have done a few extra good things — then we feel that we can receive the love of God. Many times our perception of God's attitude toward us is based upon our own feelings about ourself. But in Hosea, the Lord presents the example of Gomer, who is the absolute totality of failure, the perfection of harlotry, with a mother whose name means corruption and rottenness. Then He tells Hosea to take her in marriage. This shows that though God's people have departed from Him, they are still the objects of His unconditional love. From this we see that God's love is far beyond our human concept or our idea.

Alluring Love

Hosea chapter 2 continues to describe this woman who symbolizes God's people. Verse 13 says, "... the days of the Baals to which she burned incense. She decked herself with her earrings and jewelry, and went after her lovers. Then she forgot Me, says the Lord." She totally forgot the Lord and went after her lovers. We would think the Lord would then respond with "Therefore, behold, I will strike her in judgment." But it does not say that. He says, "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, will bring her into the wilderness and speak comfort to her" (v. 14). Literally, it means "I will speak to her heart." So here in Hosea, the Lord describes His people who went after other lovers — even other gods, Baals — and completely forgot the Lord. Yet, the nature of God's love toward His people is such that, even in this state, when she has forgotten Him, and when she has gone to idolatry, He will bring her into the wilderness. That is, He will bring her into an environment, into a circumstance that causes her to feel her need. In that kind of situation, He will attract her, allure her, and seek to win her.

This is God's love toward the objects of His love. And the objects of His love are simply those whom He has chosen to love. In Romans 9:13 the Lord says, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." So Jacob was the object of God's love regardless of his condition — regardless of his rebellion, his conniving, his deceiving. Despite all that, the Lord followed him like "the hound of heaven." Wherever Jacob went, the Lord was there alluring him, seeking him, winning him. This is another example of God's love toward His people, and it is absolutely an unconditional kind of love. Likewise, there are no conditions to meet here in the book of Hosea. The woman, symbolizing God's people, has forgotten the Lord. She has gone to idols. Because this is her state, the Lord says that He will bring her to the wilderness and speak to her heart tenderly. He will do things in order to allure and win her.

Covenant Love

Then in Hosea 2:19-20 the Lord says, ¹⁹ "I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice [or judgment], in lovingkindness and mercy; ²⁰ I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord." Here again, though His people are in a rebellious condition, the Lord says, "I will betroth you to Me forever." This definitely tells us that He has plans for her — plans for a future marriage and union with Him. He is going to

betroth; He is going to enter into a contract, a pledge, like a covenant, to love and to win her. So again in chapter 2 we see the nature of God's love. Each time His love is revealed, it is revealed toward ones in a rebellious condition, a fallen condition, a sinful condition — conditions that merit absolutely nothing, that deserve nothing but judgment and hell. But all the while, God keeps coming and revealing Himself in this way.

The Meaning of "Unconditional" Love

Hosea 3:1a says, "Then the Lord said to me, Go again, love a woman who is loved by a lover." This may be translated "loved by a husband." In other words, the husband loves her, indicating Hosea's love for Gomer. Then verse 1 continues, "and is committing adultery." So Hosea took a wife of harlotry, who bore children to him and then continued in that same kind of harlotrous living. This can be likened to our being regenerated and knowing the Lord for a period of time, and then turning away from Him and going back to our old life-style, or manner of life, and committing spiritual adultery with many other things. Let me say to you categorically that God's love to you is still unconditional because you are the object of His love. It is eternal love based upon an eternal choice, and can never be destroyed or eradicated.

So, in a sense, we are the victims of God's love. Praise the Lord! We are the objects of God's love. The Lord tells Hosea, "Go again, love a woman who is loved by a husband and is committing adultery, *just like* the love of the Lord for the children of Israel." These two words, "just like," are the key words that reveal the nature of God's unconditional love. Humanly speaking, that woman did not deserve a thing, but to be cast off. Yet God says to love that woman "*just like* the love of the Lord for the children of Israel."

This is what the love of the Lord is like. This is how God loves you, and how God loves me. There have been times I have awakened in the morning thinking about my spiritual condition, and how I am doing. I have based my relationship with the Lord and His love toward me on my condition. But in these recent mornings, I have been waking up with the book of Hosea in my heart, with the unconditional love of God in my heart. It is absolutely a reality that we can rest in His love (Zeph. 3:17).

At the end of Hosea 3:1, the Lord gives more description of the condition of His people: "who look to other gods and love the raisin cakes of the pagans." This indicates that the children of Israel were fully

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When Paul talked about the church, he never offered his own philosophy or clever ideas. He did not think up or invent the church. Instead, he spoke from the standpoint of revelation. He spoke exclusively what was shown to him by the Spirit. And he confesses that apart from the Spirit, he would have nothing to say about the church. Why?

Because the church is a divine mystery. Paul declares, "This mystery is great, but I speak with regard to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). Notice how he uses the word great. The church is not just a mystery in the Bible, but a *great mystery!*

Therefore, it takes God Himself to reveal what has been hidden in His own heart. And this is precisely what He did. How? Through the apostles. Paul says, "by revelation the mystery was made known to me, as I have written previously in brief, by which, in reading it, you can perceive my understanding in the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in spirit" (Eph. 3:3-5). God gave the revelation of what is called "the mystery of Christ" to the apostles. And He gave this revelation to them for us! (Eph. 3:2). The apostles were the "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1; Eph. 3:2). A steward is someone who handles, manages, and dispenses the goods of another. The apostles received the revelation of the mystery of Christ in order to convey and dispense it to us. In fact, Paul tells us that the purpose of His ministry is to enlighten all to see the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:9). What is the mystery of Christ? It's the church! It is the one Body where both Jews and Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members, and fellow partakers (Eph. 3:6). This is the great mystery that requires revelation from God through the apostles to us. And today we have this great mystery conveyed in the Word of God. The Spirit used the apostles to record the revelation of this wonderful mystery in His holy Word.

Now what is needed? Simply to have the eyes of our heart enlightened to see this apostolic revelation in the Word of God. This is what Paul prayed for in the book of Ephesians. He prayed that God would give the Ephesian believers a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Christ (Eph. 1:16-18). And the full knowledge of Christ includes not only the Head but also the Body. In other words, Paul knew that for the Ephesian believers to fully apprehend who Christ is, they had to realize the unsearchable riches of the Head (Eph. 3:8, 18-19). But they also needed to see the church as the Body of Christ, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:22-23). Without seeing His Body, their knowledge of Christ would be sorely deficient. This is why Paul imparts such a transcendent vision of the church in Ephesians.

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THE CHURCH TO GOD — PART 2

Finally, in the book of Revelation, the first vision John saw was a vision of the churches. In chapter 1, he saw 7 golden lampstands and the Son of Man walking in the midst of the lampstands (Rev. 1:10-20). This vision is then interpreted for us. The lampstands are churches, and the Son of Man is the resurrected, glorified Christ walking in their midst and speak-

ing to them as the Spirit. What does this mean? It means that the church on this earth is not just another human institution. Nor is it even

a religious institution. Rather, the church is a divine, spiritual entity that requires revelation to apprehend. Even the aged apostle John needed revelation to see the church as lampstands. By the natural eye, the church appears to be just a group of Christians who gather to meet. But to the enlightened eye, to the eye that has received Spirit-imparted revelation, the church is much, much more. The church has great spiritual reality.

Therefore, our primary need is to *see* the church. Too often believers attempt to "set up" church before they really see the church. But we must first see the church by revelation. We must see the church as the apostles saw the church. Then based on such a vision, we could practice the church. Now, what revelation can we see about the church from the New Testament? What is the apostolic revelation of the church?

What Is the Church?

Let us briefly enumerate some of the basic terms the Bible uses to define and describe the church. These items will be covered in more detail in the coming articles. But it is helpful to list them in a concise way in order to be impressed with the position and significance of the church.

First, the church is the Body of Christ. This is an awesome fact! When Paul declared this, he was not employing a mere illustration to show the church's relationship to Christ. No. The church is, in fact, the very Body of the risen Christ. He is the Head, and we, the church, are His Body, organically joined to Him. Together, the Head and the Body comprise what the Bible terms "the new man" (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 1:22-23).

Second, the church is the house of God. In other words, the church is the habitation, the dwelling place, of God. The church is not God's hotel. The church is God's home. It is where God lives, moves, and expresses Himself (1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6; 1 Pet. 2:5).

Third, the church is the bride of Christ. Jesus Christ is the bridegroom, and the church is His corporate bride. She is "the wife of the Lamb." Of course, He loves her, and gave Himself up for her. In response, she loves Him, and is awaiting His return (John 3:29-30; Eph. 5:23-32; Rev. 19:7-9).

Fourth, the church is the family of God. In this family, God is our Father and Christ is our Brother, the Firstborn among many brothers. And we are the many sons of God. We are not just servants of God, nor merely the friends of God. We have the wonderful status of being His sons (Gal. 4:4-7; Eph. 1:4-5; 2:19; 1 John 3:1).

Fifth, the church is a lampstand, a city set on a hill. We as the church are surrounded by great spiritual darkness. We are in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. Yet, Christ is the light of the world. And by His indwelling us, we are the children of light. We are the saints in the light. Thus, the church is a lampstand shining forth Christ as light to the dark world around us (Matt. 5:14-16; Phil. 2:15-16; Col. 1:12; Rev. 1:11-16, 20).

Sixth, the church is, simply put, the people of God. She is a people for God's own possession. She consists of all the called-out ones who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. In fact, the original Greek word for church is *ἐκκλησία*, which means "called-out ones," or "assembly." The word implies the assembly of those whom God has called out of the world to be separated unto Himself alone (Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9-10; Rev. 21:3).

How Significant Is the Church?

These are some of the terms the Bible uses to define the church. It is certainly not an exhaustive list. But based on what we have briefly seen, let us return to this question: How significant is the church *to God*? To answer this question, perhaps we need to ask ourselves (on a human level) — how important is your body to you? Or, how important is your bride, your spouse? Or, how important is your home to you? Or, how important is your family? Or, how important is your people, your nation? Are these just minor items or are they major items in your life? The answer is most obvious. These are (again, on a human level) the most major items in our lives. Indeed, it is difficult to itemize anything that exceeds the importance of our body, spouse, home, family, and people.

Yet, to the Lord Jesus, all these major items are collectively concentrated in one glorious entity — the church. The church is not just one or two of these items to Him — but all of them. No wonder He loves the church. No wonder she is the apple of His eye. No wonder she is the good pleasure of His will. To Christ, there is nothing more important in all creation than the church! But today believers, for the most part, do not value or esteem the church the way He does. They do not match Him in His desire to see the church come forth and be built up. Nor do they match the deep burden for the church that was continually in the hearts of the apostles. Paul, Peter, John, and others had a genuine care and love for the church that is not often seen among believers in the present day.

Why? What makes the difference? Is it just happenstance or coincidence? No. It is vision. The apostles had a

Spirit-imparted revelation of the church. They saw its place in God's eternal purpose and economy. They realized how high, how awesome, how glorious is the church. Today our greatest lack regarding the church is vision. We lack the vision the apostles had. And "where there is no vision, the people perish" (Prov. 29:18). That is, where there is no vision of the church, the living reality of the church perishes. May God enlighten the eyes of our heart. May we receive such a spirit of wisdom and revelation to see what the apostles saw. Where there is such a vision, the reality of the church can come forth.

— Kirk Eland

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distracted in idolatry, addicted to idolatry. Ephraim is spoken of in this way. At one point Ephraim is joined to idols, fully addicted to idols. An idol is anything that replaces God and usurps God in our life. It does not have to be a statue of Buddha. It can be an automobile. It can be a bank account. It can be a person. It can be a relationship. It can be watching television. It can be whatever gives us pleasure in our flesh. It may give us pleasure, but it can actually be idolatry, because Colossians 3:5 says, "covetousness which is idolatry." Covetousness refers to having inordinate desires, sinful, pleasurable desires that are directed toward some object. This is idolatry.

Ephraim was joined to idols, and at one point the Lord says, "let him alone" (Hosea 4:17). Then Ephraim came under the allurements and the attraction of the love of God. So at the end of the book of Hosea, after observing the Lord and hearing Him and enjoying His love, the Lord declares that Ephraim shall say, "What have I to do anymore with idols?" (Hosea 14:8). In other words, Ephraim is enthralled with God's love. Once he was addicted to idolatry, but now he is totally captured by God's love. So he just drops the idols. This is yet another picture of the nature of God's unconditional love.

Dependable Love

Now let us look at Hosea 6:1-3: ¹ "Come, and let us return to the Lord; for He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up. ² After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight. ³ Let us know, let us pursue the knowledge of the Lord. His going forth is established as the morning; He will come to us like the rain, like the latter and former rain to the earth." On one hand, God's love takes the form of tearing and striking; on the other hand, His love is His coming to us, binding us up, healing us, and raising us up. And both forms of His love are necessary for us to "live in His sight."

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Verse 3 says that His going forth is established as the morning. That means His love is absolutely dependable. It is as established as the morning. In this universe, you can depend upon tomorrow morning. You can depend upon the fact that there will be another morning. How dependable the morning is! And toward you, in your idolatry, in your failure, in your rottenness, in your corruption, in the filling up of your sins, His love is as dependable to you as the morning. That is God's love. That is unconditional love. It is established as the morning.

You can count on the fact that God loves you, not because your condition merits His love, but rather, because God's love issues out of Himself, unrelated to our condition. Ephesians 1:4 says, "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world," and His choosing us was "according to the good pleasure of His will" (v. 5). Thus, out of His own good pleasure, He chose us; He selected us. It did not make any difference what our condition was. As those selected and chosen, we have become the very objects of God's love; and this love is dependable. It is eternal and everlasting. So, praise the Lord for the nature of God's love.

Gentle Love

Now let us look at another example of God's unconditional love in Hosea 11:1-4. In verse 1, the Lord declares, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son." This verse has a double application: to Israel in their formative years, and to the Lord Jesus in the early years of His life on the earth (Matt. 2:15). In relation to Israel verse 2 says, "As they called them, so they went from them; they sacrificed to the Baals, and burned incense to carved images." In other words, Israel's sin was not just a little mistake. They purposely sacrificed to other gods, and actually burned incense to carved images. The very ones who knew the living God ran after other loves. They were filled with idolatry and addicted to it.

Then verses 3 and 4 say, ³ "I taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by their arms; but they did not know that I healed them. ⁴ I drew them with gentle cords." Gentle cords can be translated "cords of a man." The Lord drew His people with cords of a man, not cords of a beast. They are not the kind of cords that you pull beasts with, but gentle cords. He does not treat us like a beast, but tenderly comes with gentle cords, "with bands of love." Then in verse 4 the Lord continues, "And I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped and fed them." This means God's love is a stooping love. God's love comes down to where we are. And when we are under a yoke, He

removes it. Yet because we have been under a yoke so long, we do not know how to behave without one. We have been in bondage for so long, that when He removes the yoke, we cannot get up by ourselves. So He not only removes the yoke, but He also comes down to where we are and stoops to feed us. Praise the Lord!

This means that He meets you exactly where you are. The nature of His love does not require that you first come up to a certain level. But just as you are, the way you are, God will come down to you and stoop and feed you. Amen. Praise the Lord for this kind of love. This is the gentle nature of God's unconditional love revealed to us in Hosea.

Intrinsic Love

Hosea 11:7 says, "My people are bent on backsliding from Me. Though they call to the Most High, none at all exalt Him." This describes a kind of religious profession that has no heart in it. It is like a person going through the motions of religion, but who in reality is bent on backsliding. This condition is well-described in the lines of a hymn: "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love." Often we come to a point where we feel like "God can't love me anymore. I've passed the point of no return. He might be able to love others, but not me." This is what happened to John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*. For seven years he was under the tyranny of his own thoughts and of the devil; both were telling him that he had committed the unpardonable sin and had gone beyond the love and grace of God. He was tormented for those years. This happens to us in our experience, especially when we have continual failures, when it happens again and again and we seem to be bent on backsliding.

Let us just stop ourselves where we are. Do not analyze yourself, and base how much God loves you on your own feeling. Instead, look at the Word. Listen to the Lord's reaction to those who are prone to wander, who are addicted to backsliding, who have, so to speak, filled up the measure of their sins in whatever area. In Hosea 11:7 we see Israel bent on backsliding. Then the Lord says in verse 8, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim?" In Deuteronomy 29:23 Admah and Zeboiim are grouped together with Sodom and Gomorrah. When God gave up Sodom and Gomorrah and destroyed them, He did the same with Admah and Zeboiim. So here He says, "How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim? My heart churns within Me." This is God.

This shows us that the nature of God's uncondi-

tional love is intrinsic to God Himself. That means it is organically a part of Him. Have you ever had compassion toward someone? You felt mercy toward them. It was in you intrinsically. You loved, you wept, you went out to them. It came right out of you, because it was what was in you. God said, "My heart churns within Me." This shows that God's love toward us is not a doctrine to Him. It is intrinsic to His being. It belongs to His nature. It is the way He reacts, the way He feels. Even with Israel in a backslidden condition He says, "My heart churns within Me; My sympathy [compassion] is stirred. I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim. For I am God, and not man." Praise the Lord, our God feels this way.

Uncompelled Love

In Hosea 14:4-8 the Lord says, ⁴ "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for My anger has turned away from him. ⁵ I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall grow like the lily, and lengthen his roots like Lebanon. ⁶ His branches shall spread; his beauty shall be like an olive tree, and his fragrance like Lebanon. ⁷ Those who dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall be revived like grain, and grow like the vine. Their scent shall be like the wine of Lebanon. ⁸ Ephraim shall say, 'What have I to do anymore with idols?' I have heard and observed him. I am like a green cypress tree; your fruit is found in Me." These verses show us that God's unconditional love is dependable, gentle, and intrinsic. In verse 4 He says, "I will love them freely." The Hebrew word for "freely" means uncompelled. No one has to compel God to love him. Inwardly, voluntarily, freely, without any compelling, He will love us. That is the nature of God's love toward us.

Practical Love

So in this book of Hosea we can see a big unveiling of God's unconditional love. Now practically, how does God's love affect my experience — how I relate to the Lord, to myself, to the brothers and sisters, and to other people? Having a revelation of the nature of the love of God will change our relationships in each of these areas. We are persons with the love of God "poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who was given to us" (Rom. 5:5). This love is demonstrated and manifested in our very being to be enjoyed by us and others. This is the nature of God's love. And our relationship with the Lord is based upon our resting in this love. In John 15:9 the Lord said, "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love."

Just rest in His love; just stay in His love.

The book of Hosea reveals to us God's love in the midst of a dark background, a most despicable kind of condition. God illustrates His love toward Israel by telling Hosea to take a wife of harlotry and then to love her even though she continues in her adultery. This is the nature of God's love. We need to be persons who are under this influence and this allurements. We just need to allow the Lord to draw us with gentle cords, with bands of love, that our hearts may be touched.

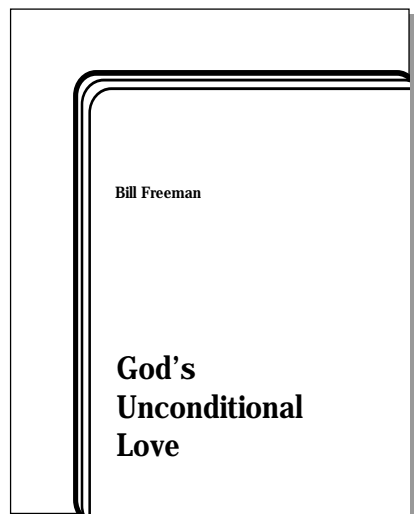
This unconditional love of God was demonstrated to us through Christ's death on the cross. Romans 5:8 says, "*while* we were [yet] sinners, Christ died for us." And Romans 5:6 says, "Christ died for the ungodly." Then in verse 7 Paul gives the illustration that someone might "dare to die" for a good man. But God did not die for a good man. It says, "*while* we were [yet] sinners, Christ died for us." So this is a demonstration of the love of God.

Ephesians 5:25 says that Christ "loved the church and gave Himself [up for her]." He loved the church not because the church at that time was intrinsically beautiful. She had no beauty. We were like the rotten figs that Hosea describes. We were failures, ungodly, sinful, rebellious, addicted to idolatry. "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Eph. 2:4-5). This is God's unconditional love. God's love is in this dimension. So now our hearts simply need to be opened up to this revelation. We should not presume that we really know God's character and love. We may have had a bad childhood, being handled abusively, and so now we project our parents' ways of relating to us onto God. In other words, we think that is the way God is. But we have to realize God is God. He says, "I am God, and not man" (Hosea 11:9). He is not your natural father or mother. We have to have a revelation that this is how God loves us.

Now we just need to come to Him. Just as we are, come to Him. Have you failed? Then, you are a candidate for Him to take you to Himself. Are you rotten? You are just as much a candidate. Do you feel corrupted and spoiled? Maybe your humanity has gotten spoiled. You have sinned yourself out — you feel wasted. Do you realize that God's love and the revelation of that love to you is not based upon any beauty or potential in you? It is just His nature, intrinsically, to love the objects of His love. He cannot help Himself. He cannot help but love us.

We all need to shout, Hallelujah! We are all objects of unconditional love. So let Him bring you to the

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wilderness, attract you, and speak to you. Let Him woo your heart just to love Him. It is not a matter of someone coercing or forcing you to break away from the idols you are joined to. It is a matter of just enjoying the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, from which nothing can separate you. This love will cause you to say, "What have I to do anymore with idols?" Hallelujah.

Oh, may the Lord attract us all as we fellowship and see this love of God that wins our hearts. Let Him come down and meet you where you are. Let Him stoop and feed you. He does not expect you to even lift up your head. He will take away the yoke and He will come down just where you are. If you can only say, "O Lord," if that is all you can get out because that is just where you are, then that is where He loves you. He loves you right *where* you are, just *as* you are. No wonder we sing, "Just

as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me." God's love has been demonstrated. This is the nature of God's love revealed in Hosea; and this love affects our relationship with Him, with ourself, with one another, and with His purpose. This love causes us to shout with Paul to the whole universe that nothing "shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39).

Spend some time before the Lord, fellowshiping with Him in your heart. Just enjoy His intrinsic, covenant love. Let His unconditional love gently allure you in whatever condition you find yourself. Be certain that His love is as dependable as the morning. Let the effects of this love reach into every area of your being and into all your relationships.

This article is the first chapter of the new book, *God's Unconditional Love*, by Bill Freeman.

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