

Hosea 11:1-11

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Preacher: Stuart Cashman

[0 : 0 0] When my daughter is now seven, when she was about two, two and a half, I took her shopping, I've taken her shopping a number of times, but this particular instance, when she was about! two and a half, she was running down the aisle all the way from me, so I called her, Zoe, come here. And of course she thought it was a game. So she ran off a bit further, so I called her again, and she ran a bit further, so I called her again, and she ran round the corner and up the next aisle so I could no longer see her. To her, all I could hear was some wild exuberant giggling as she ran away. Now as a father, how do you think I felt as my little two and a half year old daughter darted away out of my sight, giggling, thinking it was fun? It was all a game to her, wasn't it? But to me, it was serious. She did not know how much danger she was in. She did not know, and the more I called, the more she ran off, thinking it was fun. Now it's often the case today, isn't it, that people think religion, what you believe, religious choice, is just a game, just a fun thing. If you're into religion, that's great. I'm into football, I'm into literature, I'm into science. You're into religion, that's fine. They're all just little games we play to keep ourselves amused, to give us some fun. I think that's how many people think about religious belief, about belief in God, isn't it? And yet, just like Zoe was running away, playing a little game, thinking it was fun, not knowing the danger she was in. We need to beware of the Bible's warnings here.

How we think about God, how we relate to God, is not just a game. It is very, very serious. And we are in more danger than we could imagine if we're running away. And yet that is what Israel was doing in Hosea's day. You can see that there in verse 2. The more they were called, the more they went away. Israel, like my little daughter, was kind of running off, away from God, having fun, doing other things. And so God is speaking through Hosea here to plead with them, to show them that he is a loving father who provides for his people. And showing us that the one true God is a loving father who provides for his people, provides the security we all need. And so we need to come back to him and look to him alone for security. And in these verses, Hosea gives us three front angles, three front pictures to see God's loving care as a father. We see his care in verses 1 to 4. We see the loving father's discipline in verses 5 to 7. And we see the loving father's compassion in verses 8 to 11. So first of all, we get the loving father's care in verses 1 to 4. Get these little portraits, don't we?

The father calling Israel out of Egypt as a child. The father teaching Ephraim to walk. The father caring for, healing Ephraim, Israel. Verse 3. A couple of weeks ago I was visiting a man who I don't know very well, just getting to know him. And on his wall there's lots of pictures of his family. There's a beautiful insight into what the family's like. I've never met any of his children, but the way he speaks about them, he obviously loves them. Look at the photos on the walls of various stages of life. You see here is a father who really cares for his children, and children who really love their father. It's beautiful to see those snapshots. Well here Hosea is saying, look back at the family album. Look at the father's loving care for his people. Look what he's done. When Israel was a child, I loved him.

Out of Egypt I called my son. In Egypt they were in slavery. Yet God comes and adopts them as his people. Brings them out of slavery to be his people, to be his child, to be loved.

And then picture the seed taught Israel to walk. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk. I took them by their arms. You ever seen, especially in the summer, a young family out in the park playing. And the dad down on his knees trying to help this little child to walk, leading them step by step. Usually a child giggling, enjoying it. It's a beautiful picture of love, isn't it? And it's God's love for his people. I know some in this room perhaps have never had a father like that, or never knew your father. Yet you do know the father you wanted to have, don't you? However bad your experience has been, we all know the father we wanted. And here we see that father with Israel. At the end of that verse, they

did not know that I healed them. When my children are ill, they just want to snuggle up on mummy's lap or sometimes daddy's lap. They just want to know they're cared for and loved. And that's the image here of all the hard times the nation had been through. All the hard times God's people had been through. Yet he was the one healing them. He was caring. And yet look how they responded. Verse 2. The more they were called, the more they went away. They kept sacrificing to Baals and burning offerings to idols. See, why did Israel turn away, as God called them? Or perhaps like my daughter, they thought it was a little game, thought it didn't really matter, didn't realise what danger they were in. Or perhaps they sacrificed for the Baals and their idols because they wanted something more solid, more tangible. Not this God they couldn't see, they wanted a little idol they could see. And I know people like that. They say, I can't believe in God, I need more evidence. I want something I can see and feel and touch.

[5 : 27] Well, as someone trained in a science degree, let me say, I believe there is lots and lots of evidence. I won't spend time now trying to persuade you, because that wouldn't work. Your mind is already made up. But if you're honest about wanting to find out the truth, I want to encourage you, invite you, go look for some evidence. If you really have an open mind, go and look, go and think. So maybe they wanted something they could see and touch, or maybe they wanted something they could control. You know, these religions in the ancient Near East at the time, worshipping Baal and worshipping these idols, they're all about essentially bribing this God to do something for you. If I offer my sacrifice to this idol, it will give me fertility in my fields. If I go and worship Baal, he will make me rich. They were gods that the people felt they could control. Now let me ask you, can you have a relationship with someone you control? Can you ever have a truly loving relationship with someone, if all you want to do is control them? Well, of course not. Neither can you have a loving relationship with God, if all you want to do is control him. Yet it seems that was something Israel wanted to do. So I wonder what tempts us to turn away from the living, loving God, the Father? Is it a desire to stay in control? To not have someone else meddle in our lives? Is it a desire for something visible, something we can see and touch, some evidence? Maybe you've investigated or had experience of Christianity as a child, perhaps at school or something like that. And maybe you've dismissed it as being fantasy from those early days of life. No relevance now. I want to encourage you. Here is a loving Father who is calling. Please do not turn away. Please come. Please heed his voice. Please don't do the game my daughter did, running further away doing your own thing, thinking you're not in danger. Because you are in danger. Running away from the God who loves us, leaves us very vulnerable. And we'll see that in a few moments.

Look at what he says, verse 2. The more they were called, the more they went away. God called Israel through the prophets. He'd send the prophets to them to call them back. Prophets like Ozeah. He called them through the circumstances he sent into their lives, through famines, through other powers coming, marching into the territory. These are the ways he called them back to himself. How does God call you and I today? Well, he does it through his word. As you sit here and listen to his word, you open up the Bible. God is speaking to us. He's calling us. He's saying, I'm a loving Father. Come listen to me. Don't run away. But also he calls us through the works of creation around. The beauty of the world we see on a glorious day like this.

A bit like spring coming out. Our neighbour's magnolia tree is starting to blossom. How ridiculous is that at the start of February? Beautiful clear sky. I put my gloves on for my bike. Isn't that cold even? The glories of creation show us something of God. He calls to us through that. But he calls to us through the circumstances he brings into our lives. C.S. Lewis famously said, God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains.

It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. Is God whispering to you in your pleasures? Is he saying something more to life than what you're enjoying here? This is just a taste of what I have for you. Is he speaking to you in your conscience that you know you're running away? Or is it pain he's using to show that actually there are things in life you cannot control? See, he's a loving Father. He calls to his people. He cares for his people. And because he's a loving Father, he has to discipline those he loves. I couldn't let Zoe just run away, could I? There had to be some discipline. She had to learn that running away is wrong because it's dangerous for her. And so God also disciplines his people. So that's the second point. We see in the loving Father's care. Verses 5-7 we see the loving Father's discipline. See, actions have consequences. And so Israel's actions would have consequences.

[9 : 42] And there are two consequences God pulls out. The slavery that they all have to endure. And also stripping away of all their false confidences. So first of all is slavery. Look at verse 5. They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king because they refused to return to me. So God's not going to abandon his program. He's not going to take Israel back to Egypt and leave them there. He's already brought them out of Egypt. But he will let them be ruled over by someone else. You don't want me to be your ruler. He says, okay, you can have the king of Assyria. That is the consequence of rejecting me. Sure enough, 722 BC, Assyria rolled in, destroyed Samaria, and took many people away into captivity. See, Israel tried to be free from the Lord's demands and found they were slaves to something else instead. And that is how life works, isn't it? We think we can be free of God. We end up enslaved to something else. Think about the person who thinks, I'm going to make money myself. I'm going to make my own identity, make my own security. By working hard on this job, I've got my career, I'm going to work at it. And what can so easily happen?

What can so easily happen is they just end up working longer and longer hours to keep going with the demands of their company, to keep going with their career, to keep progressing, to keep up with the lifestyle of having the kids in an independent school and a nice fancy home. They end up enslaved to that way of life. They are not free at all. But it happens in all sorts of other ways. I think of someone I know who always wanted to keep his options open, never wanted to commit to anything. And as a result, he ended up with nothing, really.

Certainly not relationally. So the Lord was going to let them experience slavery as part of the discipline so that they could know they needed him for freedom. But secondly also there's a stripping away of all they trusted in. Look at verse 6. The Lord shall rage, the sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates and devour them because of their councils. Now the bars of the gates, the defences they put in to make the city strong, that is going to be destroyed. You trust that for your security, not me, says the Lord, I will take it. They trusted their own councils and so they will be devoured. Their own ideas, their own speculative thoughts and they will go. Now what would it take for me and for you to realise how much God is our security and it's only in God? I've probably rambled on about this far too many times already in these talks. But a few years ago I was in hospital for six weeks with a brain infection. It was one of the things the Lord used to show me once again how much I need him.

He is my health and my salvation. I don't just need him for eternity, I need him for life now. Sometimes he will let us, he will strip away the things we put our confidence in, be it our health, be it our career, be it our relationship, be it our ability to do something. So we can find it's only with him, only in trusting him are we truly secure. What would it take for you to realise how the loving Father is your only true security?

Maybe you feel that actually this is bleak. All we've got here is God judging his people.

[13 : 21] This sounds terrible. Maybe you think, I'm a bit of a messed up failure myself. I don't lift my own standards, let alone to God's standards. Is there any hope? Can God really love me?

Can God really take me back? Well let's look on. We've seen the Father's care, we've seen the Father's discipline. But finally we see the loving Father's compassion in verses 8 to 11. There's a hymn to the compassion in verse 5 that he'll not send them back to Egypt.

If God had sent Israel back to Egypt then he'd be saying that God's plans have failed. God wasn't going to pursue his plan to bring his blessing to all the nations of the world. That plan had been thwarted by Israel's sin and stubbornness and rebellion. But God will not send them back. Because God's plan is bigger. God's love is bigger. God's desire to bless the world cannot be thwarted by our sin and rebellion. Not yours nor mine. We see that as we look at the Father's compassion. Look at verse 8. How can I give you up, O Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Avmah? How can I treat you like Zeboim? Avmah and Zeboim were two towns next to Sodom and Gomorrah, which the Lord destroyed was fire and sulfur in Genesis 19. God says, you might deserve judgment, but I can't do that to you. I love you too much. My compassion grows tender within me, he says.

My heart recoils within me. My compassion grows warm and tender. Remember a few months ago there was that picture of a little Syrian refugee child who drowned off the coast of Turkey, I think it was. And how that image, that picture just led to a kind of outpouring of compassion and campaigning for this country to take in Syrian refugees and money being given to help them. Even for us hard-hearted humans, suffering can devote compassion, can't it? Well here is the ultimate

loving father who sees what could happen to his people and is moved to tenderness and compassion. And look how he responds, verse 9. I will not execute my burning anger. I will not again destroy Ephraim. Now why is God like that? Why is God like that? I expect many people in our society have this image of God as being kind of stern, horrible headmaster. They expect God to be like this. But look at the reason God says he is compassionate. Look down to verse 9 there. I will not again destroy Ephraim, for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

[16:05] Holy means set apart, different. Now often we think of God as set apart and holy because he is perfect in all his ways. For here the accent falls on another difference between God and us. We naturally seek revenge, don't we? We naturally harbor bitterness. We naturally don't want to forgive. Someone hurts me, hurts you? We are slow to forget, aren't we? But God is not like us. He will not come in anger.

His love is too great. He wants to forgive. But the question is, how can he turn away his burning anger? How can he not punish Israel, punish Ephraim, punish me, punish you for our hard-heartedness, our rebellion, our turning away from him? Well, Hosea doesn't tell us here. But there is a hint.

There is a hint, even back in the way verse 1 of this chapter is used in the New Testament. Out of Egypt I called my son. In Matthew's Gospel, Matthew chapter 2 verse 15, Matthew uses this verse to sum up the early years of the Lord Jesus. How he fled as a refugee to Egypt and had come back to the promised land. Out of Egypt I called my son. Jesus was the true Israel. Jesus was going to complete the story that Israel had failed. Jesus was going to bring God's blessing to the world, as Israel was supposed to have done. He was going to be the faithful son who didn't turn away as the father called him. And he didn't come in anger. He came to bring rescue. John 3, 17. God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

How could God be just and fair and still show mercy? He could do it because his own son, the Lord Jesus took the punishment that Israel deserved. The punishment that I deserve. For so often turning away and being interested in the idols of this world, rather than listening to the voice of God. Jesus took that punishment. So that we can have the mercy of the beloved son. So that we can enjoy the father's care.

[18:22] The father's compassion. The father's discipline without knowing the full extent of the father's wrath. That's the solution. That's how God can be compassionate.

But who is this compassion for? Let's look very briefly at verses 10 and 11. Here the image changes. Instead of the loving father, we now get a powerful image of a roaring lion.

Verse 10. They shall go after the Lord. He shall roar like a lion. And when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt and like doves from the land of Assyria.

And they will return them to their homes, declares the Lord. That's a prophecy that's at first fulfilled as God brought his people back from exile in the east, in Assyria, in the west, in Egypt.

Brought them all back to Israel. It's a prophecy that's being fulfilled today as God roars, as his word goes out across the world. Those who trust in his voice come trembling.

[19:24] Trembling knowing we need his forgiveness and mercy. Trembling knowing he is a holy and righteous God. Yet we come to him trusting in his love. And then we can be home.

I will return into their homes, declares the Lord, the loving father, who offers us a home with him forever if we will trust in his son. To all who hear his voice, who hear the lion's roar and come trembling, knowing our need for mercy and forgiveness.

This is the promise. Our Lord, turn them to their homes, declares the Lord. We can stop running away. We come back to the father's embrace and to the everlasting security that is only found in Jesus Christ.

Let me pray for us. Let me pray for those of you.