

Your New Self

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a four-part series

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from Hosea 11:1-9 (CEB)

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

²The more I called them,
the further they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,
and they burned incense to idols.

³Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them up in my arms,
but they did not know
that I healed them.

⁴I led them
with bands of human kindness,
with cords of love.
I treated them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks;
I bent down to them and fed them.

[In verses 5-7, God expresses his frustration with his people before turning back to his enduring love for them in verse 8.]

⁸How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like
Zeboiim?

My heart winces within me;
my compassion
grows warm and tender.

⁹I won't act on the heat of my anger;
I won't return to destroy
Ephraim;
for I am God and not a human
being,
the holy one in your midst;
I won't come in harsh judgment.

Colossians 3:1-14 (CEB)

Therefore, if you were raised with Christ, look for the things that are above where Christ is sitting at God's right side. ²Think about the things above and not things on earth. ³You died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

⁵So put to death the parts of your life that belong to the earth, such as sexual immorality, moral corruption, lust, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁶The wrath of God is coming upon disobedient people because of these things. ⁷You used to live this way, when you were alive to these things. ⁸But now set aside these things, such as anger, rage, malice, slander, and obscene language. ⁹Don't lie to each other. Take off the old human nature with its practices ¹⁰and put on the new nature, which is renewed in knowledge by conforming to the image of the one who created it. ¹¹In this image there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all things and in all people.

¹²Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. ¹³Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. ¹⁴And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

Are you really ready to be a new you?

This week, the lectionary juxtaposes two scriptures: a passage from Hosea and another from Paul's letter to the Colossians. At first glance (and maybe a second) it is hard to see how one passage might inform the other. But it is, indeed, a beautiful pairing, for it is all one big love story.

Hosea

The opening verses of Hosea certainly don't read like a love story. God tells Hosea that he is to go find an adulterous woman named Gomer, marry her, and be a father to her children. Nothing about affection or courtship -- just go and do it. The only portion of the book that deals with Hosea's personal life is 1:2-10 and 3:1-5. Even here, the Hebrew is ambiguous and scholars are all over the place on how best to translate it. Is

Gomer a prostitute as some translations have it, or is she “merely” promiscuous? Is she promiscuous before she marries Hosea or only after? But if we keep in mind that this is the story of two relationships in parallel, Hosea/Gomer and YHWH/Israelites, then we can get the author’s point.

Hosea is to enter into a marriage covenant with a woman who is not faithful to the covenant, committing adultery with other men. Similarly, God has entered into a covenant with the Israelites and they have been unfaithful to that covenant by committing adultery with foreign gods. The way Hosea feels is the way God feels, but Hosea is to be faithful to Gomer as God is faithful to Israel.

Because of Israel’s faithlessness, there are a lot of passages in the book of Hosea that express God’s anger and determination to leave his people to their own devices. But one that speaks of God’s unending love for the Israelites follows every such passage. That is the point of today’s passage from Hosea 11.

God’s wrath is righteous. The Israelites are faithless. They have committed terrible acts against God, themselves, and others. . . . Yet, God loves them and so, time after time, God returns to them to start anew.

“The wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.”

So often with the Bible, it is possible to be reading along comfortably only to be blindsided by a phrase like the “wrath of God” in Colossians 3:6. I’m pretty sure that for many of us, talk of God’s wrath makes us squirm, but not only because we know how far short we fall of God’s standards. We also wonder, how do we square the wrath of God with our proclamation that God is love?

The mistake we often make is to set God’s love and God’s wrath against one another as if they are mutually exclusive. They are not. Across the Old and the New Testaments, from the prophets to Jesus to Paul, the proclamation of God’s mercy is accompanied by the preaching of God’s wrath.

God’s wrath is not an unbridled passion nor is it capricious. God’s wrath is a holy anger directed at everything that separates God from his loved ones. Simply put, God’s wrath is rightly directed at sin. What sort of god would stand idly by at the murder of a child or treat casually all the evil that we do to one another? Only by grasping the immensity of God’s wrath can we grasp the immensity of God’s mercy.

Sometimes I wonder why we get so troubled by God’s anger at sin. Perhaps it is because we live in a world that so often responds to sin with apathy.

Passages like this one from Hosea prepare us for the coming of Jesus. In him, God will do for his people what they are unwilling to do for themselves. Thus, Paul’s teaching in Colossians 3:12-14, expresses the very nature of God that is depicted in Hosea 11. So, let us turn to Paul’s letter.

New clothes

When I was a boy, “The Emperor’s New Clothes” was one of my favorite Hans Christian Anderson stories. There was, of course, the juvenile fascination with nakedness, but I also think that I was intrigued by the story’s several morals. As you may recall, the Emperor was a vain man whose only ambition was to dress well. His vanity led him to fall for a transparent con and his new clothes turned out to be no clothes at all! In today’s passage from Colossians, Paul urges us to don a new wardrobe that is fitting for those who have been raised to life with Christ. Rather than exposing our nakedness, this wardrobe renews us in the image of our Creator.

Old clothes, new clothes

Paul give us a list of vices and a list of virtues. We are to set aside the one and embrace the other. We are to “put to death” the vices, the sins that separate us from God, and “set our minds on things above.” We are to shed our old lives and embrace our new lives. We are to strip off our old selves and put on our new selves. Off with the old clothes, on with the new. Paul works this metaphor really hard. Why? Perhaps, Paul has in mind the baptism practices of

the early church. Many of the Christians in the first century were converts from paganism and came into the Christian community as adults. Frequently, they would wear old clothes to the baptism and emerge from their immersion to put on a new set of white clothes, signifying the purity of the new life they were entering.¹

When we put on this new life, this “new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (v. 10), the transformation encompasses our whole being. Intellectually, we believe things that we didn’t before, about ourselves, this world, about our purpose in life, and so on. Morally, we gain a different sense of right and wrong, of good and evil. Behaviors, thoughts, even TV shows and movies which once seemed harmless, no longer do. Emotionally, we love differently. We lavish less love upon ourselves and pour out our love upon God and one another. We become spiritually open to God, but also to the spiritual needs of others. We see the image of God in those whom we once ignored, or worse, oppressed.² The old has gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Doin’ what comes naturally?

The renewal, the transformation, which Paul speaks of is real. It is as concrete as Jesus’ own death and resurrection. Putting on this new self is being restored in the image of God, so that we can be the people intends us to be. Andrew Lincoln writes:

The thrust of this passage provides another reminder that for the writer of Colossians the real issue is not learning special techniques to deal with the powerful forces at work for evil in our lives and in our society but is instead learning how to live the Christian life individually and corporately. He holds that there is no need for a diminished view of the self in which the body is deemed inferior and people are put in thrall to hostile powers that have a divisive influence. What is wrong is not an inherent flaw in the material world; it is sin, a flawed relationship with the Creator, that has produced alienation. Being restored in the image of the Creator through Christ, therefore, is what makes possible life as it was intended to be lived.³

But this restoration is only the beginning. We still must learn to walk in the Spirit of Christ, to walk in God’s way, to walk in a manner befitting the new clothes that we wear. Paul knows that we are talking about a process, not merely a moment. It is why he speaks of the new self as *being* renewed. It is in the same sense as our proclamation that God’s kingdom has come *already*, but *not yet* in all its fullness. We have been renewed *and* we are being renewed. We have been saved *and* we are being saved.

Paul wrote to the Galatians in a similar vein, “If [since!] we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25). Even for those who have been “raised with Christ,” getting rid of the old and putting on the new does not come naturally and if we were on our own in this, we would fail. But we are not alone. Rather, God has provided a helper and comforter, the Holy Spirit, who guides us, guards us, and strengthens us so that we may truly become whole, complete, and mature disciples of Christ (Matthew 5:48). The Holy Spirit is God’s presence with us and in us, every step of the way.

Solid food

Paul once told the Corinthians (1 Cor 3:2) that they were not yet ready for “solid food.” Scripture passages like today’s challenge us as well. Paul’s phrases are so rich and packed with meaning as to be virtually inexhaustible. Yet, we sometimes allow ourselves to be intimidated by such passages. But, in truth, this “solid food” will repay a slow and thoughtful reading.

¹from Tom Wright’s, *Paul for Everyone: The prison letters*, published Westminster John Knox Press in the U.S., 2003

²I’ve paraphrased some of this from John Stackhouse’s book, *Humble Apologetics*, Oxford press, 2002.

³Lincoln, A. T. (1994–2004). The Letter to the Colossians. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 11, pp. 644–645). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

The Wrath of God and the Nature of God's Love

You don't have to read much of the Old Testament story to know that the people's idolatry, the worshiping of foreign gods and idols, was a BIG problem during the long decline of Israel and Judah. In the biblical view, this idolatry, along with the people's abandonment of social justice, explains the decline of the Israelite kingdoms and their eventual destruction.

The story of God's response to this covenant betrayal is told through the marriage of Hosea and Gomer in chapter 2. The expected anger, judgment, and punishment await the adulterous Israel (2:1-13). Yet, that is not the end of the story. We are also told that God will win Israel back by showering her with tender affection (2:14-23): "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her . . . On that day, says the Lord, you will call me 'My husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal'¹." The same emotional playing out of betrayal, forgiveness, and restoration is found in chapter 11: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender, I will not execute my fierce anger . . . for I am God and no mortal, the Holy one in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." (11:8-9).

The over-arching Old Testament story is that of covenant betrayal, judgment, and restoration. Nearly every OT prophet comes bearing a word from God about the coming destruction of unfaithful Israel, but also brings a word of hope and restoration. The people will have to bear the consequences of their betrayal but God will one day restore them as his people, putting things right for them and for all of creation. It is this restoration (a.k.a. the coming of the kingdom of God) that the Jews are so anxiously awaiting in Jesus' day. It is the proclamation of God's kingdom, this restoration, that occupied much of Jesus' ministry and was accomplished in his death.

We can see that this is somewhat like a marriage between a man and woman that has been rocked by unfaithfulness. It is hard and hurtful, marked by anger and despair. Yet, the couple makes it through, emerging on the other side with a marriage stronger than before. Is this really possible? With God, all things are possible!

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson writes, "Hosea is the prophet of love, but not love as we imagine or fantasize it. He was a parable of God's love for his people lived out as God revealed and enacted it — a lived parable. It is an astonishing story: a prophet commanded to marry a common whore and have children with her. It is an even more astonishing message: God loves us in just this way—goes after us at our worst, keeps after us until he gets us, and makes lovers of men and women who know nothing of real love. Once we absorb this story and the words that flow from it, we will know God far more accurately. And we will be well on our way to being cured of all the sentimentalized and neurotic distortions of love that incapacitate us from dealing with the God who loves us and loving the neighbors who don't love us."

1. Baal was the chief god in the Canaanite pantheon and a main subject of the Israelites' idol worship.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Does it surprise you that in Hosea 11:8-9, written more than 700 years before Jesus, God forswears his wrath? How do you square this with all the biblical (Old and New Testaments alike) depictions of God's wrath, his righteous anger? What might happen if we all forswore our own wrath?
2. When writing this study, I didn't choose to concentrate on the virtues that Paul enumerates in v. 12-14. In Paul's metaphor, these virtues describe the new clothes that we put on when we place our faith (our trust) in Jesus Christ (in standard Christian vocabulary this is called "justification") and begin our renewal (in standard Christian vocabulary, the process of renewal is called "sanctification"). Are these virtues prized by the "real world" that we live and work in every day? Paul urges us not to lie to one another. Is this "realistic"? Are these *truly* the virtues that we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, try to embrace each day? If not, why not? What holds us back? What do you think Paul means when he writes that loves binds everything together in perfect harmony?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Hosea 1-4 Israel has committed adultery by chasing after other gods, so God instructs Hosea to marry a prostitute. God's redeeming love will be revealed. See esp. 2:14-15</p>	<p>Tuesday, Hosea 5-8 God calls for Israel and Judah to turn back to God before they are overwhelmed by the consequences of their apostasy.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Hosea 9-11 Peterson calls Israel's life, "playing at religion with toy gods."</p>	<p>Thursday, Hosea 12-14 See again in chapter 14, God's promise of a fresh start, blessedness, and prosperity.</p>
<p>Friday, John 3:1-21 Paul talks about putting on our new self in the Colossians passage. Jesus talks to a Pharisee about being born a second time.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

