

See the Father's Long-Suffering Love for His Sons

Hosea 11:1-7 • December 29, 2019 • Christmas 1



Imagine that you worked really hard on the perfect Christmas gift. You put extra care and thought into it. You picked out or created it just to meet the need. Then you put a loving note or card on it and hand it to someone you deeply love. Then you watch as they open it. At first it gives them great joy and excitement. But then later you see that they have tossed your gift into the trash. Instead of thanking you for the gift they completely forgot about it. Instead of reciprocating your love they made you feel rejected and treated your love as worthless. How would God respond if this was the way someone treated his love? Today we are going to see that this is just what happened to the Lord when he showed his love to Israel. How does he respond? We see the answer in our reading from Hosea 11 this morning and we see the Father's long-suffering love for his sons.

How could anyone ever fail to appreciate someone wanting to show them love? Open up the book of Hosea and take a look. It is there that you will see the most painful feeling that one can experience: a loving kindness and faithfulness that is completely rejected. Hosea lived about 750 years before the first Christmas. He was a prophet to the people of Israel, the northern kingdom of the Jews in ancient Palestine. This kingdom, called here Ephraim after one of the northern tribes of Israel, needed a reality check. So, Hosea was called by God to deliver a message centered around their betrayal and rejection. And he presented his message in a dramatic way. As a husband Hosea himself experienced the painful rejection of his faithful love. His wife spurned him. He sought her, brought her out of a poor condition, took her as his bride, enriched her with his life and his possessions, and displayed great care and love. He had not failed to show love to her. But she left him with total rejection. She chased after other men and in the end was found prostituting herself to them in slavery. She didn't care a thing for her husband anymore, and it showed! These skeletons in Hosea's closet are recorded for us because Hosea and his wife were symbolic of the relationship between God and his people. God mentions how he showered Israel with love like a faithful husband, but she was unfaithful to him.

Chapter 11 brings in another picture of love repaid with a shocking betrayal. God loved Israel as a Father loves his son.. His son was a slave, but God called his son, Israel, out of Egypt. The people were slaves in Egypt, but through Moses God displayed his great love and said, "Come out." And with his powerful hand he led his son out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt. Through the waters they passed and were freed from slavery! A new nation was born free! God pictures his actions like that of a caring father for a son. *"I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them."* Parents and others who care for little children, you know what it is like to help a little toddler. When they are learning to walk lovingly grab their hand and lead them to take their first few steps. And when they are older you help them past the difficult parts. This is the love God had and showed to the nation of Israel as he guided them on their way. He lovingly stooped down to lead them day after day. God also says that he bent down to feed young Israel. Once again, if you have ever seen or dealt with a toddler, you know the amount of love this action takes. You love them, so you take that meshed up food and you put it on that tiny spoon. You lean toward the infant and feed them by hand. Sometimes you have to put up with a spitting of the food. Why do fathers and mothers put up with it? Love takes on the struggle, the effort, and does the work.

God loved his son, Israel and he fed Israel. He sent manna from heaven. He spoon-fed them his bread from heaven and made water gush out in the desert for them like a father holding a bottle for his baby. And this toddler nation didn't always respond so well. They at one point spat it out and complained. At another point they hoarded and demanded more. And when they thirsted, they complained in spoiled impatience, "I'm thirsty!" But still, God Most High lowered himself to provide their every need. Not just for a few months of childhood, but for 40 years he fed them this way. He also fought for them and blessed them in their new land for hundreds of years afterward. The people were prosperous in Hosea's time. They were cared for and loved so much by their Father!

But the book of Hosea is about more than God's great display of love for Israel. It is also about Israel rejecting that love. God says, "They did not realize it was I who healed them." Now like a rebellious teenager Israel didn't care for or love the Lord. They burned incense to Baal. They worshiped the false gods of the people around them. In fact, instead of turning away from sin, they turned away from the Lord. They rejected his love and threw it in the trash because they thought they found a better one in Baal, the pagan God with its worship of sex and perversions. It's not that God gave up on them. He called on them and sent prophet after prophet.

Yet he expresses here his frustration with them, *"But the more they were called, the more they went away from me."* Wow! Rather than recalling the love of God shown over and over, they chose to live apart from God's love. They had more than forgotten God's love. They had spurned it! They had hearts which refused his love and deliberately turned away from it!

Ancient Israel's terrible rejection of God's love was rooted in their cold, ungrateful hearts. They did not realize all that their Lord had done for them or treasure his gracious love for them. It was easier for the people to treasure the prosperity God had blessed them with and to love prosperity itself. It was easy to find temporary pleasure for the sinful

heart and to thank Baal for that temporary sexual gratification. The God who had stooped down from heaven for them received far less attention than the honey and wine right under their noses.

We may not be turning to worship the false gods of the land we live in. We may not be turning our TV's to the "god of Baal" channel. But idolatry begins with the heart that turns away from the Lord and toward sin. We have hearts by nature that respond the same way to God's calling us. Many of us were infants and toddlers when he showed his love in our baptism. Through the waters we passed and were freed from slavery! We were made to be his own children through faith. Do we daily recall this great love given to us in our baptism or has it at times disappeared as a distant and unimportant event? And God has led each and every one of us in love by calling us with his Word. He has fed us like a loving Father with the bread of life from heaven. Is that Word something we daily listen to? Or is it sometimes easier to live in the moment, rather than to live constantly recalling God's love? Our sinful flesh would rather complain about God's Word and how it interferes with our lives than live in that Word. A Bible sits on the shelf and God's love calls us to listen. But the sinful flesh only has time for other matters. God reminds us each Christmas how he loves us. But does that mean we love to hear his Word as he calls us Christmas, and the next day, and the next day, and the next day, over and over again to worship him alone? When you are reminded by a Christian friend, spouse, or pastor that you need to listen to God's Word more, do you respond by distancing yourself from them and from your God? It's a terrible truth we inherit from Adam: the more God calls us the more our hearts by nature desire to turn away!

Have we been attentive as we ought to be in recognizing all the love God has shown us, listening to him calling through his Word, and responding accordingly? Sometimes we are quicker to offer incense to the gods of this world than the God who loved us as his children. Our sinful nature would rather play its love song to entertainment, worldly comfort and joys, godless movies and music, rather than to God's rich display of love. Even if you feel you have been grateful to God, have you honored him as much as he deserves for all the love he has shown? What is missing when a measure of love is absent between us and our God? God's love isn't absent from the picture. It's all on our end. By turning to so many other things with our love we sometimes are like the teenager who has forgotten just how much love we were shown and spurn our God's love for lesser things.

Israel had gone too far. Their choice was clear, and their fate was just. They loved sin, not God. "*They refuse(d) to repent.*" Tell a stubborn son or daughter of God of their sin, and that Christian will sometimes refuse to repent. And if they persist that meant something awful! When the day of reckoning comes at last, they might cry out, "Lord, Lord!" But the answer will be, "I don't know you." God's warning is clear to his children. "One day you'll call out and the loving Father you rejected will not be there anymore." Continual rejection of God's love ends in just that: God's love is no longer yours. With a terrible irony God's son, Israel, exchanged the loving Father's hand for the hand of their enemies. They would not guide them with a loving hand but slash them with a sword. They would not feed them by the hand but would destroy and devour them. With a terrible twist of fate those who reject God's loving hand will receive the devil's hand of destruction. They will be left outside and will be dragged down with the devil to the pits of hell. They will call but the *Most High God will not lift them up.*

But here is where God's love far exceeds our own love. It is a love which is purely given in grace. The Most High God still loved his son, Israel and called him back. It is always this way. It was by the grace of God that Israel still bore the title "my son." God in grace chose the nation of Israel to be his own. It was in grace that he brought them out of Egypt. And though this son complained, it was by grace that he led them by the hand. That's the love Hosea came to preach. Recall how Hosea's wife treated him? Hosea took back his wife. He found her and bought her back from her miserable condition. He still forgave and loved her as his wife. This relationship also shows the relationship between God and his people. God remains loving, even when we fail to reciprocate his love. This is why we read that God called Israel, his son, over and over. This is why we read that God didn't abandon or give up Israel his son at the first sign of rejection of his love. ***He is gracious, and his patience is great, long-suffering.*** God has long displayed his love. Despite the rejection of it, he wants all to recall it and have it. He calls us to be his own, to leave slavery, to be his dear children!

The whole world has been shown this love from God. He sent his Son, Jesus, into the world. In love the Most High God took on flesh to become the lowliest of men. Jesus, God's Son, lowered himself so that he needed to be carried by Joseph and Mary to Egypt. In lowliness, Jesus needed Joseph to grab his arm as he learned to walk. He needed his parents to give him food. In a rage Herod wanted to spurn God's gift and kill him. But even then, God's love would not be pulled away. The Son of God remained in the world. He needed Joseph and Mary to carry him from Bethlehem to Egypt and back to Israel. (This action pointed back to his gracious love of God for his son, Israel, in Egypt.) Jesus continued to face rejection. He came to his own, but his own rejected him and killed him by hanging him on a cross! Talk about rejected love! But Jesus did this out of love for the world. He did it for you before you were even born. He is the perfect and only Son of God, our substitute. And because the Son of God lived and died in your place you are called sons and daughters of God.

Yes, one can reject God's love. Yes, one can refuse to repent and can turn away from God. But what does God do when his love is spurned? God still calls his children back. God still has displayed great love for you and all this world. See the Father's long-suffering love for us all! *Can I, will I forget how Love as born, and burned Its way into my heart unasked, unforced, unearned?* (CW 54)