
Why Remember Hosea?

An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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The average Christian probably does not remember much about Hosea. That's "Hosea," not "Isaiah!" (we *do* hear a great deal from "*Isaiah*" in our church services).

If anyone remembers anything about Hosea, it's probably the R-rated image that appears in the first three chapters of that Old Testament book. In fact, within the first three *verses* of that book, we read that the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, so he went and took Gomer, and she conceived and bore him a son."

What? Hosea was commanded to take a prostitute for a wife? Yes, and it actually looks like he paid for her! (see Hosea 3:2) Yes, it must also be said that his clear instruction after that marriage was that she not "play the whore."

Now that I have your attention, let me remind you again that the Bible is actually an R-rated book! It contains gory and unsavory and immoral actions, even from people we now consider heroes. I take the phrase "R-rated" to mean that it takes a true and mature adult to understand and interpret parts of the Bible.

That image of Hosea taking a prostitute in the first three chapters of his book is not the primary reason we should remember him. Rather, we should remember him for his powerful word of the LORD at Hosea 6:6. It goes like this: "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

In that verse, Hosea is summarizing a theme that appears throughout the Hebrew scriptures. Isaiah also said something like this: "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams" (Isaiah 1:11). In the Psalms, God asks "Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving" (Psalm 50:13-14); Psalm 51:16 says to God, "You have no delight in sacrifice, the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit." That principle of God desiring steadfast love, mercy, kindness, and justice "rather than sacrifice" is expounded throughout the Old Testament scriptures.

But perhaps the main reason we Christians ought to remember Hosea is that Jesus remembered him. When Jesus was confronted with the question of why he ate with tax collectors and sinners, he answered the Pharisees in Matthew 9:13, "Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." In other words, he was telling the Pharisees to go do their homework; go study the words of Hosea, whom he was quoting. That's how Jesus remembered Hosea.

Then, one of my favorite passages about Jesus occurs three chapters after Jesus told the Pharisees to go do their homework. At Matthew 12:1 ff., Jesus and his disciples are plucking and eating grain on the Sabbath. That is clearly unlawful, and the Pharisees say so. Jesus, however, explains to them the story of David eating unlawfully; and then Jesus says: "If you had known what this means, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice' you would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matthew 12:7).

Ha! Jesus is saying that if the Pharisees had done what he had told them to do earlier, to go and study those words from Hosea, then they would not have condemned the guiltless!

"I desire mercy and not sacrifice." That is why we should remember Hosea. Jesus took those words and developed their interpretation. He used them to apply to actual laws""good laws!""about uncleanness and keeping the Sabbath! Once again, biblical interpretation benefits from adult maturity. It's not the literal sacrifices, nor, sometimes, the literal laws that God is watching for. God is watching for mercy and steadfast love. For us, in our time, are we "sacrificing" to outmoded customs (however good they once were) instead of offering steadfast love and mercy? Let's remember Hosea by going and learning what Hosea 6:6 means, for us.

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