

Never Gonna Give You Up, Never Gonna Let You Down, Never Gonna Run Around and Desert You.

Hosea 11

Sunday, June 22, 2025

Mark Archibald

Today is the start of a new series: **Hearing God through the Minor Prophets**. For many of us, the 12 books that are the minor prophets are neglected space within our Bibles. We might neglect these books because **the Minor Prophets are poorly named**. “The phrase minor prophets refers not to the contents of these books, but to their length” (*The Map* p. 176). For some reason we seem to take the longer prophetic books, which are called the Major Prophets, more seriously simply because they are longer than the much shorter Minor Prophetic books. The labelling of some books “Major Prophets” and some books as “Minor Prophets” has made us ignore some vital words of Scripture.

Some call the Minor Prophets “The Book of the 12”. Although these 12 books of the Bible have different authors and themes and formats and purposes, they all appeared on the same scroll of the Hebrew Bible. Some scholars and teachers treat the 12 Minor Prophet books as separate books that form a single unit.

If the minor prophet books are part of the Book of the 12, it is helpful to see these 12 books in conversation with one another. Some minor prophet books are all about stern proclamations of judgement. Others end with a high emphasis on God’s mercy. Some books are poetic in nature. Others tell a story. Some books give warnings to avoid certain people groups, while others talk more favorably about these same people groups. Every book is unique, but as the Book of the 12 we get to read a full conversation. Reading the Minor Prophets as “The Book of the 12” gives us a more complete picture of God, of God’s people, and the realities and problems of the day in which these were written.

The Minor Prophets give us a full picture of what God’s justice, mercy and grace look like. We find the Minor Prophets answering the question, What is the nature of the relationship between God and people? What does it mean that God is judge? What does it mean that God delivers and saves?

The Minor Prophets invite us to PARTICIPATE in God’s justice, mercy and grace. There are lots of demands put on the reader of the Minor Prophets. We are encouraged to live righteously and live justly. The Minor Prophets ask, “What is God like?” with the follow up question, “How do we now live?”

In the Old Testament, the prophets are frequently portrayed as a peculiar bunch. There’s often not a lot of info given about them, but some prophets tend to have strong personalities and say audacious things.

This audacious and loud version of the prophets is what Homer patterns himself after in one of my favorite Simpsons episodes ever, titled “Thank God It’s Doomsday.” Homer is convinced that he knows when the end of the world will be. He’s stumbled across movies about the end times, he’s done his own Bible research, and he is CERTAIN in his predictions. He declares his prophecy loudly around town, ringing a massive bell and wearing a sign that says, “The End is Near.”

While doing what he thinks a prophet is supposed to do, Homer gets interviewed by the local news.

When the broadcaster asks Homer what he is doing, Homer looks dead into the camera and yells, “It’s the end of the world! God loves you! He’s going to kill you!”

We know is a total misrepresentation of God’s message of love that Scripture gives, and the message of love that Jesus embodies.

BUT in reality, Homer’s message of “God loves you! He’s gonna kill you,” does not seem that far away from Hosea’s message and tone! In preparation for today I read through and listened to Hosea in single sittings. Yikes! GRIM! This is the great book to read if you like hearing the nation of Israel at that time labelled as a “prostitute”. Or if you like God threatening violence to his wandering people. Sometimes the message of Hosea truly feels like, “God loves you! God’s gonna kill you.”

As you read Hosea, you feel like you’re getting whiplash. **God jarringly alternates between threats of punishment and loving invitations** to return to him.

But all throughout the book of Hosea, God’s love is persistent. So I figure a good title for Hosea, especially Hosea 11, would be **“Never Gonna Give You Up, Never Gonna Let You Down, Never Gonna Run Around and Desert You.”** In the end, no matter what Israel does, and no matter how God feels about Israel, God just wants them back. And regardless of what we do, God just wants us back.

Hosea chapter 11 is a story and a poem that summarizes the relationship that God has with his people. **God is a parent that provided everything.** In verse 1 we read:

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

God, in Hosea’s poem, speaks of God’s interaction with Israel at the defining moment of its history – the escape and deliverance from Egypt. The exodus. The Israelite slavery in Egypt, and the resulting deliverance, become the defining story of who Israel is. This story is foundation of their relationship with God as a people. It becomes the foundation and justification for their laws and for their culture. God’s call of Israel out of Egypt, and his deliverance of them in ways that only God could do, demonstrate the extent and depth of God’s parenting and care.

God’s relationship to his people is as a loving parent. *“I taught Israel to walk – I led them with love.”* Yet despite that great care and great love, **Israel is a child that walked away:**

***But the more they were called,
the more they went away from me***

Israel, in Hosea 11, is a rebellious son. I know family relationships are complicated, and all kinds of dynamics are at play in the relationships we have with our families. But in this specific chapter, Israel was given everything – all the rescue, care and continued provision needed – and rejects all of that for alliances with nations with bad priorities and the worship of other gods.

Maybe as God's people walked away from God, they felt an excitement. Maybe they saw things in other nations that they wanted for themselves. However, **there were consequences for leaving:**

My people are determined to turn from me.

Even though they call me God Most High,

I will by no means exalt them.

They have removed themselves from God's household, therefore they have moved themselves away from God's protection and God's intervention.

In the previous passages to this one, God is far more aggressive in his attempts to win Israel back. He sends out enemies to conquer them. He is active in bringing calamity on them. But in this chapter, the people are reaping the results of their walking away. The son of the story is coming into bad situations because God has released the son to his own devices.

Have you ever been around a friend that was acting reckless and foolish, and they hurt themselves just a little bit? What's your response? "Good!" "That's what you get for being a fool!" Parents, have you ever warned your kids to stop rough housing, only to have them come to you moments later in tears, feeling the consequences of the actions they were warned about? Is there something in you that feels just a little bit smug about your warning coming true?

God in Hosea 11 is fully within rights to feel this way about Israel's demise. Israel had been rescued. Israel was cared for. Israel was warned about the consequences of their actions. But God's resulting response is not to say, "Good! You deserve this!" Instead, **God as a parent is emotionally torn:**

My heart is changed within me;

all my compassion is aroused.

I will not carry out my fierce anger,

nor will I devastate Ephraim again.

The foundation of God's connection to Israel in Hosea 11 is that of relationship. Parent to child. When we think of relationships we have where trust has been broken, what complex feelings do we have about those relationships? When a child walks away despite our best efforts; when a parent did not provide or protect or nurture; when a trusting work relationship has dissolved; when a friend betrays; all of these cause us to have complicated feelings toward people that have broken relationship with us.

In Hosea's portrayal as a parent in Hosea 11, God has complicated feelings about his people. God is furious at Israel's actions! God is heartbroken about Israel's predicament! God is moved by mercy and compassion to forgive. *"How can I give you up, Ephraim?"*

Despite people walking away from God's love and care for them; despite people's rejection of THE God for lesser gods; despite people's behavior that is contrary to what God has taught them; God's own love and covenant mercy are greater than the people's sin.

The thing is: **God just wants you back:**

*They will come from Egypt,
trembling like sparrows,
from Assyria, fluttering like doves.
I will settle them in their homes.*

God promises a second Exodus! Israel had once been delivered from Egypt. And the people had rejected everything about their Deliverer. But God, in God's own love and faithfulness, calls to the people once more and beckons them to return. And God delivers again!

Israel has a timid return. Much like the prodigal son returning to the father in Jesus' parable. And as we recall, the son timidly returns, and the father exuberantly runs to the son, welcoming the son back home. Because God loves you and God just wants you back.

When Rick Astley sings, **"Never Gonna Give You Up, Never Gonna Let You Down, Nevere Gonna Run Around and Desert You"** it sounds shallow and poppy and bubble-gummy and silly. But this is God's commitment for real and for true for those that have been connected with him. *"How can I give you up, Ephraim?"* If you have wandered away; if you have turned away from the most important things God has taught you; if you made other things a bigger priority than God – God just wants you back.

I asked one of our summer staff, Thea, to read Hosea this week and pass along her thoughts. She noted the pattern of God's desired punishment for Israel and God's desire to welcome them home. And within this she noted – the punishment for wandering away never lasts for long. When the people return to God from walking away, God quickly welcomes them back and quickly restores them. God is not holding out on his people until they have cleaned up their act. Once they return, they are fully welcomed home.

God just wants you back. God will do the work of cleaning you up and saving and restoring. You don't earn back trust. You just come. This is as true for us as it is for the Israel of Hosea 11: "God's ultimate purpose is to heal and save his people"

Yes, Hosea in sections can be a depressing read– but clear in the portrayal of God in Hosea is God's desire to love and heal and save. The point of the more difficult passages isn't punishment. The point is that God wants his people back and restored by any means possible.

The warning in Hosea is clear: don't go wandering away from God in the first place. The book concludes:

⁹ **Let those who are wise understand these things.
Let those with discernment listen carefully.
The paths of the Lord are true and right,
and righteous people live by walking in them.
But in those paths sinners stumble and fall. (Hosea 14:9)**

Be faithful. Follow God. Worship God. But no matter what happens, God is never gonna give you up, never gonna let you down, never gonna desert you. God just wants you back.