

THE LOVE PROPHET

Hosea

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As we look at Hosea this evening I will first of all take some time sharing the background of the book. Then when we're through with that I wish to share with you three themes from Hosea's experience, which I think have tremendous application for you and me.

I indicated we would be taking the prophets in the order in which they come in our Bibles. That is in contrast to the chronological order. We should, in a proper chronological order, be taking Amos before Hosea since Amos comes before Hosea. But we'll simply stick with the order it comes in the Scripture. Hosea, interestingly enough, ministered to his country in his nation's bicentennial. His nation was approaching its two-hundredth birthday. It was not going to be a very happy occasion, however, as we will see in Hosea. In fact, some eleven years after his nation's bicentennial, the nation was carried away into captivity. We don't want to make any prophetic words at this point by way of application but a lot of conditions that were in Hosea's day are very evident in our own day as well.

Hosea begins by dating himself: "The word of the LORD that came to Hosea..." The name "Hosea" is the same name as "Joshua" or "Jesus." It's "God saves." "Jehovah saves." "Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel" (Hosea 1:1, NIV). As with all chronological Scriptures, we say, "What's next. Only if we take time on that verse for a moment it reveals some very fascinating things about Hosea's perspective of his ministry and the time setting Hosea has as a prophet. Hosea is a prophet in the north, in the region which is called Israel. In 931 B.C., under Solomon's son Rehoboam, the kingdom split. Jeroboam took the north, which is

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known as Israel. And Rehoboam the south, known as Judah. The north was marked by chaos in terms of the fact that there was no continuing dynasty of kings. One dynasty rose up after another, killing off the previous dynasty. The north had ten tribes. The south had two tribes. Hosea's ministry is in the north. Yet he begins by dating himself, first of all, by the kings of the south. Uzziah reigned from 783 B.C. to 742 B.C., a rather lengthy period. Evidently Hosea's ministry begins toward the latter end of Uzziah's days. Jotham reigned for seven years, from 742 to 735; Ahaz, who was a very bad king of Judah, from 735 to 713; and Hezekiah reigned from 715 to 687. It's obvious that Hosea did not minister during the total years of this period. That's about 116 years. So we pick up the train of thought: He is entering his ministry in the closing days of King Uzziah and the beginning days of King Hezekiah of Judah.

What is striking is he identifies himself with Jeroboam as the king of Israel. This would be the second Jeroboam to have reigned over Israel, Jeroboam II. He reigned from 786–746.

Hosea's ministry probably encompassed the time from about 750 B.C. to around 715 B.C. The dating of Hosea itself should probably be before the fall of Israel in 722 B.C.

It would seem logical, if he were writing from the Northern Kingdom's perspective, the kingdom of Israel, that he should go on and list the kings of Israel who are contemporary to his ministry.

But he lists only the kings of Judah who were contemporary to him and says as far as he's concerned, with Jeroboam II he's through listing the kings, even though Hosea's ministry began at the very close of this Jeroboam's reign.

Perhaps it is because Hosea has a reluctance to even dignify his prophetic word with the names of six kings who would reign within the course of twelve years in his country's history. During the years of the writing of Hosea there are four political assassinations. Dynasty after dynasty comes on the scene. One man reigns even for the short span of a month. He is executed by his

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successor. Other kings pay tribute to Assyria. Finally, there's the king under whose administration the nation itself is carried away into captivity.

By dating himself according to Jeroboam he is saying when he began his ministry here is the political, cultural, social, and religious history of the people in which his ministry began. In fact if you look at the characteristics of Jeroboam's reign, which are given to us in 2 Kings 14:23–27, you get a kind of perspective of what the nation was like during the reigning of Jeroboam.

If we look at all of the kings in the Northern Kingdom's two centuries plus of existence, the best one they ever had, the one that brought them the twin themes every presidential candidate wants to run on—peace and prosperity—is Jeroboam. The stability of his reign is coming to an end when Hosea begins to prophesy. Jeroboam II happened to live in a time when Assyria to the northeast and Egypt to the southwest were preoccupied with internal affairs in their kingdom. They couldn't take their annual marches out to look around and see who they could conquer that year. They had to stay home because there were problems at home. Nations and great empires get this way.

Jeroboam had a positive situation; God prospered him and allowed him to reign during this time when there was relative political stability on both the fronts of his land. During this time, therefore, he was able to have an administration which brought political success and a revived economy. We read in 2 Kings 14:23–27 about the enlargement of his borders. Under Jeroboam II's reign Israel had, as a nation, its greatest frontiers.

It also had its time of greatest economic success. For reference to that we need only turn to the prophet Amos who ministered some ten years before the prophet Hosea. Amos really takes the country to task for their economic prosperity which was insensitive to aggravated social needs,

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open sores of discrimination in the land. Amos goes so far to call the elite feminist society of the capital city “cows of Bashan,” the term he likes to use to mock the finery (Amos 4:1).

In Amos 6:1–8 he notes the economic security of the country, particularly verses 4 and following. “Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory...” Great prosperity. The prophets keep pinching the balloon of confidence. They come with an unwanted message. They say this bubble of prosperity, this bubble of peace is about to be burst. In the midst of your political and economic gains you have neglected what is the most fundamental. That is your relationship with God. Amos talks about this in detail. Hosea notes particularly his theme is the harlotry of Israel. It’s total apostasy and adultery from the God who has called it into being.

In the time when Israel in the north and Judah in the south are being assaulted by tremendous foreign forces, particularly Assyria, in such a tremendous day of tensions, perhaps the four greatest prophets of Israel’s history are raised up. Amos and Hosea in the north, although Amos was a southerner who came north. And Isaiah and Micah in the south. All living pretty much contemporary to one another in the eighth century before Christ.

Hosea was going to be called by God to live an existential event. He was to live in his own experience, through his own marriage, what God was going through with Israel, which was married to God. So that after Hosea dates himself by way of introduction, then he indicates that his call began with his marriage. The Lord, when he first spoke to him, said, ““Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD.’ So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son” (Hosea 1:2–3, NIV). Then the rest of the chapter goes on and tells about the two children that were born.

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Hosea's marriage to Gomer would be the context by which the prophet would come to understand in a very real and personal sense how God felt about his people. We as persons who are committed to the God who speaks justly and requires his people to walk truly are somewhat taken aback by this command of the Lord.

There are those who said the marriage that Hosea was told to go through with this woman Gomer is an allegory. That is, it did not really happen, it's simply a story that the Lord gave to Hosea to help him in more realistic terms like a parable to understand the events that are taking place.

Anybody who takes inspiration of Scripture has problems with that. A real wife was taken and real children are born. Out of Hosea's experience comes his tenderness as a prophet. Hosea in fact has a tender side, which Amos never reflects. It's surprising that even with the prophets of God, God helps them to say things as they are shaped by their experiences. So because of Hosea's terribly distressing marriage, there is a tender side, a compassionate side, a kind of a sweep of God's grace that is so like what we find in the New Testament in regard to the grace of God in respect to His people.

There are two positions that primarily evangelical people have taken in regard to Hosea's marriage. Some have said that we should at this point understand that literal reading of the text is required. And indeed Hosea was called to marry a person who was already involved in harlotry. This view holds the aspect that God's requirements of his prophets were frequently grievous. For example, Isaiah was told to walk around Jerusalem and Judea for three years clad only in a loincloth to symbolize the depth of his prophetic word (Isaiah 20). Jeremiah, in his day in the sixth century, was asked to remain single as a symbol of the disrupted life in captivity, which had fallen upon the people.

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If it is the case that Hosea's call was to marry someone who had already fallen into the kind of moral sin that Gomer had, then it was no romantic idea of a white knight rushing to the rescue of a person who has fallen but wanted to be whole and was only waiting for the white knight to rescue her. Gomer's conduct proves that she was a person who had deep moral, spiritual and psychological problems.

Another possibility is sometimes the prophets would summarize everything in a moment. They would tell the result of the thing at the very moment it began. Like for example when Isaiah is given his call in Isaiah 6 he is told to go tell the people that they would hear but not understand. That they would see but not perceive. What we know from that call to Isaiah was that at the beginning of his ministry God told him what the end result would be. The end result would not be that the people would come to repentance but your ministry will simply be a message, which confirms their disobedience. They will hear the message and not do anything about it. The end result will be that the people will be stronger in disobedience when you get through than they were when you began. So to Isaiah he reveals the end from the beginning. Some have postulated at this point that God in giving the call to Hosea was simply telling him go marry a bride but know that the end result of it will be that the one you marry is going to sink into harlotry, and that from this harlotrous woman you will have three children.

When God married Israel He loved her and He took his bride, young and beautiful, out of Egypt. But no sooner was she out of Egypt than she began to commit spiritual harlotry. It may be that this is the kind of theme that Hosea is working on.

Whatever the case, we know that Hosea would learn his theology and his experience with God not in an ivory tower but in the turmoil of a kitchen with a quarrelsome wife, and in the bedroom where he would be confronted with his wife's unfaithfulness. Just as we learn our greatest

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spiritual lessons not in an ivory tower but in the real circumstances of life, so Hosea was called to feel what God is feeling through the context of his own marital situation.

One other thing. If you want to outline Hosea you'll find it's very difficult. There are probably two major divisions we could say for sure. The first three chapters are very clearly a major division. It's Hosea's own experience with his marriage. Chapters 4–14 is his message to the nation. The reason why it's not easy to outline is that Hosea is writing from an emotional standpoint. Someone has said that Hosea 4–14 is a succession of sobs. That well might be the case. Thus it's not writing simply on the intellectually perceivable area of life.

In chapters 4–14 there appears three divisions. Each division has three recurring themes. The themes of first rebuke, followed by threat or warning, followed by promise or reinstatement. Chapter 4:1–6:3, 6:4–11:11, 11:12–14:9—rebuke, threat or warning, promise.

Having looked at that kind of introduction, seeing Hosea as an eighth century prophet who's speaking from his own experience of his marriage, God is revealing himself to him in that walk. These lessons primarily draw from Hosea 1–3 but are amply illustrated through the last chapters of the book.

I. First, the Lord knows his bride and the rebellion of her children, yet he enters the marriage.

Even as Hosea is told in advance that his wife is going to be or has been an adulteress, so God knows when He calls Israel out of Egypt that the nation which He calls as His companion, as His bride. He knows from the calling what the issue of the deliverance is going to be and He sees in advance that Israel is going to commit spiritual harlotry.

Hosea was being called to do the same thing as God. Well might we from an intellectual standpoint put up an argument against God. It's not reasonable for any person to enter a marriage

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relationship where he knows in advance that the thing is going to go sour and he knows in advance that the whole thing is going to be an endless contest marked with unfaithfulness after unfaithfulness. It's not right to expect that of any person entering into marriage. That makes it all the more dramatic, when it is seen from the context of God's marriage to Israel, that God knows full well in advance what is going to happen to the people whom he is uniting with for the sake of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Hosea picks up on this theme of God's knowing Israel's unfaithfulness. It becomes an open spiritual sore throughout the book. There is swearing, lying, killing, stealing, committing adultery. They break all bounds and murder follows murder. Then Hosea says an incredible thing in 4:3. He realizes that the misbehavior of man ultimately effects the environment. Therefore the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish. If people don't take care of people they sure aren't going to take care of things. Also the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and even the fish of the sea are taken away.

He goes on to indicate the prophets and priests are in error. Again he notes the unfaithfulness of the people. It runs in sobs through the book. In a key passage in chapter 7:8 he uses a metaphor from a baker. A baker is one of the illustrations he uses for the political turmoil of the time in 7:4-8. He says the turmoil is like an oven. He's recounting the political assassinations. Then in verse 8 he says Ephraim (a word for Israel) mixes himself with the peoples. Speaking of the adultery. Ephraim is a cake not turned. Half-baked!

How is the land half-baked? Oriental bread is not like our bread. It's thin. You put it on the oven and you've got to flip it over. He says of his nation that it is a nation half-baked. A cake not turned. In the social life it's a society where one half of the people have too much and the other half don't have enough. Remember his is a theocratic or God centered society. God had called

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Israel to do the kinds of things that are done in the Book of Acts in respect for the church. People taking care of one another. Instead of that, those who have too much are simply living off their gain and sinking the people who don't have enough deeper and deeper into a hole. So in terms of their social system they're a cake not turned. In regard to politics they're a cake not turned.

Everyone is seeking some kind of political advancement and intrigue follows intrigue in the nation. The nation, while it's actively in politics, it is not a nation stable in its political life.

In religion it is also a cake not turned. On the one side it has a very thoroughly developed ceremonial religion. The temple was in existence. They had the temple and all the other gods of the land as well. In terms of ceremony they were well-developed. But in terms of the moral and spiritual fiber of true faith they were undeveloped so they were a nation of a cake not turned.

Hosea goes on to say in 13:2 an incredible word: "Now they sin more and more; they make idols for themselves from their silver, cleverly fashioned images, all of them the work of craftsmen. It is said of these people, 'They offer human sacrifice and kiss the calf-idols'" (NIV). Recall that when the nation of Israel began, and under its ruler Jeroboam I, the first thing he did was set up two golden calves, as in Exodus 32, putting one at the north of his land and one at the south. "He said to the people... 'Here are your gods, O Israel'" (1 Kings 12:28, NIV). That kind of adulterous relationship had gone on for two centuries by the time Hosea is on the scene. He notes the adultery. Instead of true devotion toward God, men kiss calves.

Therefore there is to be judgment upon the nation. God realizes when he married the nation what would come from it. What its progeny would be. Jezreel and Lo-Ruhamah and Lo-Ammi—three words used for the children born to Hosea and his unfaithful wife, Gomer. Each strikingly symbolic. All of them in advance, God knows their character.

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The first child is a boy by the name of Jezreel. What's so important about Jezreel? Look at the history of where the name came from. Remember a man by the name of Naboth. It was his vineyard that Ahab wanted. Jehu was a king of Israel who was raised up by the Lord to overthrow the dynasty of Ahab. After Ahab died, Jezebel reigned for a time using her son as a puppet. Jehu came along and in one day in the valley of Jezreel killed the king of Judah, the king of Israel, and Jezebel. All in Jezreel. It was his great triumph. It was the establishment of the house of Jehu. Well might we hope in that time when Ahab's house was overthrown with all of its wickedness and repugnance toward God, its resistance of the prophet Elijah, well might we expect that a new day would come and a fresh broom would sweep clean. But instead Jehu simply walks in the way of the other kings of Israel. He follows the sins of Jeroboam I. Because he did nothing about the sin of the land, he did not take the mandate that God had given him and use it, the Lord is saying the place for the house of Jehu, which was the center of triumph, is going to be the center of its downfall. And sure enough the fourth king of Jehu's dynasty is killed in Jezreel, the place that had been the victory is going to be the defeat. That's the first son that's born.

The next child that's born is Lo-Ruhamah, a daughter, "Not pity." The third child is Lo-Ammi, "Not my people."

As these children grew up they were expressing in their own personality the fact that God knew what had happened to His people.

A second kind of major thing that is happening in the book of Hosea. Not only does God know in advance how his people are going to turn out and yet he enters the marriage anyway.

II. A second thing that happens: Since the bride will not change her adulterous ways through the agency of her husband's love, the husband's discipline will be given to her.

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In other words, God has married Israel for keeps. He prefers that the harlotry in Israel's heart will be routed out because it will be overwhelmed by the love. But the love, which was true for God and the same is true for Hosea, does not cure the adultery within the wife.

God has several options at this point. He can walk away from his wife. He can visit his wife with total judgment—that's in the hands of God. Or he can stay married to her and hope to redeem her. There is tremendous truth running through the Scriptures in respect to God's dealings with Israel. It's not a contract dependent upon Israel's behavior. God has decided to be wedded to that people forever. Therefore he is not going to walk away and forget about her. She is his wife. One of the prophets will declare "The Lord hates divorce." That comes from a theological context.

God will not divorce his people. Cut them off for a temporary time as Paul says in Romans. But not divorce. Separation yes. Divorce no. God will not put off his people. God will not walk away. God will not obliterate them with total judgment. The only way, therefore, that God has of bringing his people back to himself is to visit them with what we might call discipline or judgment which has a positive goal to it. A redemptive goal. Since his bride has not responded with love, He will seek to use some other strategy to bring the bride to her senses. In a sense here we see the bride is acting like a child. When nice words won't work with a child, you have to use some rather firm measures to get the desired end. The goal is not to coerce the child, but to teach the child that the important thing is to respond of its own volition. This is what the Lord is doing through his discipline.

Look at the love that God has for Israel. Speaking of the bride as a child it really comes out in Hosea 11. God now thinks of Israel not simply as a bride but as His child as well. "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the

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further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images...I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love” (Hosea 11:1–2,4, NIV).

I love the phrase “leading with cords of human kindness (or “compassion”).” It reminds me in the modern kind of sense of pulling a child in a wagon. There’s nothing perhaps more expressive. We can immediately catch the imagery of the father who loves the child. He puts the child in a wagon, attaches a rope to it and pulls it around. Anybody who’s willing to do that for his child, you’ve got to know there’s probably some warmth flowing between a father and the child.

This is how God feels when he looks at Israel. He’s seen Israel grow up. That’s why he’s having such a terrible time letting Israel go. God cries out, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over?” (Hosea 11:8, NIV). Hosea himself married to Gomer has felt that same emotion many times. In spite of what she is, He loves her. How can He give her up? How can He let her go?

What Hosea is trying to show is that when God metes out discipline on Israel in order to win Israel’s love, it is as that old truism, “This hurts me more than you.” It really does, I think, hurt the parent more than the child to spank, not in a fit of anger, but to spank that it might yield some positive results. It hurts, tears me up when I have to discipline either of my children. You can’t fully experience this until you’re a parent. That’s why I think God gives Hosea this experience so that he will know in the context how much it hurt God. It hurt God to discipline Israel.

We must realize that in the discipline Hosea sees coming upon Israel, the nation is going to be carried away into captivity where it will dwell for many days; but God is not disciplining Israel because He gets kicks out of punishment, but because Israel has proven so adulterous to him that the only way God can still salvage the marriage (since Israel won’t respond in love), the only

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way He can still salvage the marriage is if He imposes the discipline upon the nation. Hopefully it will awake in the midst of the discipline and, like the Prodigal Son, come to itself, then come to its partner.

The Lord disciplines His children. Why? Because He loves them.

So a major theme of Hosea is God knows in advance the way his wife is going to turn out.

Secondly, since the bride will not change through the husband's love, the Lord will use discipline that somehow the bride might reciprocate the love.

III. A great and important last theme we'll look at from Hosea is the husband's love will prevail.

Thus Hosea, in regard to his own personal experience, will after the naming of his children switch gears. He's called them "Jezreel," "not pitied" and "not my people." Then he says in 1:10, "Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.' The people of Judah and the people of Israel will be reunited, and they will appoint one leader and will come up out of the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel. Say of your brothers, 'My people'" (Hosea 1:10–2:1, NIV). The person who had been called "Not my people," say to him now, "My people." And to your sister, "She has pity."

Again at the end of chapter 2 the Lord talks about the process it will take to eventuate this change. Thus in 3:1–5 are perhaps the most prophetic elements in the Book of Hosea. The major feature of prophecy is not prediction. It is speaking to the present. Addressing the needs of the moment. But out of that comes predictive statements; 3:1–5 is a predictive statement. It tells us the long disciplinary process the Lord is going to use with the people of Israel. Hosea is saying there is going to be what might be called a long period of time in which Israel is divested of its

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harlotry but neither does it have a relationship with its husband during that period of time. It is cut off from either a relationship with its husband or a relationship with its paramour. During those days of cutting off there is in effect what might be called an age of discipline, the end product of which in the later days is the people coming in whole heart to the Lord.

Look at Hosea and you begin to understand the significance of the apostles' question to Jesus in Acts 1:6, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom?" There's that kind of promise God has made within the reaches of time that Israel indeed is His people never to be cast off. Paul in Romans does a fascinating thing with the book of Hosea. Two things to note as we kind of look at a New Testament interpretation of Hosea.

The first thing Paul does is say what Hosea named his children, "Not my people" and "not pity" he was speaking in reference to Jews. But now, because of that period of time Israel has refused the gospel, the Lord has turned and He's calling Gentiles. He's saying to Gentiles who were formerly not His people and not pitied, He's saying now, Romans 9:25–26 as he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call "my people" and her who was not beloved I will call "beloved." In the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," they shall be called 'sons of the living God.'" This Paul is saying is a promise that now embraces the Gentiles—you and me, which is a way of us entering the door of hope in the Book of Hosea and saying the kind of love that God has for his ancient people is no less a love which He has for us. And all the more real because we've seen the living demonstration in Jesus Christ our Lord. You have been won by love. That's why Hosea is so much an Old Testament expression of the heart of Jesus. He's a prophet who understands the depth of God's love for his people.

Hosea's message, particularly it's predictive element in 3:1–5, is that which embraces the millenniums of time to wrap up God's purpose for His people whom He loved as His bride when

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he called his people out of Egypt. And whom He will love in completeness again when the period of disciplines is over and the bride cured of its harlotries returns in love.

The humility of God is incredible! In this prospect of Israel coming back to God the Lord says in chapter 2:7, “She will chase after her lovers but not catch them; she will look for them but not find them. Then she will say, ‘I will go back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off than now’” (NIV). I ask any of you if you had a marriage partner who acted like this, said, “I’m leaving this marriage and I’m going to go see who else is interested in me.” Then finally they came back one day much later and said, “I’ve gone and nobody else would have me. Since nobody else will have me I’m coming back to you as a last resort because you’re better than nothing.” What kind of response do you think you would make to that kind of impassioned appeal of love?

The humility of God in his love is absolutely unearthly. It’s heavenly. He is saying in effect, “I will take your commitment on whatever grounds I can get it. If need be I’ll receive you on those grounds.”

If you’ve ever doubted if God would accept you, if God would love you, if God would love you continually, if God has a purpose to gather you to his people, if you’ve ever wondered if God would complete his purpose in you, read the Book of Hosea and understand something about the depth of God’s love affair with his people. He loves you and he loves me.

Closing Prayer

How great is Your love for us as Your people. We might pray, Lord Jesus, in this moment that all of us would know in our experience the deep nature of Your love for us, that not a one of us would go out of this room this evening wondering if we are loved, or wondering if we are accepted. We are loved in you. What therefore incentive remains for us to respond and return in

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some fashion the love which you have exhibited towards us. How discourteous, how hurtful it would be to you and us if we should walk away from your love. Loving imitations. Loving things which are not of you. Loving other paramours. Having relationships, which are false to the relationship with you. How much you want us to rise in the purity of our expression of our love for you. To enjoy the lasting and permanent relationship you have called us to in yourself. We are humbled by your love. We praise you for your steadfast love for your people. Your ancient people of Israel and your Church. You have purposed at the conclusion of time to gather all things to yourself and to have a people that would praise you and honor you and love you and adore you. We bless your name in this evening hour and give thanks. Amen.