

“A Tale of Names”

Reading: Psalm 136; Hosea 1:1-11

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

The story of Hosea and his family begins a couple of generations earlier. It begins with political intrigue, with religious battles, and with bloodshed. There was a general named Jehu, the great-grandfather of Jeroboam II who was king when Hosea lived. Jehu led the armies of the northern kingdom of Israel until he found himself suddenly and unexpectedly anointed king by a prophet of God. God had chosen Jehu to bring judgment on the ruling family of Israel for their idolatry and injustice, and Jehu was zealous in his mission. He massacred the entire royal family in the Jezreel Valley, shooting an arrow into the back of the wounded king as he fled, murdering the king of neighboring Judah for good measure, and having the heads of the seventy princes of the royal family piled up for all to see and take warning. Jehu was acting as God’s agent of judgment at first, and he was God’s choice for king, but he took things too far, and in spite of God giving him the opportunity, Jehu didn’t remain faithful to God.

I’m skipping over a lot of names to keep from getting confusing, even though those names are important. Names like Jehoram the murdered king, and Ahab and Jezebel, his parents, names that are synonymous with apostasy and opposition to God, the classic enemies of the great prophet Elijah. Each of those names, and many others in the periphery, are their own story. Each name is overflowing with meaning: the meaning that comes from being created by God, and the meaning that comes from living a life either in response to God’s action or rejection of it. All of those names feed into the story we’re telling today, a story of five other names.

The names that we have and the names that we give are, as I’m sure you know, very important. Your name is yourself, with all of your history, all of your dreams, all of your mistakes and triumphs and flaws and virtues, all collapsed into a word that means *you*. I remember as a child going on vacation with my family, stopping at some tourist trap along the way, inspecting those rotating racks of souvenir keychains with names on them to see whether they had one with *my* name. They usually didn’t. I never wanted one for my own that I can remember, but I always wanted to see if my name was worth including on that rack. Your name is important to you, whether you love it and have embraced it, or whether you hate it and prefer a nickname instead. You have the name given to you by your parents, perhaps nicknames given to you by your closest friends or your loved ones, maybe you’ve taken on the name of a spouse or an adoptive parent. All of them are shorthand for *you* and your life.

Our story begins with Hosea, a name pregnant with meaning and history. It was a pretty common name at the time, and as was true of many Hebrew names, the name itself was a statement about God. “Hosea” probably means something like “the Lord saves.” A variation of the name would be Joshua, or even Jesus, both of which mean the same thing and are themselves examples of God’s salvation. And so Hosea the prophet carried in his very name a reminder that there is such a thing as salvation, there is hope, and the Lord is the source of that hope. That name is a needed reminder considering the times in which he lived. The northern kingdom was playing dangerous games with the much larger and more powerful empires around them, trying to jockey for power so they could have enough strength to rebel and avoid paying expensive tributes. But their plans would backfire, leading to the decline and destruction of their kingdom, and ultimately to the exile and dispersion of their

people. Hosea speaks messages of warning about all of this — some might even call them messages of gloom and doom —but before we get to the darkness we hear the name, the promise, that the Lord saves: “the Lord began to speak through Hosea.”

God’s message to Hosea brings us to the second name in our story: Gomer, his wife. The Lord commands Hosea to “marry a promiscuous woman,” and more than that, he’s commanded to “have children with her.” Hosea and Gomer are to have a genuine marriage, not just one for show. Scholars have put forward a variety of ways of interpreting exactly what Gomer was guilty of, but however you want to read it, Hosea is called to marry her and love her knowing full well that she will not be faithful to him, and all the neighbors probably know it, too. We don’t know what Gomer’s name means. It may be too old or too foreign; maybe even Hosea’s audience wouldn’t have known what it meant. She’s said to be the “daughter of Diblaim,” but whether Diblaim is a person’s name or a town’s name or a description of some sort isn’t clear, either. Later on in Hosea’s story, the Lord tells him to “show your love to your wife again,” but she has fallen so far into disgrace that Hosea has to purchase her out of slavery. Gomer isn’t named this time, though, so people have wondered whether Hosea had a second wife, or whether this is indeed Gomer. What does her name mean, even when it’s mentioned? She as a person has been reduced to a role, made nothing more than her sin. Her identity has become merely what she has done, and done wrong. But she is still worthy of being loved, and she is literally redeemed from slavery because she is loved.

Have you ever looked up the meaning of your name? It’s easy these days to find websites that list names and their meanings; you can even look up how popular a name has been in any given year. We went through all of that recently, of course, in coming up with a name for Junia. Junia is a Roman name meaning “youthful,” which is nice enough, and it sounds pretty, and I tried to think of whether it could either rhyme with or be shortened into something nasty. But we didn’t name her Junia just because it’s pretty, or just because it means “youthful.” It’s also the name of one of the earliest leaders in the church, “commended among the apostles,” according to Paul in Romans 16:7. She may have been an apostle herself, and some have argued that she was one of the female disciples of Jesus Himself, and one of the women at the foot of the cross. But through the ages of the church some people assumed that there simply could not have been a female apostle, and so the name was wrongly changed to Junias — a male name that doesn’t exist. Junia the apostle was stripped of her existence because of sexism. All of that story goes into the name of my daughter, in the hope that she might imitate the quality of Junia, who followed Jesus so faithfully, who surely faced opposition to her role. Hopefully our Junia will learn this story, and learn that though there will be people who will try to reduce your identity, your very existence, to something that is more comfortable for them, the truth is that God gives you a greater identity that cannot be reduced by any human.

Gomer’s name may be obscure and lost, and her faithlessness may be shocking, but her identity as God’s beloved is secure. Her relationship with Hosea becomes a prophetic metaphor, a sermon lived for all to see, proclaiming that God’s love is greater than the wandering lust of His people. His faithfulness is stronger than our faithlessness. Hosea and Gomer, a name that preaches hope and a name that gets lost in the mire of sin, then give birth to three children whose names each tell even more stories for the future of God’s people and God’s love for them.

They first have a son, and God tells Hosea to name him Jezreel. That’s not a terrible name, since the Jezreel Valley has been known as a place of fertile growth since ancient times, and Jezreel

means “God sows” or “God plants.” Nothing too threatening there. But then God tells Hosea *why* to name his son Jezreel: “because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel. In that day I will break Israel’s bow in the Valley of Jezreel.” Remember those names from a few generations back, Jehu and Jehoram and so on. God had not forgotten the excess of blood spilled, nor had He forgotten the faithlessness of Jehu and his dynasty after that. Jezreel spelled in Hebrew is similar to Israel, and may be a pun: Israel will suffer at Jezreel because of what Israel has done at Jezreel.

Hosea and Gomer then have a daughter, and her name is worse: Lo-Ruhamah, which means “not loved” or “no compassion.” It’s hard to think of a child growing up with a name like that. But as little “Not Loved” toddles around the village where they live, she is a walking sermon on the fact that God had made a covenant with His people, and they had not been faithful to it, but God’s compassion on them had lasted longer than anyone could have expected of Him. Any other god or human lord would have long ago brought down retribution on their heads. But then right after saying “I will not have compassion,” God says, “But I *will* have compassion.” There is still hope and love and salvation, though not always in the way we expect.

And then comes another son, “Lo-Ammi,” which means “Not My People.” Again, surely a hard name for a child to live with. The reason for little Lo-Ammi’s name is that “you are not my people, and I am not your God,” which is a reversal of the promises of the past: the whole point of the covenant, we are told again and again, is that they would be God’s people and He would be their God. And even the way He says it drives the point home. In Hebrew, “I am not your God” echoes the name God gave to Moses back at the start: God revealed Himself as “I Am” to Moses, and now He is saying through Hosea “I am not.”

And yet. “Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore.” These children’s names are indictments and warnings, not clearly messages of love. But even so, their names reflect God’s superabundant love that goes beyond faithfulness and into mercy. There is promise of reversal. Jezreel might call back a place of rebellion and foretell a place of judgment, but Jezreel also means “God plants,” and in the next chapter God comes back to Jezreel to say that “I will plant her for myself in the land.” There may be an uprooting now, but there will be a replanting later. He also says “I will show my love to the one I called ‘Not my loved one, Lo-Ruhamah.’ I will say to those called ‘Lo-Ammi, Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’; and they will say, ‘You are my God.’”

And beyond that, the very presence of those children shows that God has spoken. The fact that God speaks to His people when they have so often ignored Him shows that He loves them. He does not simply crush them in His anger and then leave them to wonder what happened. When God punishes, it is not wild, uncontrolled, vindictive, arbitrary, or spiteful. It is directed, purposeful, and limited. And not all evil that happens is a punishment from God, but God is still in control. Such evil does not have the final word, and God is still able to use it to bring growth, maturity, and unexpected blessing. Even at their worst, God’s people have not fallen so far that God does not bother to at least give them a message of warning and the offer of hope. God has judged them, but He has still spoken to them. Our God is one who goes far beyond what is required, who is slow to anger and quick to forgive, whose mercies are new every morning, who blesses and blesses and blesses again.

What about you? What names do you bear? What names have been given to you by others, or what roles have you taken on yourself? What is there in your identity that would tempt you to think God has finished with you, that you're too small or too slow or too sinful or too unimportant or too far gone for God to do anything more in your life? Do not dare to think God is done with you. His faithfulness is far more abundant than you could expect.



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