

“The Tenderness of God”

Reading: Psalm 113; Hosea 11:1-11; Isaiah 40:18-31

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Everyone knows that the God of the Old Testament is totally different than the God of the New Testament. Even if you know very little about the Bible, surely you know that in the Old Testament, God is angry and capricious and unpredictable and bloodthirsty and violent. He’s all about smiting people and plaguing people in the Old Testament. But then if you turn the page to the New Testament, you see Jesus suddenly preaching that God is love, and He calls us to love our neighbors and forgive one another, and God is nice and cuddly and friendly. It’s as though having a Son mellows God out, maybe, or maybe God the Father is the angry God and God the Son is the nice God. Maybe we picture Jesus constantly calming His Father down. Maybe we think of the Old Testament God hating sin so much that He just can’t stand it, and the New Testament God just loves everyone and wants us all to get along.

In fact that was one of the earliest controversies in the church after the apostolic age. There was a church leader in the second century named Marcion who is known for two things: he developed one of the earliest lists of what New Testament books should be included in Scripture, and he taught that the God of the Old Testament was a merciless, imperfect, almost Satanic figure, a tribal God of the Hebrews who was wrathful and limited, and was distinct from the all-loving, perfect, true God of the New Testament. Marcion was hardly the last to make that distinction; lots of other teachers in antiquity and even today say the same basic thing.

It’s very understandable. God gets upset at the Israelites and He threatens to kill Moses, or He commands His people to go to Canaan and kill all the people living there, even including women and children and even their animals, or He sends prophets to proclaim that God is fed up with the sin of the people and He’s sending plagues or enemy nations against them to teach them a lesson. God in the Old Testament is always demanding blood sacrifices to satisfy His wrath. Turn the page to the New Testament and you see something totally different: Jesus tells us not to judge one another, and He spends His time saying poetic things about the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, and He says it all comes down to loving God and loving one another. The contrast is obvious.

Except that then we come across passages like this one in Hosea 11. Remember that the book of Hosea, as we learned last week, is best known for being the one where God commands the prophet Hosea to marry, love, and have children with a woman named Gomer whom he knows has not been and will not be faithful to him. Hosea and Gomer and their children’s entire lives are walking, talking sermons about how God has faithfully, relentlessly loved His people, but they have faithlessly, persistently shown their love to other gods and kings instead. Hosea’s story is one of those books that show beyond any doubt that the God we see in the Old Testament is hardly a bloodthirsty tyrant. No, He’s a jilted lover, or an abandoned Father, or a betrayed king. It’s a tragic tale of love and loss, but God persists in loving His faithless people anyway. And chapter 11 is yet another part of the story blasting to pieces any theory that God is just angry and petulant in the Old Testament.

Instead, we see the tenderness of God on display. You can definitely find lots of passages in Hosea that talk about how God is going to send punishment on Israel, but in chapter 11 we come upon this wonderful moment when God’s tender love for His people gets the better of Him. He

describes Himself in terms of being the Father of His people: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” It’s an image so tender that it later gets applied to Jesus Himself, when the parents of Jesus are forced to take Him to Egypt to flee the wrath of King Herod. God describes Himself as teaching His child to walk, carrying him, feeding him, and holding the child to His cheek. This is not a wrathful, petty god; this is a tender Father.

But then, yes, we get to some scary stuff. “Will they not return to Egypt?” God asks, because their sin is going to lead them back into slavery, and they have rejected the tender leading of their Father. “A sword will flash in their cities,” which is clearly a violent image, and gets us back to that bloodthirsty God. But what’s the point of the sword? To “devour their false prophets,” to put an end to the people who are lying to the nation and giving them counterfeit messages from God for their own personal gain. Like we saw last week: when God sends punishment, it’s directed, limited, and purposeful; it’s not wild, uncontrolled, and indiscriminate. God makes it clear that He “will by no means exalt” His people because they flatter Him with their words while betraying Him with their actions. There are consequences to repeated betrayal, even in the tenderest relationship.

And yet you can hear God’s pain at this situation. “How can I give you up, Ephraim,” using one of the poetic names for Israel. “How can I hand you over?” God wonders whether He can treat them like Admah and Zeboyim, two of the cities near Sodom and Gomorrah, which were overthrown in ancient times because of their flagrant rejection of God’s ways. God has a special relationship with Israel; He can’t just treat them like any other people. “My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger.” It’s as though God changes His mind, as though He has talked Himself out of doing what He had to do.

We might have a hard time with that, because we have it drilled into our theology that God knows absolutely everything, and if God knows absolutely everything, then how could He ever change His mind? How could He be surprised by anything, or convinced by anything, or argued into holding a different position, or talked out of anything? He already knows everything, so there’s nothing new to tell Him. The omniscience of God is one of those key theological concepts that we put a lot of stock in: God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-present. And yet there are a number of times in the Bible where God is portrayed as changing His mind, or deliberating about a decision, or inviting one of His people convince Him. Maybe it’s just how the story is told for dramatic effect, but the point is that it shows God’s passion. If there’s any reason He would change His mind, it’s out of tenderness for His people. In fact, in this verse, God appears to be changing His mind specifically *because* “I am God, and not a man — the Holy One among you.” His holy presence is here seen not through fire or power or violence or keeping His distance behind some barrier, it’s seen through His tender love.

We really can’t hit this point hard enough, because it’s just that important to understanding who God is. This is not some rare example in the Old Testament when God isn’t cranky or some exception that proves the rule. The entire Bible, from the first page to the last, shouts it from the rooftops and hides it in every nook and cranny that God is a God of love. We read part of Isaiah 40, another example, and the chapter begins by saying, “Comfort, comfort my people...speak *tenderly* to Jerusalem.” It’s a passage that we often read near the Christmas season because parts of it apply to the coming of the Messiah, but the whole chapter is saturated with the beautiful character of God. Isaiah sings of the mighty power of God that is put on display: God raises up and brings down entire nations, and He sits enthroned above all of creation, and He calls on the stars to shine their light. And

yet as high as He is above us, as great and mighty and incomprehensible and impossible to fathom, “He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak...Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

He is a God to whom there is no comparison. “With whom, then, will you compare God?” Isaiah asks. And his question has a bit of a mocking tone to it, because to whom could you *possibly* compare such a God? In those days the people were tempted by a whole soap opera-full of gods that they would then create idols for, and Isaiah reminds them that those idols are merely human trinkets: “a metalworker casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold.” If you can’t afford gold and silver, you do your best to find some decent wood so your god won’t rot, and you look for a skilled worker so your god doesn’t topple over. That hardly seems to me like a god worth worshipping, especially when compared with the God Isaiah describes.

And yet that’s exactly the temptation people faced in ages past, and it’s still the temptation we face today if we’re not careful. The idolatry of the past presented you with some extremes in your worship: on the one hand, you had these physical idols and sacred places that were made by human hands, and while they weren’t generally thought to contain the god or goddess, those idols were the image of the god or goddess and the god could reside in it. So on the one hand you have this image made of wood or stone or metal, and you spend your time worshipping something that can’t see you, hear you, or help you in any way. There is not and cannot be any tenderness on the part of that idol toward you or anyone else. They cannot be moved by your pleas, your pain, or your sacrifices. Think of the pictures you’ve seen of the statues of Greek gods and goddesses, carved in marble or cast in bronze. In antiquity many of them might actually have been painted to look more lifelike, but even so, they’re cold, unfeeling, and unseeing. They’re just cleverly-crafted rocks.

On the other hand, when you read the stories of those gods in Greek mythology or the myths of other peoples, you find that though they’re unmovable, they’re still subject to all kinds of human faults and flaws, except magnified. Those gods are passionate, but not tender. They’re lustful, but not tender. They’re wrathful, but not tender. Their stories are full of emotion, but their motivation is rarely virtuous. They’re often detached from humanity, and they see humans as a bother or even a curse or a resource to be used, abused, and discarded at their whim.

And at the same time, while those gods claim to be above the world, so often they are inescapably caught up in the actions of the world. The gods will fight a battle, and that battle causes turmoil in the seas. Or a god will die and come back to life, and the earth will move into winter and back into spring. It’s like when a child asks why it thunders, and we answer that God is moving His furniture, or a child asks why it’s raining, and we say that angels are crying. Those ancient gods couldn’t help affecting the world on accident; they didn’t have a plan or any real control. In half those old stories, the gods ended up creating the entire world without really meaning to.

But who is like our God? He’s not subject to human passions and emotions; the story of our God is not a soap opera like so many of the stories of other gods. But He’s also not cold, distant, and unfeeling; He has a tender love for His people — for *you*. And He is enthroned over creation: He rules it; He’s not bound to it, and He’s in control over it, and He has a plan. He’s directly involved in our world and in our lives because He cares about them. Like any good parent, His tenderness does not

mean God is weak, as though love is just a fluffy, wishy-washy romantic feeling that gets googly-eyed and then gets out of the way. No, His tender love for His people means that He is powerfully involved in their lives.

We don't worship idols of marble or bronze today, but the question still stands: who is like our God? We don't have the honesty to admit that we're worshipping anything these days; we would rather pretend that we've kept our hearts to ourselves and we are masters of our own fate. No silly superstitions for us modern, enlightened people. But even so, we still find not-gods to worship. We still find those objects of devotion that are distant enough to be unobtrusive, but close enough to be pliable and cooperative for our own desires. Money makes so few demands as a god, but it's so useful for our ends. Pleasure demands no relationship or commitment, it seems, but it's always there for us when we need it. Entertainment can be had for such a low price, and it's ready at the flip of a switch. Any number of other gods available for us, but they can't compare to the true God. He has a tender love *for you*, the love of a good parent, the compassion and generosity of a good Lord for His people. Have you lived in the tenderness of God?



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