

Aim of lesson

To explore the foundation of love in the plan of salvation and the revelation of the nature of God.

Bible background

Hosea

Preparation required

Read through the notes and those in the students' book to familiarise yourself with the theme. Decide how you are going to tell the story of Hosea and how much you will expect them to read to ensure they appreciate the beauty of the book without getting bogged down by too much reading.

Suggested outline of lesson

Besides these very helpful descriptive references about God, he has also ensured that we can understand a lot more about him and his purpose. He has done this by demonstrating various aspects of his character in many ways in our Bibles.

Many people present the God of the Old Testament as a stern, vengeful autocrat, with a different God in the New - a loving, forgiving Father. When we come to look at what the Bible really says, we find the fatherhood of God and his mercy revealed as much in the Old Testament as in the New.

A Father to Israel

God reveals himself in particular, though not exclusively, as a father to Israel:

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| Exodus 4:22 | Thus saith the Lord, Israel is my son. |
| Psalms 68:5 | A father to the fatherless ... is God. |
| Psalms 89:26 | Thou art my father, my God. |
| Psalms 89:27 | I will make him my firstborn. |
| Jeremiah 3:19 | Thou shalt call me, My father. The NIV 'I thought you would call me "Father"' is a poignant translation. |
| Jeremiah 31:9 | I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. |
| Malachi 1:6 | If then I be a father, where is mine honour? |

The Old Testament presents God first as the all powerful creator, lawgiver and judge, and this may be seen as conflicting with his role as father. A father is expected to

be able to provide, to teach, to impose discipline, but also to be ready to love, to help out of trouble, to make allowances and to forgive.

The stern judgement of God is seen at the beginning of the Bible with the account of the fall of man. God gave his command concerning the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and the sentence for disobedience was to be death; Adam and Eve chose to believe the serpent rather than God, and so they received the sentence of death. But in the same passage, the mercy of God is seen in his promise of the seed who would overcome sin for all. At this darkest of moments, the care and provision of God was manifest.

Hosea

In the prophecy of Hosea, God is presented as the long-suffering husband of an unfaithful wife and the father of a problem son.

In the early chapters, Hosea himself is the husband and father, with his errant wife a symbol of Israel worshipping pagan idols. After their first child, she bears children to her lovers rather than to her husband, and the long-suffering Hosea accepts them and brings them up as if his own, finally accepting back his wife when her lovers have tired of her and have exposed her to the ultimate degradation by selling her off in the slave market at half-price. She is then humiliated and unlovely, no longer remotely desirable, but Hosea buys her back to be his wife again (chapter 3), because he still loves her.

This is a parable of the love and patience of God toward his people. The quality of mercy and forgiveness displayed is far beyond anything which might be expected of a human husband. It is an Old Testament version of the Prodigal Son (note chapter 4:17 where Ephraim is joined to idols as the prodigal later joined himself to a citizen of that country), wherein the hurt imposed by the runaway seems even greater than that in the New Testament parable, and the forbearance of the deserted husband must be greater too.

Note the contrast between these two verses:

Hosea 1:5 Judgement at Jezreel

Hosea 1:11 Reconciliation at Jezreel

This is typical of this book. Every prophecy of doom is accompanied by one of hope, another pointer to the nature of the God who inspired it, and of his desire to show mercy to any who will repent.

Later in the book, the family grows up, and it is the children who give rise to anxiety. In Jeremiah 31:9 referred to above, Ephraim is God's firstborn son. (Ephraim was the dominant tribe in the northern kingdom of Israel, and Israel is sometimes called Ephraim in much the same way as the UK is sometimes called England, or the Netherlands Holland). In Chapter 5, Ephraim is in trouble, but instead of turning to

his Heavenly Father for help, he goes to a human power (5:13). Chapter 6 describes how he and his siblings finally decide to return, prodigal-like, to their father, and in verse 4, God as father welcomes the change of heart, but he is realistic. He has seen it all before. It is one of those resolutions which is soon forgotten. He likens it to the morning dew which evaporates away as soon as the sun is up. He will return to this metaphor (chapter 14:5) and will promise to be a lasting dew to repentant Israel.

Ask the class what tone of voice God is using in chapter 6:4. Is he angry, or judgmental, or indulgent? Guide them towards the conclusion that he is pleading, like a father grieving over a headstrong child whose behaviour is leading to self-destruction. Can they hear the sorrow and frustration in his voice in chapter 13:9?

Chapter 6:6 repeats the message of Samuel to Saul at Gilgal. You may like to remind the young people of the events of 1 Samuel 15:15-23, where Saul excused his disobedience by saying that he had kept animals alive to offer them as a sacrifice. This is the mistake that Israel were still making, and that we can make too; to think that the appearance of religion is more important than humility and obedience towards God.

What is the picture evoked by chapter 11:1-4? Is not this a nostalgic father recalling with pleasure and pride the infancy of his offspring; little episodes like when the father was teaching the child how to walk are remembered with fondness. Now everything has changed. The child has spurned the father and deserves to be punished, but the loving father cannot bring himself to mete out such dire retribution (verses 8 and 9). They deserve to be treated like those cities which were wiped out with Sodom and Gomorrah, but he will plead a bit longer yet.

What is Ephraim's reply to God's pleading at this stage? Chapter 12:8 has Ephraim replying 'What does it matter so long as I am rich?'

God responds with the words of hope which always accompany despair in this book. He will restore them in spite of themselves.

There is great beauty in the closing chapter of Hosea. Ephraim responds to his Heavenly Father's pleading, and with fulsome joy and generosity, God promises full restoration. Ask the class to list the similes he uses for Israel restored:

- The lily
- The cedar of Lebanon
- The olive tree
- Corn
- The vine
- The fir tree

Relevance to our lives

God has the same love for us that he showed to Israel through the parable of Hosea's experiences. We can draw comfort from the knowledge that however far we stray, he is like a loving and forgiving father, always ready to receive us back.

Prayer

The Lord's prayer begins 'Our Father' - a phrase which contrasts wonderfully with 'in heaven'. Say the prayer together trying to concentrate on the fact that you are praying to a loving father, as well as to a mighty God in heaven.

Other suggestions for activities

The young people might like to look at the parable of the prodigal son to pick out the characteristics of God as shown in the father in the parable.