on the road with
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TOUGH LOVE,
TENDER MERCIES
3 short stops in the Minor Prophets

Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
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First Stop:

Hosea
An Unlikely Love Story

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace. Frederick Buechner

I wouldn’t mind looking like Julia Roberts. It’s not that I’m really unhappy with my own looks—though I wouldn’t mind having my pre-forty-year-old metabolism back—and I don’t have any aspirations to be a contestant on Extreme Makeover. But with her close-to-perfect figure and megawatt smile, Julia always seems to get the good guy. At least in the movies. And the film that probably best
showcases her appeal is *Pretty Woman*. That movie launched her career as a superstar and was also one of the highest-grossing romantic comedies in recent history.

Read Hosea 1–3 in the New Living Translation or *The Message* and synopsize these chapters in your own words.

If Hollywood optioned the rights to your life story, what actress would you choose to play yourself? Why?

You probably remember the story line: Julia Roberts portrays a likable prostitute (she doesn’t really *want* to be a lady-of-the-evening—she just doesn’t have any other viable choices—but we’re led to believe that she still has a good heart and certain values she wouldn’t compromise!) opposite handsome Richard Gere’s extremely successful businessman character. Theirs is a very unlikely romance, which began when his curiosity and sheer pragmatism intersected—he had never learned how to drive a car with a manual transmission and needed someone to drive his borrowed stick-shift sports car. After a few hours in Julia’s charming presence, which did not include a stereotypical fishnet-hose-and-bad-teeth prostitute persona, Richard asks her to be his no-strings-attached date for several weekend business functions.

Of course, within a short time they become smitten with each other and go on to overcome her profession, his fear of commitment, and the dismay
of his clued-in business associates. By the end of the movie, they have fallen madly in love. It sounds pretty far-fetched, doesn’t it? Only Hollywood could write a story where a gum-smacking prostitute ends up with a good-looking, Ivy League–educated millionaire, right? Well, not exactly. I think Tinseltown borrowed the “very bad girl gets very good guy” plot from an Old Testament book called Hosea.

It’s been said that all great stories include the four main themes of Scripture: Creation, the Depravity of mankind, Redemptive love, and Death (or Heaven). Which one of your favorite books or movies is a good example that incorporates those themes?

Polygamy, Politics, and Pagans
Hosea kicks off a twelve-book section located at the very end of the Old Testament, commonly called the Minor Prophets. I used to think they were called minor because the men who wrote them were diminutive! But they’re actually designated this way because they’re relatively short books, unlike the longer prophetic books like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Yet, in spite of their brevity—most are no more than a few chapters in length—the Minor Prophets are full of passion, intrigue, and unforgettable images of God. And my favorite image of all is found in Hosea, the first stop on our tour.

However, before we begin our trip, we need to learn a few things about this divine district we’ll be visiting. Now, for those of you who tend to take
mental field trips during history lessons, I suggest you grab some coffee and dark chocolate to help you focus because the following information is the key to enjoying the rest of the tour!

The twelve Minor Prophets were written over a span of about four hundred years (from 835 BC to 400 BC), after the reigns of David and Solomon. And those four hundred years represent an extremely tumultuous time in Israel’s history. They were in turmoil partly because of bad leadership. After forty years of strong leadership, King David died, leaving the keys to the throne to his smart son, Solomon. But although Solomon’s SAT scores were at the top of the class, he flunked the final exam of leadership.

Solomon was a brilliant, literary man (he wrote most of Proverbs, and possibly some of the other Wisdom books) with a bevy of beautiful wives from other countries. In the beginning of his reign, he

did you know?
The notation BC stands for “before Christ” and represents the time period preceding His birth. AD is an abbreviation for the Latin words anno Domini which translated means “the year of the Lord” and represents the time period after Jesus was born. Those two terms—BC and AD—have been used worldwide for well over a thousand years to designate the time periods before and after Jesus Christ’s birth. However, in modern literature the politically correct terms BCE and CE are fast replacing BC and AD. BCE stands for “before the common era” and CE stands for “common era.” These terms have the same time “value” as BC and AD, but have effectively removed the reference to Christ. For obvious reasons, I still prefer the dating notations BC and AD.
followed in his father’s wise footsteps. But then he made the dumb decision to let his foreign wives continue practicing the idolatry they grew up with instead of converting to faith in the one true God, Jehovah. Furthermore, Solomon foolishly allowed those same pagan wives to control the kids. So when he died and the need for a successor arose, chaos broke lose in the harem. His Jerry Springer version of a family couldn’t begin to agree on which of his sons should become the next king of Israel.

**Read 1 Timothy 3:1-5 and 8-12. Why do you think God included being a good father in the list of qualifications for church leadership? What parenting characteristics do you think best correlate with effective leadership?**

The infighting that followed Solomon’s death resulted in a vicious split in the kingdom of Israel. The northern kingdom retained the name *Israel*, and is sometimes also called *Ephraim*, which was the name of Israel’s largest tribe. The southern kingdom—now called *Judah*—retained Jerusalem, the beautiful “City of God,” as its capital. The gist of this split in God’s family is that His people now warred amongst themselves as often as they fought with foreign nations.

Finally, the theocracy of Israel was in turmoil because rather than trusting God to protect them, they made alliances with former enemies like Assyria in a dangerous game of political roulette. When they aligned themselves with people they used to cross swords with, they also swung the door to their
David—Jesse’s son who was anointed by Samuel to be God’s choice for Israel’s king before he even reached puberty, who killed the giant Goliath with one stone from his sling-shot, and who was best friends with Saul’s son, Jonathan—becomes the second king of Israel. He was humanly flawed, but a great king.

Solomon builds the first Temple in Jerusalem; fulfilling the vision God gave his dad.

Israel—now the northern kingdom—is conquered by the war-mongering nation of Assyria and ceases to exist.

Persia is now the most powerful country in the world, and the Persian king, Cyrus, decrees that Jews living in exile be allowed to return to Judah (now called Palestine).

Judah—now the southern kingdom—is conquered by the newest world power, Babylon, which is led by King Nebuchadnezzar. His armies completely destroy the Temple in Jerusalem and all southern Jews are exiled to Babylon.

All exiled Jews who want to have returned to their homeland and construction of the second Temple is completed in Jerusalem.

Jesus Christ, Immanuel, is born in Bethlehem. We can’t be sure of the exact date of Jesus’ birth because a Roman monk, named Dionysius Exiguus, miscalculated the reigns of Roman emperors, thereby coming up with the erroneous birth year of Christ and throwing our entire calendar off a few years.
sanctuary wide open, allowing other religions to waltz into their once monotheistic way of life. Instead of being “one nation under God,” Israel was becoming a compromised spiritual smorgasbord. Needless to say, they were in a heap of trouble.

**How would you compare Israel's inner turmoil with the segregation and jealousy among Christian denominations today? If you attend a church that is affiliated with a specific denomination, was there a unique issue or tradition that attracted you to it in the first place?**

Several notable Bible scholars assert that God’s prophets only spoke when Israel was in trouble, that God normally communicated to His people through kings and priests and He didn’t use prophets until things really got out of control. And things were certainly out of control in Hosea’s hometown, spiritually speaking anyway.

**did you know?**

Israel is the only nation ever given the status of theocracy—that is, a nation specially chosen by God to represent a covenant relationship with Him. The Old Testament Historical Books reveal how God created Israel to be His nation and chose the Israelites to be His representatives to the other nations, His ambassadors to the world. These “chosen people” were ordained to be kings and priests unto God, and all other nations were to be blessed by their contacts with Israel (see 2 Corinthians 4:6). But like Christians today, Israel was prone to wander and their spiritual apathy and idolatry led to their downfall.¹
Like Charles Dickens’s opening line in *A Tale of Two Cities*, it was “the best of times and the worst of times” in Jerusalem. It was the best of times because the national economy was thriving and Judah was experiencing unprecedented favor with surrounding nations. But it was the worst of times because God’s chosen people were turning their backs on Him. They were spending more time at the mall than the synagogue. They were frolicking in their newfound freedom and material excess and flinging loyalty to God out the window. Hedonism replaced holiness. So God chose Hosea—and Hosea’s marriage—to express His disapproval and to forecast the consequences of Israel’s actions.

**FAST FACT**
The first nine books of the Minor Prophets are classified as being pre-exilic, which means they were written prior to that very dark period in Israel’s history when southern Jews were exiled from their homeland and forced to live in Babylon. The last three books of the Minor Prophets are classified as post-exilic, which means they were written after the Jewish exiles had returned to Jerusalem.

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**Read Exodus 34:14-16; Deuteronomy 32:16; and Isaiah 62:5.** How does our “marriage” to God differ from a human marital relationship? In what ways are they similar?

**Dating Diblaim’s Daughter**
While we know much about ancient world powers and monks who made dating mistakes (no pun intended), we know very little about this man named Hosea. Based on the content of his prophecy, we do know that it was written in the eighth century BC, and that he preached during the reigns of four successive kings of Judah (somewhere between 770 to 710 BC). We also know that Hosea’s name literally means *salvation* in Hebrew. But other than that, all we know about him comes from the poignant story God asked him to live and record.
Thus, in the absence of knowable details, I’m going to use considerable creative license to describe what Hosea might have been like. Since he was a prophet, and therefore an all-around good guy, I picture him wearing high-water pants, a short-sleeved white shirt with a tie his grandmother gave him for his bar mitzvah, old-fashioned black leather oxfords, and Coke-bottle glasses. He was the vice president of his high school math club and a loyal member of the FPGCP—the Future Prophets of God’s Chosen People—club. Definitely not the type of guy who cruised questionable watering holes looking for chicks. Frankly, Hosea wasn’t the type of guy who had a girlfriend. He probably didn’t even go to his senior prom . . . he just stayed home and played Nintendo.

So what God asked this nice guy to do next was all the more surprising:

> When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, “Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD.”

Hosea 1:2

The girl God told Hosea to marry had a social life very different from his. While he’d never taken a date to a Friday night football game, her phone number was plastered all over the boys’ locker room. She was a quintessential party animal who’d been through more boyfriends than Jennifer Lopez. And it was her bad behavior that made her the perfect metaphor for God’s chosen people, because
they had a pretty racy reputation too. They’d betrayed the Creator of the universe by indulging in meaningless flings with idols and numerous affairs with false prophets. Faithfulness wasn’t their forte.

It’s amazing that Hosea doesn’t question God in light of His request. He doesn’t protest, “Hey, wait a minute, God. I don’t like this idea! I don’t want my marriage to be some prophetic metaphor! I want to marry a nice girl, not some tramp who’s been with every guy in the neighborhood.” Hosea doesn’t say anything. He simply obeys God:

*So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.*

Hosea 1:9

Many people—including theologian and church father John Calvin—have questioned why God would ask one of His children to marry a woman He knew would commit adultery. If you had to write a paper or engage in debate on this subject, how would you justify God asking Hosea to marry a “whore”?

When God asks me to do something difficult and I do what He says, I typically expect a good return on my investment. Especially if it cost me personal inconvenience or emotional pain. For instance, recently I was given too much change at a fast-food drive-through window. When I realized I’d been mistakenly given change based on twenty dollars instead of ten, I turned my car
around, parked, and went into the restaurant to give the extra money back. I was in a big hurry and didn’t really have the time to go inside—that’s why I was picking up fast food from a drive-through in the first place. But I didn’t want anyone to get in trouble when they came up ten bucks short in the register at the end of the day, plus God’s pretty clear that honesty is important, even when it comes to little things.

However, when I went inside that trashy taco joint and briefly explained the situation to the cashier, you would’ve thought I passed her a note that said, “This is a stickup and I’m wearing men’s underwear,” because she seemed alarmed and kind of disgusted at the same time. Then she sighed in exaggerated exasperation and told me to wait because she was going to have to get the assistant manager in order to straighten things out. Things didn’t go much better with him, though. He told me that my actions weren’t covered in their training manual and he wasn’t sure how to put money back into the register without some type of transaction. I explained that I “just wanted to do the right thing” and he gave me the now familiar “thief wearing boxers” look.

I ended up leaving the money on the counter and walking out of the restaurant with several pairs of eyes watching me warily. I didn’t expect a parade or a story in the local paper lauding my integrity, but I didn’t expect to be treated like a wacko either.

Sometimes doing the right thing doesn’t get the response you hope for. God doesn’t promise an
immediate or public blessing as a result of our obedience.

Hosea found that out the hard way.

What’s the most difficult thing you’ve sensed God asking you to do recently?