

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for December 30: God's active compassion

December 21, 2012

When you think of God in the Old Testament, what images or words come to mind? Many seem to have an idea of God in the Old Testament as an all-powerful being set high above humanity and creation who always seems to be angry and watching for anyone to step across the line and immediately feel God's wrath. Others may call to mind some of the more impersonal images which the Old Testament presents of God as being our Rock or Fortress.

Yet as we read more closely, we find the God portrayed in the Old Testament is a God of grace which flows from God's deep love for humanity. The central event in the Old Testament, the exodus from Egypt, cannot be explained apart from grace, and the psalms are filled with references to God's love.

But there are few places in the Old Testament where we see more clearly God's love and compassion for his people than in Hosea 11. In these verses, we see the emotional struggle within the heart of God as he deals with rebellious children as well as the various ways God's compassion is demonstrated through actions toward those children.

Teaching (Hosea 11:1-4)

There is no interpersonal relationship that involves more compassion than a parent and child. Having brought the child into the world, the parent not only provides for and takes care of the child, but also takes time to carefully teach and train the child.

In verses 1 through 4, God reminds the people it was God who had given them life by leading them out of Egyptian slavery. It was God who gently had cared for and led them through the desert, teaching them to walk (see Exodus 19:4 where God pictures this as a mother eagle teaching her young to fly).

It had been God who had sought to ease their burden as they grew. God had not placed heavy demands on the people—simply to listen and obey God’s voice. God certainly could have been far more heavy-handed with the people, but in compassion, God understood the need to be gentle as they learned to be God’s people.

Indeed God’s love and compassion for us is demonstrated through the fact that God teaches us to walk and provides for us rather than simply leaving us to figure life out on our own.

Disciplining (Hosea 11:5-7)

In the relationship between parent and child as well as between God and an individual, teaching and training often involve discipline. As we grow from childhood, we all need to learn there are consequences for our actions. When our actions cross the lines set by parents or God, those consequences are in the form of punishment and discipline.

Despite the many calls and opportunities to return to God, the people of Israel continued to pursue the worship of idols, and God had to punish them. Verses 5 through 7 paint a picture of severe judgment. The people would be turned over to the Assyrians. Their cities would be utterly destroyed and many people killed because of their sin. Verse 7 is perhaps the harshest as it states that even should the people call out to God in the midst of the punishment, God would not answer or rescue them.

While it often is difficult to see, this discipline is evidence of God’s love for his people. God had given the people all they had and had so much more to

give them, but their constant turning away prevented God from bestowing further blessings.

God's discipline always is designed to motivate people to return to him so they might enjoy the fullness of the relationship. It is out of God's infinite compassion that his greatest desire is to bless rather than punish.

Relenting (Hosea 11:8-9)

Did you hear it? As you read from verse 7 to verse 8, you almost can hear God pause and sigh over the judgment he has just announced on his children. It almost is as if God's compassion rises up and overwhelms his anger over the sins of the people (that actually is what the last part of verse 8 says). Many people may have a problem with the idea that God changes his mind, but many times throughout the Old Testament, God is pictured as doing just that (Exodus 32:10-14, Jonah 4:1-3, Joel 2:12-14, Amos 7:1-6, Jeremiah 18:7-10).

Significantly, the Hebrew verb used in these and other verses to convey this idea of God relenting, *naham*, carries the idea of taking a heavy breath or sigh as an emotional response. The word translated "compassion" in verse 8 comes from this same verb. Thus while God cannot let sin go unpunished, God's great compassion governs his judgment and leads God to change his plans based on our repentance.

Restoring (Hosea 11:10-11)

Not only does God's compassion lead to God's deep desire to forgive following our repentance, it also prompts God to fully restore those who return. Verses 10 and 11 describe God's roar as a call to all his people to return.

The clearest picture of this in the Bible is the parable of the prodigal son. At the end of the story, the father not only forgives his returning son, but

restores him to full relationship as a son by giving him a ring and robe. While we must come in repentance for our sin, God does not want us to come before him in fear, but in humility knowing God desires above all to restore his wayward children so we may fully experience all the blessings of our relationship with our compassionate God.