



God's Incredible "No-Matter-What" Love

Let me tell you a Valentine's Day love story. Jack and Barbara were celebrating their sixty-fourth anniversary on February 14, 2007. They were a great couple—loving, lively, the twinkle in their eyes always inviting you into their lives.

Jack and Barbara started Valentine's Day by visiting a Christian university in Southern California to which they had donated some of their time and treasure. Jack and Barbara were being honored at the groundbreaking of a special place of prayer on campus dedicated in their honor. Barbara had not been feeling well, but made a special effort to attend because she had been looking forward to this day for many months. Although she was feeling terrible, she was able to enjoy the events, surrounded by city and university officials, friends and family.

Later that evening, in the arms of her devoted husband, Barbara passed from this world into God's eternal kingdom of heaven. Jack and Barbara's life together was a true love story. They went steady in high school, and married a few years later while Jack was a pilot during World War II. My wife and I first met Jack and Barbara several years before her death through another mutual friend. We quickly discovered our mutual faith in Jesus, and it became the basis of our friendship. For some reason Jack and Barbara became

fans of my books, not only reading them, but promoting them to others. I joked with Jack that he was becoming my P.R. person.

My wife and I were shocked to hear of Barbara's passing—and the specific day on which she died (1) Valentine's Day, (2) their sixty-fourth anniversary and (3) the day of the groundbreaking in their honor.

Sixty-four years of marriage! It's a long time, but I assure you Jack and Barbara didn't live their lives simply for their physical marriage. They lived in Christ for their eternal home because of the love of our heavenly Father.

A marriage lasting sixty-four years is a wonderful example! However, it is nothing at all when compared to God's love for us, which spans the boundaries of time and space. Valentine's Day is a time when our thoughts turn to love, but often our thoughts are focused on physical love, which so often is here today and gone tomorrow. Let's talk about God's eternal, unconditional, *no-matter-what love*.

Hosea's Less Than Perfect Marriage

The biblical book of Hosea is based on an incredible love story. Hosea's marriage, as we understand from what God inspired for us to read in this book, is all about *no-matter-what love*, or *in-spite-of love*. Hosea was empowered by God to love his wife in spite of her infidelities.

Hosea is a love story about our relationship with God. This is a love story about God's perfect commitment to you and me in spite of who we really are. The book of Hosea is an affirmation of God's absolute, unwavering fidelity to you and me. It's a book about real life—real people—real pain and heartache. This book is about God's perfect relationship with imperfect people—people like you and me.

The first chapter of Hosea records God's instructions to his prophet Hosea. God told Hosea to marry an unfaithful woman. We are not specifically told if Gomer, his wife, was already a loose and permissive woman, or if she only became that way after they got married.

The book of Hosea is not some Disney Princess fairy tale where everyone lives happily ever after. The picture God gave to Hosea was this: "Hosea, you're going to be a loving and faithful husband. And here's what you will get in return.

Gomer will betray you, she will break your heart, she will eventually sell her body, she will make a public spectacle of you, and eventually she will inhabit such low places in life she will be offered for sale at a slave auction. She will completely humiliate you.”

What would you, a young man, having grown up thinking about the princess you would one day marry, think when God gave you those marching orders? The book of Hosea doesn't share the sordid details of how Gomer started to cheat on Hosea. It doesn't tell us about the first time Hosea's heart was broken. It does tell us, in broad brush strokes, about God's *no-matter-what love*.

So Hosea marries Gomer and their family grows to include three children, at least two of whom have fathers other than Hosea. Finally Gomer hits rock bottom. She sells her body and lives such a depraved life that there is nothing left for her but to be sold into slavery.

Hosea shows up at the slave auction, and when the auctioneer cries out, “Is anyone here interested in buying this woman?” we imagine an awkward silence, as the crowd surveys a bedraggled, sickly, gaunt, used, abused and probably diseased woman cowering before them. Finally a voice booms out, “I will buy her *back*.” It's the voice of Hosea, her faithful, ever-forgiving husband. And more importantly, of course, it's the voice of our ever-loving God.

Hosea's “Pretty Woman”

Today many people reading this love story would call Hosea a stupid sap. What a gutless, spineless, henpecked loser! Apart from knowing God's love, we would think the story of Hosea, at face value, is about a man who let his wife take advantage of him and treat him like a fool.

Do you remember the movie *Pretty Woman* that came out in 1990? It was about a respectable, refined, educated and cultured rich man, played by Richard Gere, who falls in love with a prostitute, played by Julia Roberts. The friends of the rich man are appalled, shocked and scandalized by the “kind of woman” he intends to marry.

Pretty Woman was regarded as such a sleazy story that I remember pastors who condemned the movie on the premise that it might encourage immorality and permissiveness.