



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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I Will Never Stop Loving You

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My name is Hosea.

I am a prophet to my own people, the Israelites. I have a message for them that is God's message given to me. I fear they will not hear me, but I long for them to.

My people desperately need to hear my message. Since the war with the Assyrians, they suffer terribly. The government is virtually without power or authority. There is upheaval in the land.

"There is no faithfulness or kindness, and no knowledge of God in the land. There is swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery. They break all bounds and murder follows murder. Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish." (Hosea 4: 1b-3a)

My people have turned away from God. They have rejected each other. They cry out that God has abandoned them – that He has withdrawn His love. They condemn Him and blaspheme His name. They wallow in their misery. They have no hope – and do not see that it is they who have turned away.

I do not believe that God has abandoned my people. He has not withdrawn His love. He knows their suffering. He feels deep compassion for them. Though they live in corruption, He has not let them go – and never will. Somehow, I must convince them that this is true. Somehow, I must make them see that it is they who have turned from God – not God who has turned from them. Somehow, I must get through to them and make them understand just how much God loves them.

Through my own experience I learned the extent of God's love. That experience gave me my message to Israel. If only my people will hear me. If only they will.

It happened this way.

I fell in love with Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and, responding to the urging of my heart, I married her. She was a prostitute, but I thought I could make her change. I thought my love was strong enough to make her want to turn from that way of life. I thought I could satisfy her so completely that she would never feel any desire to stray from our marriage.

I was wrong about that, but I did not stop loving her. Indeed, I could not.

I had plenty of warning as to what to expect. Before I married Gomer, my friends all urged me not to. They didn't think she was worthy of me. They pointed out that people seldom change their way of life. They saw no reason for me to throw my life away on the likes of her. They warned me of all the trouble I was almost certain to have with her. They drew vivid word pictures of how miserable my life would be. They were sure no good could possibly come of our marriage. All they could foresee was doom and gloom. They wanted something better for me. They were urgent and persistent.

"But", I said to them, "I love her." And that seemed to be all that mattered to me.

It wasn't all that mattered.

I really wanted Gomer to be a loving wife to me – to bear my children – to share with me in rearing our family. I wanted her to be as responsive to me as I felt to her. I wanted us to experience all the joy of the kind of marriage I knew was possible for us. I wanted her to be satisfied with our marriage.

It was not to be.

At first, I tried in every way I knew to get her to be as I wanted her to be, but without success. In many ways she was a good wife, but she flaunted her prostitution even while she shared my bed. I begged her to stop, but she would not. I demanded by my right as her husband that she stop. She only laughed at me.

"I will go after my lovers," she said. "You can't stop me. They give me bread and water and wool and flax and oil and drink. They give me what I want – much more than you can give me. Why shouldn't I give them what they want?"

I was deeply hurt and very angry. In my imagination, I thought of all the ways I could punish her and make her be the wife to me that I wanted her to be. I could withhold my own goodness to her – even the necessities. I could prevent her lovers from paying her, or take their payments from her. I could fill her life with misery until she turned back to me, pleading for my forgiveness. In my imagination, I said to her, "Somehow, I will make you see the folly of your ways."

I could not do what I imagined – not even when I told myself it would be for her good. I could not do those things to her, nor turn from her. I loved her completely. None of those things mattered more than my love for her.

We had a son. In high hope for our marriage and our family, I named him Jezreel, which means "God sows". I was sure this would be a turning point for us. But I was wrong.

We seemed happy for a while, and then I discovered that Gomer was pregnant again but not by me. My bitterness was so great that I both turned on Gomer and on the baby girl she bore. I named the child Lo-ruhamah, which means "Not Pitied" and felt no pity for her, nor her mother.

Life was miserable at our house and I fancied myself the most miserable of all. I couldn't be decent to the baby, for every sight of her seared me with a reminder of what her mother had done to me. I wanted nothing to do with her.

After she weaned "Not Pitied", Gomer got pregnant by another of her lovers.

My misery knew no bounds. This child – a boy – I named Lo-ammi, which means "Not My People" - "Not My Child". He was not my child and I would make him bear the burden of his mother's guilt all his life. By his name, I had seen to that. Maybe, in years to come, she would feel some remorse. I wouldn't allow myself to think about

the burden that I had put upon the child.

Then Gomer left me and took the children with her. I was outraged even more, if that be possible. I had done my duty by her and more, even though she had wronged me so grievously. And then she left me. It was the last straw. What right did she have to do that – as if I were the one who was in the wrong.

The house was empty and I was alone.

I was more than alone. I was lonely. Despite all that had happened, I knew that I loved Gomer. I argued against that love. I cited my hurt and my outrage. I reviewed all the reasons why I shouldn't love her. I told myself that I didn't have to put up with behavior such as hers. She had chosen her way of life. She had no right to expect me to accept it or her. If I were really honest with myself, I had to admit that she didn't expect me to accept it or her.

For months I tried to soothe myself, nursing my anger and bitterness. I tried to tell myself that I no longer loved Gomer, nor cared what happened to her and the children. Who could possibly love her after what she had done?

Everything in me cried out to find ways to condemn and punish Gomer, but I couldn't make myself do it and I felt no peace. The simple reality was that I did love Gomer. What she did and how she lived caused me to suffer, but it did not alter the fact of my love, and I could not turn from her.

Finally, I decided to respond to that love. I would be faithful to her, no matter what she did. I would start by changing the names of her two children. Lo-ruhamah ("Not Pitied") would now be called Ruhamah ("Pitied") and Lo-ammi ("Not My Child") would be called Ammi ("You Are My Child"). I would love them as I loved their mother. She – all of them – would be free to lead their lives as they choose. If I did not do this, there was no real possibility for us ever to be a loving family.

Even though she had turned to other lovers, I went out into the market place and bought Gomer back. I told her that I wanted her as my wife, and that I did not want her to sell herself to any other man.

And then I said to her, "Gomer, do whatever you do. Go or stay. I want you to be my wife and love me, but that is for you to decide. I cannot be – I will not be vindictive, nor punishing, nor try to make you pay in kind. I love you – and will always love you. That's how it is."

Thus I knew in my own experience love that had no strings. I knew how God felt about my people Israel. I knew His suffering and His longing for them, and I knew it was the more intense because of His steadfast love for them.

My people, Israel, were God's people, and I had a message from God to bring to them – a message of God's unconditional love.

It was my task to bring that message to my people who were also God's people. I was angry with them for their sinfulness, and their turning away from God. I wanted to castigate them. I wanted to demand that they change and turn back to God. But I knew they would pay no attention to my anger, nor my warnings. That message wouldn't do any good.

I wanted my people to know how it could be for them if they turned back to God. I longed for them both to know and to understand. But I knew from my experience with Gomer that the only message of hope for them was the message of God's love that does not end and is never withdrawn – no matter what they do, nor how they respond to that love.

I am a prophet to my own people, Israel. I have a message from God for them. My task is to tell them of God's unending love. It is not to judge and condemn them. It is certainly not to demand that they repent and turn back to God. I must do my task, and not try to do something else.

I don't know what my people will do in response to my message. They may choose to ignore me completely, or they may turn against me and reject me. They may continue their sinful and destructive ways. They may allow themselves no relief from their suffering. They may wallow in their misery. They may condemn and blaspheme God.

My people may see the error of their ways. They may see how it can be for them if they turn back to God. They may allow themselves to experience the completeness and totality of God's love. I hope they will, but I cannot make them do so. Only they can make that choice.

I do know what I will do. I will declare my message to my people as long as I have strength and breath to do so. I will tell them of my own experience with Gomer so they can know how I know. I will love them as God loves them. That is my task. That is my desire. That is God's will for me.