

LOVE
Chapter Two
“Hounded: God’s Relentless Love”
1 John 4:18-20; Gen. 50:15-21& Hosea 2:14-20

We love, because God first loved us. This verse is relatively ambiguous. Love is the linchpin of this ambiguity. The verse is true as it stands *but it doesn’t actually define what divine love is*. Let’s explore what happens when we define love as “forgiveness,” as divine forgiveness extended to us through Jesus Christ, I mean, God’s love as expressed through the life and the mission of God’s own Son. God loves us by extending to us the forgiveness we need *if we are to love one another truly*.

So, I want to put forward first the adjective, “relentless.” By this I mean, God’s love simply does not quit. God’s love pursues us as a tireless hunter pursues his quarry. We, the unloved and unloving are His quarry and He disciplines us to our good and not to our harm . . . to bless, prosper, heal, free and help us . . . rather than to kill, or destroy us. A second thing I want to put forward is all love has its source, or well-spring in divine love. *Love is not necessarily a natural endowment, but results from a supernatural impartation*. And, finally, because the love of God is experienced as divine forgiveness; those who have not been forgiven are incapable of loving as they ought—as they were designed, or created to love.

Relentless, pursuing and foundational forgiveness that *is the nature of the love* that came to earth in human form, *in Jesus*. Despite Jesus’ miraculous birth, few outside of his immediate family, knew anything about this divine move (of forgiveness) known, more generally, as the incarnation, or divine enfleshment (God in flesh, God in the face of Jesus). Jesus was the invasion of divine love: foundational, relentless forgiveness which pursues lost sinners.

Let’s reflect together on how “astonishing” love as forgiveness is. Some folk have so sanitized forgiveness that it is prettified almost beyond recognition. Forgiveness, for instance, is nice. It is even virtuous. But, I think, it is too often relegated to the superficial domain of children, to the settling of their squabbles, their fleeting fights and innumerable tussles. Forgiveness is more than a parenting goal in childrearing! In this relegation of forgiveness to childhood development, or to superficial niceness, the gritty quality of actual forgiveness is obscured: its messy, difficult, complicated, demanding, costly and scandalous quality is missed.

The account of Joseph fulfillment of his divine calling to governorship (of Egypt) in Genesis 50 is threaded on the theme of love as forgiveness. The narrative

begins in Chapter 37 in which no love is shared between Joseph and his eleven brothers. He rats on them and dreams of dominating, or ruling over them. He has two dreams (the eleven stalks of grain bowing down to him—the sun, moon and stars also bowing down to him) and as the favored son of Rachael and Jacob, Joseph is a love child (the last born, born late in life) and he gets the famous luxurious coat of many colors. All that splendor colors his brothers mostly green. They plot to kill the big dreamer. Reuben protests and despite his cries for mercy, they dump Joseph in a dry cistern and abandon him there to die. Inspired by some Ishmaelite traders, the brothers decide to sell Joseph into slavery to some Midianites who happen to pass by. These men sell Joseph to Potiphar, the commander of the royal guard. Betrayal, murder, hatred and abandonment are the contours of evil that Joseph's brothers treat him to, in order to rid themselves of him.

In the process, these same villains (siblings!) decide to cover up their crime and to blame Joseph's death on a fierce wild beast. After making a profit on his sale, these wicked, loveless and unforgiving brothers revive the plan, kill a goat, smear the blood on the robe, and concoct a lie which nearly destroys their father. How could anyone ever forgive such evil? *But that is precisely Joseph—a wonderful prefiguration of Christ does.* He forgives eighteen harsh years, false imprisonment, further betrayals and broken promises—hardly child's play. Gen. 42 records the arrival of his brothers in Egypt seeking food in hard times. Joseph recognizes them and immediately determines to return good for their evil *even after all the evil, all the pain and suffering they inflicted on him, their brother.* Now the brothers have lived all those same years in guilt. They attribute bad things as a consequence of their mistreatment of their brother. Reuben even says, **I told you not to do anything evil to him! They are not entirely without a sense of moral accountability—which confession Joseph overhears, I think, to his secret joy.** He has a basis for redemptive hope for them—maybe they all can even be reconciled. What would it take? What would it look like?

In Gen. 45 Joseph, unable to restrain himself any more, discloses his identity to his brothers. *The last thing these unforgiving brothers expect from Joseph is forgiveness. It is totally astonishing.* Forgiveness is scandalous in just that way. In fact the brothers are “terrified” which is perhaps a step beyond astonishment. **Don't be angry with yourselves . . . God sent me ahead** (through your evil plans and lovelessness) **to save lives.** (v.5) Joseph pours such favor out on his brother Benjamin that it is no wonder that he is spoiled and Israel has so pampered him that he becomes the head of a morally challenged tribe! In concluding verses of this chapter we read: **25 So they went up out of Egypt and came to the land of Canaan to their father Jacob. 26 And they told him, “Joseph is still alive, and**

he is ruler over all the land of Egypt.” And his heart became numb, for he did not believe them. 27 But when they told him all the words of Joseph, which he had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. 28 And Israel said, “It is enough (This is too much!); Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.” (ESV)

Can you imagine how many questions this raised? Now it was clear that they had fabricated the whole story about Joseph’s death! Even though it nearly killed him and his father. Do you think Israel wanted a full disclosure? Probably. And then there is the matter of his near heart failure at hearing the news that Joseph was alive. Talk about astonishment! But the insecurity of the brothers remains (Gen. 50). Please note that although Joseph has forgiven them, they have not been able to forgive themselves. They have such an embedded sense of unworthiness, such an indelible stain of guilt, such a fear of retribution and such engrained habits of animosity, envy and hatred that *they seem completely unable to walk away from it all. What, are they hopeless slaves to their past?* Their condition is so profoundly human and, unhappily, bleak but recognizable—we can so identify:

15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “It may be that Joseph will hate us (entirely understandable) and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him (totally to be expected, feared—because they would!).” 16 So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this command before he died (another fabrication—have they learned nothing?): 17 ‘Say to Joseph, “Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.”’ (Yes they did evil, but no Israel didn’t command any such thing!) And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants (the Hebrew here sustains the rendering of “slaves.” Fear spawns spiritual servility and bondage).” 19 But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? (One way to take this is to say, “What you did is so grievous that only God could forgive it.” This matter of who has the authority to forgive sin, as in who can really forgive it!, is a live issue to this day!) 20 As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. (This is a critical insight, one which we may usefully apply to our own lives as we can to the mystery of the cross. Those who abused and executed Jesus meant evil but God meant it for good.) 21 So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and

spoke kindly to them. (Say what you may, this “love” does not rise to the standard of absolution, or “forgiveness.” Only Jesus can achieve that. **All authority in heaven and on earth has been granted unto Me.** Jesus forgives completely because He can and has done so! *His forgiveness is salvific; it transforms the heart from stone to flesh.*) (ESV)

It is, I think, axiomatic (self-evident): people who aren’t forgiven can hardly receive love, can only with difficulty truly love others. Acceptance is possible, it is good even vital but it is not forgiveness. And, yes, real forgiveness is scandalous. *It is astonishing, wonderful, even to those who believe, but to those who have never known it, forgiveness is unthinkable.* It is a work of God.

- Oct 6, 2006 Charles Carl Roberts IV murdered five little girls in Amish country and, in a world grown callous through multiple mass murders, to the astonishment of all, the community *forgave* him.
- Spike Lee’s movie “Four Little Girls” (1997) addressed the bombing death of four little black girls in Birmingham. The presence of *forgiveness* and a conspicuous absence of anger combined to scandalize America.
- The shooting at Columbine High School, April 20, 1999 (13 killed and 20 wounded) may have resulted in the apocryphal story of Cassie Bernall (“She said ‘Yes.’”); however, it also included the stunning forgiveness of the killers by Cassie’s parents and others. The two killers were hoping to kill many, many more (600+) through their propane bombs at the cafeteria! The timers failed and so did their depraved reach for world-class infamy. Thank God for his mercy—they had none.
- In the Mother Emmanuel Massacre (June 17, 2015) nine persons of color were murdered by Dylan Storm Roof at their Wednesday evening bible study on Mark 4—Myra Thompson’s first official act as a newly ordained minister was to lead this study. Roof’s apparent intent to ignite a race war was defused by *radical forgiveness* to the shock of some and the dismay of others. Alana Simmons posted these words: “Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, this is proof — everyone’s plea for your soul (Roof) is proof, that they lived in love and that their legacies will live in love, so hate won’t win.” At the bond hearing (less than 48 hours after the killings), Nadine Collier (daughter of the slain Ethel Lance) said three “defusive” words: “I forgive you.” She said them to Roof, the killer, and she said them to the judge and to a listening world. It was a declaration of peace where war was anticipated. (Time, Nov. 23, 2015, contains a probing and extensive piece on the massacre—but it bookends with initial resentment and ends with recollected rage. Suggesting that their readership, in their minds, must be entitled to anger—must

be allowed to “process” their resentment. Collier, knowing the love of Jesus, His forgiveness, knows better!) **We love because God first loved us.**

That brings us, naturally enough to the sad, sordid ballad of messy love and relentlessness of forgiveness known as demonstrated by the prophet Hosea. Now there is a tale of traumatizing romance which is simultaneously a portrait of God’s relentless grace. The Lord's Mercy on Israel:

Hosea 2:14-20 English Standard Version (ESV)

14 “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, Gomer is a wife of whoredom, she is the daughter of Diblaim. Hosea marries her and she bears him two sons and a daughters—their names are awful, each bears a prophetic word from God to His faithless nation! Imagine wearing that to elementary school! Jezebel (destruction to the northern kingdom Israel) Lo-hurama (she has not received mercy) and the second son, Lo-ammi (not My people) were their names!

So, the first thirteen verses of Ch. 2 are dedicated to Hosea’s plea to the nation (your mother) but (**she is not my wife—I am not her husband!** v.2) that she will cease prostituting herself, cease seducing strange men and committing adultery with them (as in other gods (Baals), idols and paganism) . . . **Lest I strip her naked . . . make her as a desert place/a barren wilderness . . . and show no mercy to her illegitimate children** v.4. The hope is that Israel will return to the Lord who is the true source of her wealth, prosperity and blessing —*her lovers’ payments are ill-gotten gains*. God promises to wall her off, prevent her from finding more lovers so that **she shall say, I will go and return to my first husband (Hosea) for it was better for me then, than now.** (v. 7c,d) God declares that He will hold back grain, wine and oil, the wool and flax, silver and gold (cosmetic jewelry and adornments) *until there is nothing left to her but her lewdness!* No rescue, no mirth . . . no comfort in pagan observances of any sort, ever. Devastation will dog her every step! **Because she has forgot me.** All this is a display of relentless judgment, chastisement and discipline because God is determined never to give up on her, on her marriage, or on her husband!

V. 14 **Therefore I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her.** That is after all the mess, all the defiance and all the resultant troubling.

15 And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor[a] (her former trials and chastisements) a door of hope.

And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, (as in the days prior to all her sexual misadventure-ism—yes all her prostitution and acting out!)

as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. (Here is a word for her deliverance from sexual bondage and from religious confusion. For Egypt was a spiritual bondage as surely as it was social and political! In Egypt, the Hebrews were subjected to pagan culture and strange gods. Unhappy inclusiveness.)

16 “And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me ‘My Husband,’ and no longer will you call me ‘My Baal.’ (all your confusions will be cancelled!) **17 For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more. 18 And I will make for them** (that is, my people) **a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish[b] the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety.** God will pacify the land! *He is the source of peace.*) **19 And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy.** (These are the terms of the new covenant—just as we find them to be in Christ Jesus!) **20 I will betroth you to me in faithfulness.** (His people shall be as the Bride of Christ!) **And you shall know the Lord.**

Footnotes: Hosea 2:15 Achor means “trouble;” compare Joshua 7:26; Hosea 2:18 Hebrew: “break”

Hosea’s marriage is revealed to us as a picture of God’s relentless love . . . why, if we didn’t know that; this “life parable” which was a picture of divine love, we might conclude that this Hosea’s marriage is a rather compelling case for warranted divorce. The scandal begins in the beginning. God directs Hosea to marry a woman addicted to sex and, unsurprisingly, a prostitute. The scandal is that God would order such a marriage. Surely it was doomed to failure. Surely divorce was both legitimate and, humanly speaking, advisable for the husband subjected to multiple betrayals. Despite having three children by Hosea, despite his solicitous care, Gomer “plays the whore” continually and does not seem able to help herself. This is tough stuff. *This is how Israel is to Me, says the Lord.* Hosea, the wronged husband, takes her back again and again; *his love is relentless.* He forgives even though the world says walk away; he loves even when the world says, she’s not worth it. Hosea loves Gomer with a relentless love, a love like that of our God who expressed that love via forgiveness in His Son.

Amen