At first glance, the Bible may seem like the perfect book for young children to read. Visit any children’s literature section and see the myriads of storybooks on creation, Noah, and the Christmas story. But most children’s books dance around the awkwardness of Adam and Eve’s nakedness, the mysterious episode involving nakedness at the end of Noah’s narrative, and the innuendo of sexual scandal in the Christmas story. In other words, the Bible tells it like it is, especially in the area of sexuality; how comfortable are we with it?

Why does the Bible do this? How do we explain what a harlot is in the narratives of Rahab, Solomon, Judah, Samson, and in the book of Revelation? In one way, sexuality is used as a motif to explain the depravity of humanity. It provides a backdrop of the evils that unfortunately exist and that God has to save us from. But in another manner, God uses human sexuality as a motif for His prophetic illustrations. Intimacy and pleasure connote an intense close relationship that, when betrayed, broken, or fragmented, results in the shattering of God’s heart.

The most romantic relationship in Scripture is between Yahweh and Israel. The only caveat in this relationship is that the female protagonist (that would be His people—us) struggles to remain faithful. These dynamics are portrayed in the most vivid and graphic of narratives, especially in Hosea and Ezekiel 16. They shockingly reveal the inner core of God: these nearly sensual accounts are not some form of erotic literature, but rather prophetic utterances of the most sobering kind.
Write out Ezekiel 16:60–63 from the translation of your choice. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
One of the greatest illustrations to explain the relationship between God and His people is the marriage metaphor (Eph. 5:23–27). God is the husband and His people are His spouse. Jeremiah 2:2 initially describes the relationship in tender terms, but he later laments the forgetfulness of the bride (vv. 32, 33). One could say that their initial union happened when God saved His people out of Egypt. This is found in the preamble of the Ten Commandments. With the giving of these commandments, a covenant sealed the union between the two parties. But the historical books of the Old Testament describe the waywardness of His bride. Ultimately, Jeremiah laments this broken relationship and points to the pending divorce papers in Jeremiah 3:8.

Whereas the faithlessness of Israel could be explained using merely a romance story, under inspiration, the prophets of God take this one step further to accentuate the broken heart of God. The prophets of old would at times speak oral prophecies of rebuke, prediction, and/or counsel. At other times, they would act out their sermons as real-life parables so that the people would visibly and viscerally understand the divine messages. These included cooking with human dung (Ezek. 4:12), while others had prophets beaten up and made to look like soldiers coming back from war (1 Kings 20:37–40).

One of the most dramatic acted-out messages is the well-known story of the prophet Hosea. He wasn’t to experience his wife’s infidelity only, but he was to wed a harlot, actively engaged in the sex industry. The details of the story infer that this was more than an imagined allegory. Children were born to the couple, whose names themselves became sermons. The first was Jezreel, meaning “God scatters”; the second, Lo-Ruhamah, meant “no mercy”; and the last was Lo-Ammi, or “not my people.” Imagine each evening when their names were called out loud by their mother to come back home. The entire town would have heard their unique names. Every time their teacher took roll call, their names would have been the shortest sermons preached out loud. One can find the word play of these names with the corresponding rebukes in Hosea 1:3–9. The motifs of the three children echo through the book in 1:11–2:1 and 2:22, 23 as well as in the New Testament in 1 Peter 2:9, 10.

The sexual infidelity, seduction, adultery, and justification of divorce are the immediate background for the message and theology of the book of Hosea. Despite the incredible pain of the relationship and despite the justification of the divorce, He instructs the prophet to go back and love the adulterous woman (read Hosea 3:1–5). Of the two, God opts for mercy over justice. This is just an amazing and jaw-dropping demonstration of faithfulness and forgiveness. The book of Hosea then continues to indict Israel for her sins, idolatry, and selfishness.

It is at the center of the book where the promise is found. Chapter 6 starts with the call to repentance and to return. Not only does God forgive, call us to return, and continue to love us, but through His Spirit there is the promise of revival, resurrection from the dead, and transformation. In order words, God doesn’t only forgive us, but through the covenant promises, He desires to transform us. This transformation is beyond religious forms such as sacrifice and burnt offerings (6:6). It is the intimate knowledge of God; not about God but knowing Him and experiencing His personal mercy and heart.
REMEMBER

It may be one of the most graphic chapters of the Bible. If you haven’t done so already, read the entire chapter of Ezekiel 16. Its explicit detail is not for entertainment value. Rather the spiritual audacity of God’s people is highlighted, only to be even more outshined by the profound and unfailing love of God.

Verses 1-5 parallel the beginnings of the people of Israel as a baby found in the wilderness. Rather than letting it die, the finder has pity and saves the child. Not only does the protagonist raise the child, but later falls romantically in love with her. Here the loves of romance and foster parent are insufficient to convey the divine love that God has for His people. Instead they form a composite love that points to a higher type of love. The two are married under the covenant oath (v. 8) and the bride is adorned with the best jewels and metals. (Note the bride is adorned by God, not by herself.) Images of beauty, taste, wealth, and delicacy are used to describe their union (vv. 9–14). In a sense, this is the most beautiful couple found in Scripture. It is the love story of love stories. Sadly, it does not end here.

Alas, the next section starts with the word but (v. 15). The bride was unsatisfied with this relationship. The reason is found throughout the passage and then summarized at the end. Although she married up (the most “up” possible!), she wanted more, and in turn, played the harlot with those around her. Using and abusing the gifts she received, she courted more suitors and seduced them (vv. 16–19). Combining the motifs of harlotry with idolatry, their children were sacrificed to other gods (vv. 20–22), and high places of idol worship were built.

The text then mourns at how this woman offered herself to everyone who walked by (v. 25). Each of the names of the nations that Israel betrayed God with are listed: Egypt (v. 26); the Philistines (v. 27); the Assyrians (v. 28); and the Chaldeans (v. 29). Ironically, these are the nations that subjugated or aggravated Israel throughout her history. Furthermore, the text repeats the phrase that she was not satisfied even with these lovers.

God declares what will happen to His bride in the judgment (vv. 35–43). Some are scared with the strong language God uses during His judgment sentences. But when you understand the context of their relationship and history, God sounds like a spurned husband who has the justice of the universe on His side. The Bible is clear that the sacred spiritual and physical union between husband and wife was violated. Not only singularly violated, but continuously, willingly, and multitudinously. The extremes are underscored in that though harlots accept payment, this woman offered her body for free (v. 31) and, in fact, paid men to satiate her desires (vv. 32–34).

Why is this almost near-pornographic narrative found in Scripture? It is to symbolize the holiness of the union between God and His people and how this precious union was violated. The violation can only be understood in the context of the original holiness intended in the covenant union.

The good news is found in verses 60–63, where, although the wife has not remembered, the Divine Husband will indeed remember. Rather than a two-way covenant, God establishes a one-way covenant (like a will), in which God causes forgiveness, justified righteousness on our behalf, sanctified righteous living, atonement, and our salvation. In short, He recreates His bride. Not only has He created us, loved us, brought us out of the wilderness, cleaned us, married us, established us and prospered us, and then forgiven us, and saved us; through all this He has remembered His covenant promises and been faithful to us. When we see all this and remember, repent, and return, He also changes us that we may always remember the covenant and be with Him forever.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Ephesians 5:21–33
Hosea 1–3; 6:1-6
Ezekiel 23:1–49
1 Peter 2:9, 10
Isaiah 54:5–8

What other narratives come to mind in connection with the promiscuity of God’s people?

Review your memorized verse from Ezekiel 16.
THREADS OF A ROPE

The Greek language has different words for love, as you already may be aware. Many are familiar with four of them, but the language has many other words that point to love. *Philia* points to a friendship love, one that can be found between any two individuals. Usually it is connected to those having fought a battle or having experienced some mutual trauma, where the bond is sealed in friendship. Not found in the New Testament, *storge* refers to another type of love that connects family members and relatives. It usually points to a parent or a guardian who has a deep love for their little ones. *Agape* is a selfless love that is epitomized by divine love, but can also be used for human relationships that are sacrificial in nature. With Christ’s sacrifice for us, this word can be easily used to describe His love. Because of the similarity of *eros* with the words *erotic* and *erogenous*, it is often confused with physical or sensual love. In fact, this love points to a love of the beauty of someone. There are other types of love that describe the love of self, a hospitality-centered love, and a playful type of love.

While we often attribute each type of love to different relationships, God is not limited by one. In reading Scripture, we find that God utilizes several and is not limited to *agape* love. In fact, in John 20 Jesus instructs Peter to love His sheep, but He uses the two verbs of *agapao* and *phileo* together. Rather than categorizing these loves, they are used together to convey the full spectrum of Christian love.

The reality is that with God, who is the essence of love (1 John 4:8, 16), He is not one category of love, but the ultimate encapsulation of true love, even that outside of the realm of the Greek language. Like threads of a rope, it is not just one flavor of love, but all the threads wrapped around as one composite that can illustrate God’s love.

We as fallen beings may have a hard time understanding this grand truth. God breaks down this wonderful rope into its different strands to help us understand His heart. We must be careful to try to understand each thread as He explains it, but also not to think that the entirety of God’s love can be encapsulated in words or even fully comprehended. Only eternity will make it possible to really begin contemplating this wonderous topic in the depth it deserves.

*Eros* love is a deep passionate love that later historically became connected to sexuality, but originally was associated with beauty, intimacy, and beyond the physical. It is not the physical mechanics or erotic feelings that God’s love is being compared to. Rather, knowing God’s love involves unashamed-ness, zeal, fervor, intimacy, exclusivity, no-one-else-exists-in-this-world-but-you-ness, emotion, and even passion. It is the same passion that exists between two lovers. In fact, the love of two lovers pales in comparison to the fervor of God’s love for us! Should not God be love-struck or distraught? Should not He be angry and jealous when betrayed?

What is usually misunderstood as the unbridled anger and impatient wrath of the Old Testament God is instead His fervidness of love, usually over humanity’s broken relationship with Him. Modernity wants leaders of authenticity and public figures showing their emotions and faults. Ironically, it is the God of the Old Testament who is often accused of being too emotional. This is far from the stoic, emotionless, philosophical god of the Middle Ages, who sits on His throne untouchable by human affairs. On the contrary, God is a God of passionate love (amongst other loves), who will do anything for His people, including the greatest dramatic act of the universe, being willing to go to death, even the death of the cross.
inSight

Review the memory verse.
How does it apply to your life this week?

After this week's study of the chapter, what are personal applications you are convicted of in your life?

What are you personally convicted of in your public behavior?

PLAYING THE HARLOT

“In the Bible the sacred and enduring character of the relation that exists between Christ and His church is represented by the union of marriage. The Lord has joined His people to Himself by a solemn covenant, He promising to be their God, and they pledging themselves to be His and His alone. He declares: ‘I will betroth thee unto Me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto Me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in loving-kindness, and in mercies.’ Hosea 2:19. And, again: ‘I am married unto you.’ Jeremiah 3:14. And Paul employs the same figure in the New Testament when he says: ‘I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.’ 2 Corinthians 11:2.

“The unfaithfulness of the church to Christ in permitting her confidence and affection to be turned from Him, and allowing the love of worldly things to occupy the soul, is likened to the violation of the marriage vow. The sin of Israel in departing from the Lord is presented under this figure; and the wonderful love of God which they thus despised is touchingly portrayed: ‘I swear unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God, and thou becamest Mine.’ ‘And thou wast exceeding beautiful and thou didst prosper into a kingdom. And thy renown went forth among the heathen for thy beauty: for it was perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee. . . . But thou didst trust in thine own beauty, and playedst the harlot because of thy renown.’ ‘As a wife treacherously departeth from her husband, so have ye dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel, saith the Lord;’ ‘as a wife that committeth adultery, which taketh strangers instead of her husband!’ Ezekiel 16:8, 13–15, 32; Jeremiah 3:20.

“In the New Testament, language very similar is addressed to professed Christians who seek the friendship of the world above the favor of God. Says the apostle James: ‘Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.’ . . .

“Babylon is said to be ‘the mother of harlots.’ By her daughters must be symbolized churches that cling to her doctrines and traditions, and follow her example of sacrificing the truth and the approval of God, in order to form an unlawful alliance with the world. The message of Revelation 14, announcing the fall of Babylon must apply to religious bodies that were once pure and have become corrupt. Since this message follows the warning of the judgment, it must be given in the last days; therefore it cannot refer to the Roman Church alone, for that church has been in a fallen condition for many centuries. Furthermore, in the eighteenth chapter of the Revelation the people of God are called upon to come out of Babylon. According to this scripture, many of God’s people must still be in Babylon. And in what religious bodies are the greater part of the followers of Christ now to be found? Without doubt, in the various churches professing the Protestant faith. At the time of their rise these churches took a noble stand for God and the truth, and His blessing was with them. Even the unbelieving world was constrained to acknowledge the beneficent results that followed an acceptance of the principles of the gospel. In the words of the prophet to Israel: ‘Thy renown went forth among the heathen for thy beauty: for it was perfect through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord God.’ But they fell by the same desire which was the curse and ruin of Israel--the desire of imitating the practices and courting the friendship of the ungodly. ‘Thou didst trust in thine own beauty, and playedst the harlot because of thy renown.’ Ezekiel 16:14, 15.” (Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 381–383.)
inQuire

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Which other portions of Scripture have adult-only material and why is it there?

Why does God use sexual violation as the context to convey His perspective with human rebellion?

Since our God is a God of passionate love, what effects does this have on how we view humanity and ourselves?

How does believing in this type of God affect our relationships with others?

How do we remember to remember?

How can we get more “and” thinking rather than “either/or” thinking?

How has this deepened your understanding of God and understanding of yourself as a creation of God?