

Unit 1: Major Themes from Minor Prophets

Lesson 6 | April 6, 2025

God Stubbornly Loves

Study Text

Hosea 11:1–11; Joel 2:12–27; Zechariah 1:1–17

Central Truth

God is love.

Key Verse: Jeremiah 31:3

Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee (KJV).

“I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself” (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will recognize that God is both heartbroken and angered by sin.
- Students will examine their hearts for unrepentant sin and turn back to God.
- Students will devote themselves to loving God with all their hearts, souls, and minds.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: Most of our best memories are connected to feelings of being safe, loved, and cared for. Maybe your grandmother would rub your back when you were sick as a kid. Maybe your spouse took care of extra chores while you were struggling at work. Maybe a friend sat with you and listened while you poured out grief or frustration. There are many ways people can make us feel loved.

Discussion Starter—Loved and Cared For

Say: Share about a time you felt especially loved and cared for. (*Examples might include childhood memories, relationship milestones, or random acts of kindness.*)

Say: In his book *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis explained that the purest moments of love between people are just shadows of the perfect love of God. However big we may picture God’s love in our minds, it is bigger. Here’s how C.S. Lewis put it:

God, who needs nothing, loves into existence [unnecessary] creatures in order that He may love and perfect them. He creates the universe, already foreseeing . . . the buzzing cloud of flies about the cross . . . [He] causes us to be that we may exploit and “take advantage” of Him. . . . This is the diagram of Love Himself, the inventor of all loves.¹

Alongside all the judgment and destruction foretold in the Minor Prophets, there is also a strong message of God’s faithful love. Even though His people repeatedly betrayed

Him, God could not bring himself to break His covenant with them. Instead, He called them again and again to return to Him and be completely restored by His love.

Part 1—The Father’s Compassion

Heartbroken and Angry

Hosea 11:1–7

Say: One of Jesus’ most famous parables was the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15. The son rebelled and ran away, breaking his father’s heart. When he realized his mistake, he shamefully came home, hoping to survive by becoming a servant in his father’s house. What happened next was amazing. “When he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (verse 20). Because of the father’s steadfast love, all was forgiven the moment his son returned. Seven hundred years earlier, the prophet Hosea recorded a different perspective on the Heavenly Father’s steadfast love—this time from the Father’s point of view.

As you may recall from earlier lessons, Hosea was the last recorded prophet to speak to the northern kingdom of Israel before it was overtaken by the Assyrians. Hosea was unique among the Minor Prophets. Not only did he deliver God’s messages, but his own marriage and family were object lessons of Israel’s unfaithfulness.

Resource Packet Item 1: The Prophet Hosea

This information sheet about Hosea’s life and ministry will help students better understand the message of his book.

Hosea 11 likely was written just before Israel fell to the Assyrians, when Baal worship was a regular practice in Israel. In the first seven verses, God described the past, present, and immediate future of His relationship with Israel. God’s profound heartbreak and anger were evident as He compared His selfless love with Israel’s rebellion and indifference (verse 1). As a loving Father, He had called Israel out of Egyptian slavery and into freedom. But instead of coming toward Him, Israel moved farther away from Him to worship false gods (verse 2). Then God had stooped down to teach Israel to walk (verse 3), leading them with the Law, the ministry of Moses and Joshua, and even His own fiery presence. But Israel ignored God, apparently thinking they had learned to walk on their own.

The metaphor shifts in verse 4 as God described how He cared for Israel like a beloved animal, leading them gently and removing their harness to allow them to rest and be fed from God’s own hand. God had indeed delivered the people from the yoke of Egyptian slavery, providing for all their needs in the wilderness. But Israel continually betrayed God, and in verse 5, He turned from rehearsing the past to addressing the present. Since the people refused to return to Him, they would “return to Egypt” in the sense that they would again be enslaved—this time by the Assyrians. Because of Israel’s lack of reverence and love for God, judgment was coming (verses 6–7).

Discuss

? What words or phrases in this passage show that God is heartbroken? angry?
? In what ways do you think God's people today might be breaking His heart or angering Him? How can we change course?

Moved with Compassion

Hosea 11:8–11

Say: Several times in the Gospels, Jesus is “moved with compassion”—when He sees people who are hungry (Matthew 14:14; 15:32), people who are sick or injured (20:34; Mark 1:41), and people who are grieving (Luke 7:13). In Hosea 11, the Father himself is moved with compassion when He considers His people, Israel. They may have betrayed Him, but He would not abandon them.

Hosea 11:1–7 focused on Israel's past, present, and near future, but verse 8 marks a shift as God turned to the distant future. In astonishing words of love—which in Hebrew, are perfectly balanced poetic phrases—God recommitted himself to Israel: “How can I give you up, Israel? How can I let you go?” (verse 8). He decided He would not allow His people to be destroyed like Admah (*AD-mah*) or Zeboiim (*Zih-BOY-im*), cities near Sodom and Gomorrah. He was within His rights to wipe Israel out, since they had broken covenant with Him. But instead, after the immediate judgment via the Assyrians, He would give Israel another opportunity to be restored to relationship with Him.

The reason for His decision is found in verses 8–9. The Father's heart was broken at the thought of Israel's destruction, and He was moved by compassion. God is not a petty human with limited vision and understanding; He is the Holy One—as merciful as He is just. And in that moment, mercy triumphed over judgment (James 2:13). Yes, the people would be exiled, but one day a portion of their descendants would return to the Lord (Hosea 11:10). He would “roar like a lion” to call them back to himself. Some commentators draw a connection between this future call to repentance and the ministry of Jesus, who is called “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Revelation 5:5).

Hosea 11:11 describes the repentant Israelites as “trembling like doves” when they approach God after their exile. This sign of humility and penitence was much like that of the prodigal son in Luke 15, who said, “I am no longer worthy of being called your son” (verse 21). But what was the father's response? “Quick! . . . We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found” (verses 22–24). When we humbly return to our Heavenly Father—no matter how long we've been gone or how far we've wandered—we will receive the same loving welcome.

Discuss

? Why do we sometimes let shame keep us from returning to God? How can Hosea 11 and Luke 15 help us overcome that tendency?

Part 2—The Call to Repentance

“Return to Me”

Zechariah 1:1–6

Say: As we discussed in the last lesson, Zechariah prophesied about 250 years after Hosea—after God’s people returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile. As the people returned to their homeland and began to rebuild the temple, Zechariah encouraged them to learn from the mistakes of their ancestors and devote themselves completely to God.

Zechariah 1:1–6 sets the stage for the visions the prophet would record throughout the book. Zechariah’s lineage indicates he was descended from priests, but he is called a prophet in verse 1—either by his own designation or possibly by an editor who added the introduction to his book.

His first oracle began with a reminder of the Lord’s anger against Israel’s ancestors (verse 2). This would have been all too evident to the people just back from Babylon. They were in the process of cleaning up the ruins of the temple, which had been destroyed seventy years earlier when God’s judgment fell. In fact, they may have been literally standing among the rubble as they listened to Zechariah’s words. In this new context, they were given the same message as their ancestors: “Return to me, and I will return to you” (verse 3). Because of His love for them, God implored the people to learn from the examples of the past and listen to Him (verse 4).

God then drew a comparison between mortal people and His everlasting word. The people’s ancestors and even the prophets had died long ago, but God’s words had not passed away. The people would be wise to realize that God always means what He says. “The grass withers and the flowers fade”—and so do people—“but the word of our God stands forever” (Isaiah 40:8).

Most scholars believe Zechariah 1:6 indicates that the people did, in fact, repent and serve the Lord. This would explain their renewed efforts to rebuild the temple soon afterwards. Like the Israelites, we also have been given models of spiritual fruitfulness and spiritual failure, stretching from the present day all the way back to the Garden of Eden. As we follow Jesus today, we should learn from the good and bad examples of all the people who came before us.

Discuss

? What are some spiritual examples we should learn from—whether in the Bible, in history, or in the present day?

? How can we pass these lessons on to the next generation?

“Give Me Your Hearts”

Joel 2:12–17

Say: As you may remember, Joel is one of the hardest prophets to place in a specific time. Some believe the Book of Joel was written around the time of Hosea, while others

believe it should be placed even later than Zechariah. The book's context may be unknown, but its message of repentance and restoration is clear.

Joel 2:12–17 has been called “a theological treatise on Yahweh’s mercy.”² Up to this point, the book contains cycles of lament, warning, and the call to repent. Verse 12 marks the end of the second cycle as the Lord again calls His people to return to Him.

Joel pleaded with the people to remember God’s nature as revealed throughout the Old Testament: He is “merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love” (verse 13; see also Exodus 34:6–7; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 103:8; Jonah 4:2). This loving, relational God was looking for more than outward signs of repentance (Joel 2:13). He would settle for nothing less than people’s whole hearts.

Resource Packet Item 2: Our Compassionate God

The Bible repeatedly describes God as kind and compassionate. Students will read several Scriptures and note what each one teaches about God’s compassion.

Verse 14 shows that although God is unchanging, He can alter His decisions. He grants reprieves and delays judgment when He chooses to do so (Exodus 32:12–14; 1 Chronicles 21:15; Amos 7:2–3). At other times, He carries through with His intended judgment (Jeremiah 4:27–28; Ezekiel 24:14). In case God might choose to relent this time, Joel called the people of Jerusalem to gather and repent (Joel 2:15). No one was excused from this appeal. Verse 16 specifically calls out elderly people, children, babies, and newly married couples—all of whom were usually exempt from certain religious rituals in those times. The priests were to lead the people in repentance, taking up their traditional place of intercession in the temple (verse 17).

The call to repent in this passage (verses 12, 14–17) is based on a renewed understanding of God’s character (verse 13). Because God is merciful and compassionate, return to Him! Because God is patient and filled with unfailing love, return to Him! Still today, we are drawn to repentance when we reflect on the love and goodness of God. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Romans: “Can’t you see that [God’s] kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?” (2:4).

Discuss

- ? How can our understanding of God’s nature affect the way we interact with Him?
- ? How can we be sure we have a proper understanding of His character?

Part 3—The Promise of Restoration

The Plague Will End

Joel 2:18–21

Say: In her book *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, Laura Ingalls Wilder described a plague of locusts that destroyed her family’s Minnesota wheat crop in 1875: “The cloud was hailing grasshoppers. The cloud was grasshoppers. Their bodies hid the sun and made darkness. Their thin, large wings gleamed and glittered. The rasping whirring of their

wings filled the whole air and they hit the ground and the house with the noise of a hailstorm.”³ Little did Laura know that she was witnessing the start of the largest locust swarm ever seen in North America—covering 198,000 square miles and containing 3.5 trillion locusts.⁴ The desperation of the people and the desolation of the land during that time may hint at what the people of Israel were experiencing in the days of Joel.

Joel 2:18 marks a turning point in the book. There is a tense shift as Joel began to prophesy what would happen in the near future: The passive judgment of locusts, fire, and drought would draw to a close as God’s active compassion took center stage. Not only would God replenish the supplies of His people, but He would also restore their dignity (verse 19). Scholars disagree as to whether the “armies from the north” in verse 20 refer to a literal army like the Assyrians or Babylonians or a figurative army of locusts. (There is historical precedent to show that both would have entered Palestine from the north.) Either way, Israel’s enemies were on their way out.

Next, Joel declared a four-line praise poem—a classic style in which the last line closely echoes the first. “Surely the LORD has done great things! . . . the LORD has done great things” (verses 20–21). This emphasis indicated the miraculous reversal would not be gradual, but immediate. The land that had once mourned (1:10) would now rejoice at the goodness of God (2:21).

God’s faithful love should cause us to rejoice too! Yes, we will have trouble in this world—sometimes because of our sin, and other times simply because the world is broken. But at just the right time, God will make things right again. “Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

Resource Packet Item 3: Reflecting on God’s Love

Students will read and prayerfully reflect on Romans 8:35–39, thanking God for the amazing love He has shown us through Jesus. This handout would work best as a take-home page for personal devotions.

Discuss

? How have you seen God bring about a sudden reversal—either in a situation or in a person’s life?

? How can we keep rejoicing in God’s goodness even if our “plague” season has not yet ended?

The Land Will Be Fruitful Again

Joel 2:22–27

Say: Repentance is powerful! After the people turned to the Lord, He began to pile blessings on them. Not only did He restore what had been lost to locusts, famine, and drought, but He gave the people more than they knew to ask for: the promise of His indwelling presence.

Building on the praise poem in Joel 2:20–21, the prophet launched into a description of the bounty the Lord would pour out on His people. The animals would again graze in the pastures. The trees and vines would again bear fruit (verse 22). The once-predictable autumn and spring rains would fall again as a testimony of God’s faithfulness (verse 23). The harvest of grain, wine, and oil would pour in again (verse 24). These three staples appear repeatedly in the Old Testament to signify the Lord’s provision (Joel 1:10; 2:19; Hosea 2:8, 22; Haggai 1:11).

Joel 2:25 strengthens the argument that the invading army from the north was indeed locusts. In such plagues, locusts often appear a few years in a row, making the resulting famine even worse. But God declared an end to this destruction: “Once again you will have all the food you want, and you will praise the LORD your God who does these miracles for you” (verse 26). This section ends with a double reminder in verses 26 and 27: “Never again will my people be disgraced.” God would end His people’s shame, once again setting them apart as His beloved people.

If you continue reading Joel 2, you’ll recognize the next phase of God’s blessing in the familiar words quoted by Peter on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). After all these other acts of love and kindness, God promised, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on servants—men and women alike” (Joel 2:28–29). We are recipients of this promise.

Discuss

? How do you think the people responded when they heard this message of restoration and provision?

? What are some areas where you need God to restore what has been destroyed?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: The Minor Prophets were not just messengers of judgment and doom. They also spoke of the faithful, steadfast love of God the Father. Time and again, God called His people to leave their sin and turn back to Him. He pleaded with them to be faithful, to love Him as devotedly as He loved them. He wants the same from us. And when we repent and commit ourselves completely to Him, we experience blessings we never could have imagined. “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1, NIV).

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Read Hosea 11:1–11 and Luke 15:11–32 in one sitting. Spend some time thanking your Father for loving you so faithfully.
- Think of a friend who is far from God. Strike up a conversation this week to remind them of God’s love and encourage them to return to Him.
- Choose a place in your town or neighborhood that has been desolated by sin. Pray over that location—either in-person or using an online map. Ask God to restore what has been destroyed and to draw people to repentance by His love.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

God's Compassionate Love.

Psalms 78:34–38

Tuesday:

God's Everlasting Love.

Jeremiah 31:1–6

Wednesday:

God's Life-Giving Love.

Ezekiel 16:1–8

Thursday:

God's Abiding Love.

John 15:9–17

Friday:

God's Sacrificial Love.

Galatians 2:17–21

Saturday:

God's Gracious Love.

1 Timothy 1:12–17

1. C.S. Lewis, *The C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 827.

2. *The Complete Biblical Library: The Old Testament Study Bible*, ed. Ralph W. Harris, Stanley M. Horton, Gayle Garrity Seaver (Tulsa, OK: Empowered Life, 1994–2000), Accordance.

3. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1971), 195.

4. Jackie Mead, "The Locust that Ate the American West," *Mental Floss*, May 2, 2022, <https://www.mentalfloss.com/posts/the-locust-that-ate-the-american-west-01g19ac93x9b>.