

ENDLESS LOVE

Today's Text: Hosea Chap. 11

Extracts:

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt, I called My son. ... I taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by their arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I drew them with gentle cords, with bonds of love, and I was by them as those who take the yoke from their neck...My people are bent at backsliding from Me...Though they call to the Most High, none at all exalt Him. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? ... My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred; I will not execute the fierceness of My anger” [Hos. 11: 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9a]

Love Story (1970) is a classical movie, based on Erich Segal's novel of the same title which has been translated into 20 languages. Oliver Barrett IV was at Harvard in line with the tradition of his rich and aristocratic family. There, he met and fell in love with a 'commoner,' Jennifer Cavalleri. His father, Oliver Barrett III, threatened to cut off his son's funds if he defied him to marry her. The young man defied his father, married her and had to fend for himself through Harvard Law School. During that period, he rebuffed all attempts by his wife to reconnect him to his family, especially as she and her father were very close. On graduation, the young man got a good job with a New York law firm. Soon after, he and his wife tried to raise a family only for the doctors to discover that she had a terminal disease. He was determined to save her life but he could not afford the bill. So, he went to his father that he had not seen in years and asked for a 'loan' while refusing to disclose the purpose. His father issued him a cheque. A few days later, his wife died. Just as he was leaving the hospital alone and dejected, he saw his father at the door.

Why did the young man swallow his pride and go to his father for help? Why did his strict father help without asking questions or insisting first on an apology? How did his father find out about his daughter-in-law's hospitalization? Only love can explain it, endless love. It is quite common especially between parents and their children. They may not be on speaking terms. They may not even like each other. But deep down in their hearts, there is a bond of love that can never be broken. In today's lesson, God said of the disobedient children of Israel, “How can I hand you over? ... My heart churns within Me.” Why is this so? How can we enjoy a similar privilege with God?

Let us find out.

1. What is endless love?

Let us dismiss some notions about love. First, love is *strictly* a human thing, and it involves a *relationship* between two parties. That is why we say that human beings make love but animals mate. Human beings marry but animals do not. Second, love goes beyond love-making. For example, you do not need love to make love; otherwise, prostitutes will be out of business! Third, love goes beyond charity or friendship; otherwise Robin Hood who stole from the rich to give to the poor would be a living saint! Love is all of the above and more.

In Paul's famous chapter on love, he wrote [1 Cor. 13: 4-8]:

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely; does not seek its own, is not provoked; thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity; but rejoices in the truth; ... love never fails

The forgoing confirms that *love is a relationship and it is measured by your response, not what others do to you*. When one of the Pharisees (a lawyer) asked Jesus what was the great commandment in the law, He told him to love God with all his heart, soul and mind, and his neighbours *as himself*. He added, "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" [Matt. 22: 34-40]. The *bottom line* then is that love measures *your attitude to God and His word* for, in the words of Jesus, "If *anyone* loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to live and make Our home with him" [Jn 14: 23].

So, how do you see love? Let us find out from the following examples:

a) *Love as a contract*

When we rent a new apartment or get a new job or do any such like thing, we sign a contract with the other party. In it, we set out the terms and conditions, that is, our obligations and rights and the other party's duties and rights. In most cases, there is a *termination clause* that may say something like this, "This contract can be terminated by either party giving the other ... (notice) or pay in lieu of it." Neither party may be under a contractual obligation to disclose the reason (s) for the termination. So, when the contract expires (by time or default), the remedies due to an offended party cannot come from outside the said contract.

Most of us treat love as a contract. For example, many people go into a marriage with the clear mind to remain in it for as long as it benefits them. In fact, we now hear of people signing 'prenuptial agreements' that set out how assets should be shared in the event of a divorce. Clearly, such a marriage has not been given any chance to survive!

Some people change friends as often as they change their clothes. When you analyze their situations, you will hear charges of “betrayal of trust,” or “ingratitude,” or whatever. There are ‘sufficient’ grounds for ending the friendship ‘contract’! So, when we are benefitting from a friendship that we do not want to break up, in spite of compelling evidence of deceit, distrust and betrayal, we do not speak the truth to one another. We join our friends to war against their enemies instead of telling our friends to make peace. We have no permanent friends but permanent interests! Such show of love cannot last.

Look at our charitable deeds. Most people participate just to get on a popular bandwagon or for pecuniary gain. For example, some of us pay tithes or donate to charity because they are tax-deductible. The more you pay, the less your taxes. If most countries were to change their laws to make charitable donations or tithes no longer tax-deductible, there would be a significant drop in our contributions because the ‘contract’ has been terminated. Such love cannot last.

People who treat love as a contract cannot love others on a long term basis. because they will only love on a *reciprocal* basis. Of such people, Jesus said, “If you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others?” [Matt. 5: 46-47]. Audit the circle of people you claim to love and tell me how many of your detractors are there! If God were to love you on a contractual basis, you would be the first to break it with your sins!

b) *Love as a covenant*

A covenant is much stronger than a contract in that once entered into, it cannot be broken because a covenant is made with a vow or an oath. According to the word of God, “When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for *the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and it would be sin to you*” [Deut. 23: 21]. It usually involves the shedding/exchange of blood.

For example, after Moses had received the law from God on Mount Sinai, he came to the people with “the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, ‘All that the Lord has said, we will do, and be obedient.’” Then he “took the blood (of animals), sprinkled it on the people, and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you *according to all these words*’” [Ex. 24: 1-8]. Today’s bible text covers love based on a covenant.

2. God shows endless love to a disobedient people

Let us go back to the origin of Israel. Abraham was of a pagan Syrian tribe when God called him out to Canaan to start His chosen race. At the time, he was 75 years old and his barren wife, Sarah, was ten years younger. After ten years of hoping and waiting for the promised child, nothing happened. In a vision, God appeared to Abraham (then known as Abram and his wife as Sarai) and showed him innumerable stars in the dark night and said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” Abraham believed God and He accounted it to him for righteousness [**Gen. 15: 1-6**]. Abraham then asked God how he would know that he would in deed inherit the land promised him. In response, God signed a blood covenant with Abraham, giving the stretch of land between the Nile in Egypt and the Euphrates in Babylon to his descendants [**vv. 8-18**]. Over time, more covenants followed, such as the one of circumcision before Isaac was conceived [**Gen. 17: 10-12**], and the establishment of the eternal throne of David [**2 Sam. 7: 1-13**]. Consequently, God came to regard Israel, made up of the descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, as “a holy people” that He had chosen for Himself, “a special treasure *above all the peoples on the face of the earth*” [**Deut. 7: 6**]. A covenant cannot be broken!

You can then understand God’s words in the bible text under consideration. God had cared for them from childhood, and led them out of slavery in Egypt [**Hos. 11: 1**]. Without their knowing, He had healed them and wrapped “bands of love” around them to lead them in the right direction [**vv. 3-4**]. What was the people’s response? They always returned to Egypt (worldliness and immorality) in their hearts; they were always backslidden and never repentant. In their hypocrisy, they called on the name of the Most High without exalting Him [**vv. 5-7**]. God is a consuming fire [**Heb. 12: 29**] and by their sins, they deserved to face the full wrath of God’s justice.

However, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is a covenant-keeper. He said through the prophet Hosea, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? ... My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred; I will not execute the fierceness of My anger” [**Hos. 11: 8-9**]. His endless love for the descendants of Abraham remained.

Does that mean that God violated His laws on justice [**Deut. 28: 15- 68**]? No. Thousands perished in Egypt (as slaves or on the way to the Promised Land), in their homeland Israel and in Babylon (in captivity). Millions of them perished under Hitler’s *pogrom* during the Second World War. However, God has kept a remnant to fulfill His covenant and for His end time plans. For example, Ephraim might have lied and the house of Israel might also have deceived “but Judah still walk(ed) with God, even with the Holy One *who is faithful*” [**Hos. 11: 12**]. It was their descendants that would in due course hear God “roar like a lion” and they would come “trembling from the west ... like a bird from Egypt (and) like a dove from the land of Assyria.” [**Hos. 11: 10-11**]. They are the ones who have been dwelling “in their houses” in the modern state of Israel in the last fifty years! God’s love endures forever.

3. Conclusion: Now it is your turn to enjoy covenant love!

Soon after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, wise men came from the East to pay Him homage [Matt. 2: 1]. They came to Jerusalem, to Herod the king, whom they asked where to find the new born King. Herod asked them to help him find out and to bring back word. However, after the wise men (the *Magi*) had seen and paid homage to Jesus, God warned them in a dream not to return to Herod. He also warned Joseph in a dream to take his wife, Mary, and the child Jesus by night to Egypt in order to escape Herod's planned massacre of infants about the age of Jesus. Joseph and his family remained in Egypt until after the death of Herod "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet [Hosea], saying, 'Out of Egypt, I called My Son'" [vv. 2-15]. Now, we can relate today's bible text to ourselves more intimately.

Jesus came in flesh to fulfill the covenant that God had made with Adam and Eve after their fall when He said to the serpent [Satan], "I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise His heel" [Gen. 3: 15]. The covenant was sealed with blood for "the Lord God made tunics of skin, and clothed [Adam and Eve]" [v. 21]. An animal has to shed blood before you can take its skin for clothing! When Jesus was about to be conceived, angel Gabriel appeared to the virgin Mary to announce that Jesus, "the Son of God" was coming to receive "the throne of His father David" [Lk 1: 32-35]. As the Son of God, He came in flesh to shed His blood to seal the covenant of God's love for the whole world [Jn 3: 16]. You will recall that, just after the Last Supper, before Jesus went to His suffering and death on the cross, He took the cup and said to His disciples, "This cup is the new covenant *in My blood which is shed for you*" [Lk 22: 20]. We come under that covenant when we swear (by baptism) to renounce Satan and all his works and accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour! Thereafter, we have to love as God has said we must, namely, endlessly, unrequited (even when insulted!), in truth and with all humility!

Let us take a few examples to illustrate how we can now demonstrate our new covenant love relationships:

a) *In the Family*

In a proper marriage contracted under God, the husband and wife take a vow of perpetual love and loyalty in the presence of witnesses, whether in the church or in the registry. The word of God says, "If a man makes a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word, he shall do according to *all that proceeds out of his mouth*" [Num. 30: 2]. By that covenant, a husband and wife are bound for life to love each other. It is analogous to the marriage between Christ and His bride, the church [Eph. 5: 23-25]. Will Christ ever fail to love His church even when the church is backslidden? For example, out of love He rebuked the lukewarm church of

the Laodiceans in order to chasten it [**Rev. 3: 19**]. You owe God a similar love attitude to your spouse.

Children come out of the union of a man and his wife. Therefore, blood has been shared (at conception) and shed (at birth). That is why family members are said to be related by blood. A man and woman may divorce but children *cannot* be biologically divorced from their parents! They could grow up to old age and yet remain children to their parents. Parents and children may quarrel and fight; they may not even be on speaking terms every now and then. Yet, they may never hate each other or one another because blood is thicker than water! That is covenant love in action.

b) *Friends and neighbours*

David and Jonathan were famous friends and their friendship was sealed with an oath [**1 Sam. 20: 3**] to protect each other's interests "forever" and so "Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, 'Let the Lord require it at the hand of David's enemies'" [**vv. 15-16**]. So, even when Saul's house was destroyed, the descendants of Jonathan were duly protected [**2 Sam. 9**]. Jesus told His disciples, "Greater love has no one than to lay one's life for one's friends" [**Jn 15: 13**]. Abraham has been called God's friend because he was ready to lay down the life of his son Isaac for Him [**Jam. 2: 21-23**]. God loves us because He gave His only begotten Son to die for our sins. Jesus is our friend because He gave His life for us. In like manner, you love your friends when you sacrifice for them, even to the point of death. Anything less is not love.

You are a neighbour to your neighbours. They see you as you see them but how do you see yourself? You may claim to be born again and therefore a child of God and brother/sister of Jesus. Clearly, that puts you in a covenant relationship with God and all His adopted children like yourself [**Rom. 8: 17**]. Why do you think your neighbours are not in a similar situation with Him? Remember, whatsoever you do to the least of God's brethren, you do to Him [**Matt. 25: 40**]. Now, you see why you must love them as yourself. If you hate others, it suggests that you equally hate yourself. If you love them endlessly, God will love you endlessly.

I close with an adaptation of Diana Ross's lyric in *Love Hangover* (1976): "If there is a cure for this [endless love], I don't want it...If there's a remedy I'll run from it!" I wish you God's endless love this Christmas and in the coming years.