

Vanessa
gracia-cruz

A BIBLE STUDY ABOUT

Real Love

BEING LOVED FOR WHO YOU ARE,
IN LEARNING WHOSE YOU ARE



VANESSA GRACIA CRUZ

Introduction

Happy Valentine's day! On this day, where so many around the world are celebrating love, I'm excited to share with you one of my favorite love stories of all time: the one between God and His people, as shown through a young woman named Gomer.

This study is a four part study. I recommend doing one part at a time, so that you can focus on each topic individually. I also recommend taking some time alone to reflect after each section. There will always be things in our hearts that we don't want to share with anyone but God. When we take time to be alone with Him, and just reflect, it's amazing how He can transform even the parts of us that we thought were out of our reach.

In this study we are focusing on the story of a woman named Gomer, and how so many of us can relate to her heart, feeling far from God, and needing Him to pursue us. However, it does not cover the entire book of Hosea. The lessons you'll see here are more for personal reflection than a full-blown lesson on theology. The reason for this is that the story of Gomer is metaphorical, so if you do decide to read through the book of Hosea, remember that some of the things God says are not meant literally towards Gomer, but rather symbolically towards a disobedient society at the time. So, when he says things like, "I will expose her shame," for example, it's important to know He's not talking about us! Through Jesus we have been forgiven and have no more shame! What God feels towards each individual is always forgiving, always merciful, and always loving. But, some of these concepts may be difficult to understand without knowing the history of the Israelites, or biblical context, so make sure you use another study or guide if you plan to go through the whole book.

Gomer

Don't be embarrassed if you have no clue who Gomer is. And, I'm with you if you are wondering to yourself, "what kind of name is that?" Hers is a story buried smack dab in the middle of the old testament, and her name is only mentioned once throughout all of it. Gomer was one of those forgotten girls - the kind everyone had given up on, the kind other girls loved to hate. The only thing we really know about her is that she was a prostitute and she couldn't seem to break out of that world. In fact, when she is first introduced to us in the book of Hosea, we learn that she is a prostitute before we even learn her name. To everyone around

her, that's who she was, nothing more. Her story gets interesting when God tells the prophet Hosea to take a promiscuous, sinful girl, a girl who was an outcast and a rebel, as his wife.

If you think about it, it's such a strange thing that God would ask a prophet, a preacher, to marry this girl and care for her, have children with her, and give her a completely different life. Seems like a Cinderella story, right? Here's the problem: Gomer kept betraying her husband and God and returning to the life she knew before. Time after time she would run off, and God would ask her husband to take her back, forgive her, and start again.

Now, I can't tell you what Gomer felt throughout all this. We don't get to hear the story from her perspective, but rather, the story is told from God's. So, we don't know if she kept going back because she was truly evil or rebellious, which very well could have been the case; or if maybe it was because she felt too dirty, too ashamed, and too self-conscious to truly believe that she deserved more than the life she had known. But, I love that the story is told from God's point of view, because what we DO know, is that to God, she was always worthy of another chance. Throughout this story, we see a range of different emotions. There is anger, and frustration, even from God as he wrestles with Gomer's own inability to let herself be loved. BUT- He does not give up. In fact, even when Hosea has to pay a hefty price as a consequence of her sin, he does, just to prove how much she is worth.

In the end- spoiler alert- Gomer is able to return to Him. God's love transforms her heart and allows her to leave her past behind and start a new way of living. That girl that was once only known as a sinful girl, is able to become a loving wife and mother. God gives her a place to belong, and a family.

The story of Gomer is a metaphor for God's love towards His people. At the time of this story, it seemed like everyone was turning away from the Lord, disobeying Him and worshipping false gods. What He asked Hosea to do was a symbol of what He does with US every time we turn away from Him. We all have a little Gomer in us: that girl that just can't seem to get it right, even when all the opportunities have been presented to her. The goal of this study is that through it we would allow God to show us that we are never too dirty, never too used, and never so far gone that He will no longer think we are worthy of the chase.

Part I: GOMER GIRLS

“When the Lord first spoke to Hosea, He said this to him: Go and marry a promiscuous wife and have children of promiscuity, for the land is committing blatant acts of promiscuity by abandoning the Lord. So he went and married Gomer daughter of Diblaim”

Hosea 1:2-3 (HCSB)

Promiscuous Heart

In the early 2000s there was a really catchy song always on the radio called promiscuous girl. It was about a girl who was basically down to do whatever the promiscuous boy wanted her to do, as long as it was fun. She says, “Roses are red, diamonds are blue, chivalry is dead, but you're still kind of cute.” The girl in this song had basically given up on Mr. Right, and was ready to settle on whatever felt good right now. The word promiscuous when used in the bible is used to indicate a person who wanders away from what’s right. Whether it’s having irresponsible sex, or worshipping idols, they were choosing to turn away from what they knew was good for them. Gomer was a promiscuous girl with a promiscuous heart. Although she knew what she should do, she chose to do wrong anyway.

“For she thought, “I will go after my lovers, the men who give me my food and water”

Hosea 2:5 (HCSB)

It can be so easy to judge Gomer, and to judge other girls, but the bottom line is this: we all have a little Gomer in us. We have all been unfaithful to God, self-indulgent, and rebellious. We have all chosen to go after what will please our flesh, even though we had a feeling it would destroy our spirit. And as a result, many of us have been used, judged, or have felt shame. Like Gomer, many of us have been quick to sell out our morals and trade our dignity for the quick fix and, the worst part is, we were still not satisfied. We found that even when we got the boy, or the money, or whatever we were chasing, we still felt empty and alone.

“She will pursue her lovers but not catch them; she will seek them but not find them.”

Hosea 2:7 (HCSB)

Personal Reflection

Have you ever been labeled?

What do you think the world sees when it looks at you?

Do you ever feel like you are too far gone?

Have you chased after things that could not satisfy you?

Even now, as you read this: Are you looking for satisfaction in things other than God?

The important thing to know, is you are not the only one, and you are NEVER too far gone. The bible says we have ALL sinned, and ALL of us have failed to meet God’s standards (Romans 3:23). No one has ever been able to be 100% good and without blame. The good news is, God knows that, and isn’t threatened by it, which is why He provided an answer. He sent His son to pursue us, and bring us back to Him by taking our place on the cross. Jesus died to take our punishment to prove God’s unconditional love for you.

It’s crazy how caught up we get in our sin. We are really good at convincing ourselves that we only amount to what we’ve done, when the truth is, God loves us for who we are. And we are more than our past, more than our labels, more than our promiscuity. When God looks at you, He sees the heart underneath all your sin and shame. A heart that may be bruised and broken, but is still longing for unconditional love that can only be found in Him. Romans 5:8 says that God showed his unconditional love for us in this: that while we were still sinners he sent His son to die for us. His love is not dependant on what you do and His heart is that you would return to Him.

“This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world so we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about—not that we once upon a time loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they’ve done to our relationship with God.” 1 John 4:9-10 (MSG)

Prayer

Lord, allow me to return to you, and your unconditional love. I know that I've had an unfaithful heart, but I also know that you have never stopped being faithful. I know you love me, and you sent Jesus to mend the bridge between you and me. Allow me to recognize your love for me, and to see myself the way you see me, no longer as a promiscuous girl, but your daughter

PART II: GOD OF RESCUE

“Therefore, I am going to pursue her, lead her to the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.”

Hosea 2:14 (HCSB)

He Pursues Us

Have you ever felt so far away from God that you are almost sure He’s given up on you? When you think about your own promiscuous heart you may wonder how God could love you despite your imperfections. In our last lesson, we discussed how we are never too far gone for God’s love. Regardless of our shortcomings, He is always willing to give us another chance. Still, it can sometimes feel as though the journey from where you are to God is not only distant, but confusing. Not only do you not know how to return to Him, you aren’t sure if you can make the trip.

Here’s the thing, though: you don’t have to. You are never too far from God because He is constantly pursuing you. God’s love for you is so great, He is consistently seeking you out. That’s why even in your darkest moments, even when you felt like your heart was a million miles away, you could sometimes still hear his voice, however distant and small, telling you to come back to Him. Maybe you didn’t know it was his voice. It’s possible you thought you were just crazy, and quickly brushed away the thought. But that whisper deep inside is God’s special form of romance.

Have you ever begun a relationship with someone you weren’t so sure about? Maybe at first you weren’t sure if you liked them, or if it was a right fit. Often what makes the difference in relationships like those is how much one of the people chooses to pursue the other. The more love (or interest, or attraction) there is, the stronger the pursuit will be. In the same way, God’s love for us is so strong, that He doesn’t wait until we reciprocate to start proving His love to us. He finds us, even in our darkest places, and begins to change our lives with His love. The story of Gomer paints a wonderful picture of this. Even though she had run from Him over and

over, He never let her go. Even when we purposely hide from Him, as many of us do, there is nowhere too dark, too ugly, or too remote for His love to reach.

“Is there anyplace I can go to avoid your Spirit? to be out of your sight? If I climb to the sky, you’re there! If I go underground, you’re there! If I flew on morning’s wings to the far western horizon, You’d find me in a minute— you’re already there waiting! Then I said to myself, “Oh, he even sees me in the dark! At night I’m immersed in the light!” It’s a fact: darkness isn’t dark to you; night and day, darkness and light, they’re all the same to you.”

Psalm 139:7-12 (MSG)

Personal Reflection

Have I been trying to hide or run from God?
How did God show me he was still pursuing me, even in my darkest moments?
Was I able to see it? Why or why not?

“Then the Lord said to me, (Hosea) “Go again; show love to a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, just as the Lord loves the Israelites though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes.” So I bought her for 15 shekels of silver and five bushels of barley. I said to her, “You must live with me many days. Don’t be promiscuous or belong to any man, and I will act the same way toward you.”

Hosea 3:1-2 (HCSB)

In Hosea chapter 3, God instructs the prophet Hosea to seek out Gomer, and pursue her with love. As a husband in biblical times, Hosea could have rightfully divorced her because of her unfaithfulness, or could have even put her to death for her adultery. But instead, God tells him to show her love. In the same way, God’s treatment of us is never cruelty, abuse or condemnation. No matter what we’ve done, He’s not interested in making us feel guilty or punishing us for our sin. His attitude towards us is always one of love.

We also see in the story that Hosea is instructed to pay Gomer’s way out of slavery (probably sex-slavery, or trafficking) even though she willingly returned to it after previously being freed. The price he paid was 15 shekels of silver, and 5 bushels of barley, which today would be equivalent to about twenty thousand dollars! Imagine paying twenty thousand dollars to win

back your own wife, and treating her kindly, even when she purposely left you and cheated on you. This unparalleled ability to love is a reflection of God's love for us: even when we did not deserve it, he gave his only son for us, to die on a cross and win us back from our slavery to sin.

Personal Reflection:

How does it feel to know God pursues you endlessly? What thoughts come to your mind when you hear that?

Have you ever thought maybe God gave up on you?

Have you ever felt too far gone?

Have you ever used your sin as a way to hide from God? Have you ever secretly hoped he would find you?

Prayer

God, I'm done hiding. I know you know me better than I know myself. The good parts and bad. Yet, you brought me this message so I could know that you pursue me endlessly. I want to let you catch me. I want to have a personal relationship with you. Thank you for paying a price for me, even when I felt I wasn't worth anything. I no longer want to be lost, but to find who I am in you.

PART III: GOD'S VOW TO HIS BELOVED

“I will take you to be My wife forever. I will take you to be My wife in righteousness, justice, love, and compassion. I will take you to be My wife in faithfulness, and you will know (ME) On that day I will respond— this is the Lord’s declaration...” Hosea 2:19-21 (HSCB)

A New Last Name

So far, we’ve discussed how God’s love can see past our labels, and into our hearts. We’ve touched on how the contents of that heart, however bad, don’t scare him- He’s still willing to love us unconditionally. Then we spoke about how God is willing to pursue us, no matter how far we may be from Him. But, what then? Is it really possible to keep from going back to our old ways of living?

It is possible. The moment you give your heart to God, he makes a vow to you to be faithful to you forever. From that moment on, you no longer need to go through life alone. As you can see in the verse above, God made promises to Gomer, just as he makes them to you. The first thing he promises is to change her identity. Gomer would no longer be known as the promiscuous girl we spoke about in part 1 of this study. She is no longer a hooker, a beggar, a slave, or a side-chick. She is His wife. We know that when a man takes a wife, he makes a lasting commitment to be by her side, and to change her last name (don’t get all feminist on me here, it’s just an example). In biblical times, your last name was a symbol of who your protector was. In those days, it was very dangerous for women. They were often kidnapped, abused, and mistreated. You were either protected by your father or, when the time came, by your husband. The name your husband gave you was also very important because it represented your social status. To carry the name of a man of honor meant you were treated with honor and respect from those around you.

In this passage, God makes a lasting commitment to Gomer, which illustrates His lasting commitment to us. He vows to protect us, to be faithful and compassionate towards us, but best of all to be our protector. As our “husband” (not a literal husband but one who commits to us for life) God promises to take us under His protection. From the moment that happens, what we are known for

begins to change as well. We no longer need to be known for our past, but rather can begin to be known for the new things we do through our new life. We get a clean slate! When God sees you, he no longer sees you as the girl you were, but the girl you can become.

Personal Reflection

What does a new slate mean for me?

Who would I be if I could start over, with God's help?

What are the things I'd like God to renew in my heart?

How Do We Do It?

You may be thinking: "that sounds great, but how do I actually do it? How can I stay the path when my old ways are constantly tempting me? How is it possible for a change to occur in my heart?" The answer is in the text above. When God takes you to be His, He also supplies you with everything that He has: righteousness, justice, love, and compassion. You see, when a husband takes a wife, He not only promises to be with her, He also promises to share everything He has with her. From that moment on, everything that is his also becomes hers. Similarly, when God commits to us, He also commits to share with us everything that we will need to live a new life: one worthy of the new name we've been given. In this passage God promises to share these things with us:

Righteousness and Justice

The word righteousness means to be "morally right, and without blame." When God shares His righteousness with us, he shares the ability to leave our sinful ways behind, and live a life of purity. (1 John 1:9)

Love and Compassion

God's love in our hearts helps us to also love others. It is the key to forgiveness, and mending broken relationships. You may think that your heart is too wounded, or too hardened to love others, or you may have given up on having healthy, meaningful relationships. But, through a relationship with Jesus, you can learn how. God is love, and those who know Him begin to understand and demonstrate true love. (1 John 4:7-8)

"...anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone;

a new life has begun! 2 Corinthians 5:17

Faithfulness

God is faithful, and His love teaches us to be faithful as well. The more we learn from Him, and the more time we spend with Him, the less likely we are to turn away from Him, back to our old lives. He gives us the strength we need to be faithful and loyal even amidst the strongest temptations. When we learn to go to him in our weakness, and when we are tempted He makes us strong.

The last promise God vows to us is that we will know Him, and that when we call on Him, He will answer. In other words, He promises not to leave us high and dry. When temptation, lust, or circumstances come against us, we will be able to see His perspective because we will know Him. When we face challenges, we will be victorious because He will answer our prayers for help. We can rest assured that He will help us be able to achieve a new lifestyle, because we don't have to do it alone. He's got us and He's never going to let us go.

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for a new beginning in you. Thank you for your commitment to me, to love me and call me your own all the days of my life. Please help me to live in righteousness, and to leave behind what hinders me from having a relationship with you. Help me to learn to love, not only you but those that you have placed in my life. And finally, help me to be faithful to you, and to follow you, and you alone for all of my days.

PART IV: MY VOW TO GOD

“I’m after love that lasts, not more religion. I want you to know God, not go to more prayer meetings.”

Hosea 6:6 (MSG)

Love That Lasts

Throughout this entire study we’ve learned about what God is willing to give. How his faithful love is unconditional and provides for us more than we could ever ask. But what does He ask of us? What is God after? If we wanted to offer Him something, anything as a thank you for His great love, what could that be?

We sometimes mistakenly think that the answer is religion. We assume that God is interested in our church attendance and good deeds. We think He wants us to appear to be good little church girls. But if there is anything we can learn from Gomer’s story, it’s that God isn’t interested in labels or appearances. He’s after love that lasts. He’s interested in our hearts. He doesn’t pursue us so that we can sit in prayer meetings or bible studies with our bodies in His presence but our hearts distant. Our God is a God of relationship.

We often confuse God’s love with the superficial love we’ve experienced from guys we’ve dated or friends we’ve had. We’ve encountered people who are only with us as long as it takes to get something out of us. Once they have what they want, they are no longer interested in developing a relationship. God is not like that. Throughout this study, hopefully you’ve gotten to know Him a bit and spent time with Him; but He wants so much more than a month-long relationship with you. He made a commitment to you, remember? He’s in this for life, and He’s hoping you are too. Developing a relationship with God is not an event, it’s a process. Just as two people in love continue to grow together, get to know one another, and learn more about each other as time passes, God wants to develop a relationship with you where you grow to know Him. The more you know Him, the more you will grow to understand His love for you; and the more you will learn how to live in peace, joy, and love.

There is no one bible study that could change your life. There is no one group of words that can heal your heart. The goal of any bible study, conference, or service, is to bring you one step closer to knowing God. But the rest is up to you.

Personal Reflection:

Am I comfortable letting this journey end here or am I looking for love that lasts?

Am I looking for religion and outward change or am I ready to start knowing God on a personal level?

Remain in Me

“I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you’re joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can’t produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon...”

John 15:5-8 (MSG)

God compares His relationship with us to that of a vine and its branches. When they are together they produce fruit. This fruit represents good things, blessings that your life produces when you have an intimate and organic relationship with Him. It’s about more than pretenses or church services- it’s about connection. When we are connected with the vine, all good things in our life are abundant. But, when we separate and try to do things on our own, we begin to wither. We do not wither because we are being punished or because God is angry but simply because we are cut off from our life-source.

If you’ve ever tried to make it on your own strength, you probably knows what it feels like to feel as though you are withering. The truth is, we were never meant to go through life alone. When we try, we end up feeling weak and lonely because, like a branch separated from a tree (or a vine) we weren’t meant to live independently. We were created to be perfectly co-dependent on the only thing that we can never overdose on: perfect, unconditional, everlasting love. The verse above shows us that if we abide (or exist) in relationship with Him we can be sure that all of our needs will be provided for. You see, we often complain that we don’t have this or that, that we are lonely, or that we are afraid. If we only understood that the solution for all of it is found in a lasting relationship with God.

That's where the story of Gomer ends, and finally gets to "happily ever after." Gomer chose to abide with Hosea and remain in her relationship. She chose to leave behind her promiscuous heart, and vow not only return God's love, but to remain there, where she had always belonged.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for your unfailing, and everlasting love. Thank you because I know you will never leave or forsake me. From this day forward, I make a covenant to love you, and be faithful to you as well. Although I know I am not perfect, and I may make mistakes, I promise to keep returning to you whenever my heart gets far away. I want more than just a religious relationship or titles, I want to know you, and I want to abide in you, so that my life can be blessed, and so that I can accomplish your purpose for me.