

Session 3. The Covenant God Keeps

Movement I. The Design

Passages: Hosea 1:2-3; 2:14-20; 3:1-3; Ezekiel 16:8-14, 59-63; Isaiah 54:5-8; Malachi 2:14-16

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group discovers, by working through the prophets themselves, that God chose marriage as the image for his own covenant, and that the word covenant means something different from and stronger than the word contract.

Catholic Touchstone. The love of God for Israel and of Christ for the Church is described in Scripture as a marriage, and marriage is therefore not merely illustrated by that love but shaped by it. The bond is not maintained by the faithfulness of both parties. It is maintained by the faithfulness of God (CCC 1611-1612, 1617).

SAFEGUARDING NOTE (LEADER ONLY, READ BEFORE THE SESSION)

Ezekiel 16 and Hosea 2 contain language of a husband stripping and shaming an unfaithful wife. Read the session note above before you teach this, and say explicitly to the group that no text of Scripture permits a husband to punish, shame, coerce, or use force against his wife.

If any participant appears to be hearing these texts as permission, or if anything in the discussion raises a concern about coercion or violence in a relationship in the room, do not debate it in the group. Speak to the person alone afterward, tell the priest or deacon preparing the couple, and if there is any indication of immediate danger, contact emergency services. In the United States the National Domestic Violence Hotline is available at 1-800-799-7233 or by texting START to 88788.

Do not attempt to investigate, mediate, or verify. Your role is to notice, to refer, and to stay available.

What You Need to Know

Tonight is where the study turns from anthropology to theology, and it is the session that makes Ephesians 5 possible in Session 6. If your couples arrive at Ephesians without having lived in Hosea for ninety minutes, the great mystery will sound like a metaphor. It is not a metaphor. It is the thing marriage was built to say.

GOD COMMANDS A PROPHET TO MARRY A WOMAN WHO WILL BETRAY HIM

Hosea opens with an instruction that should stop the room: take a wife of harlotry. The prophet's marriage is not an illustration he thought up. It is a sign he is made to live, publicly, for years, in front of a nation that will understand exactly what it means.

Then chapter 3 goes further. Hosea is told to go again and love a woman who is an adulteress, and he buys her back. The Hebrew of 3:1 makes the parallel explicit: love her as the LORD loves the people of Israel. The prophet's humiliation is the point.

COVENANT IS NOT CONTRACT

This distinction will carry the rest of the study, so get it clean tonight. Present it as a pedagogical contrast drawn from the marital covenant rather than as an exhaustive definition of every contract and every biblical

covenant, since covenants do carry stipulations and sanctions, and Scripture does speak of Israel breaking them.

- A contract exchanges goods or services. A covenant exchanges persons. The formula that runs through the Old Testament, I will be your God and you shall be my people, is a self donation, not a transaction.
- A contract is enforced by penalty. A covenant is sworn by an oath, which calls God himself to witness. That is why Malachi 2:14 speaks of the LORD as witness between a man and the wife of his youth.
- A contract ends when a party breaches it. A covenant, in the biblical pattern, is not dissolved by breach. It is violated, mourned, and often restored, and the innocent party bears the cost of the restoration.

That last point is the whole of Hosea in one line, and it is the reason the Church can say that a ratified and consummated marriage between two baptized persons is not dissolved by adultery, by abandonment, or by anything short of death. The couple in front of you is about to swear the kind of oath that does not have an exit clause because the God who witnesses it does not have one either.

EZEKIEL 16, AND HOW TO HANDLE IT

Ezekiel 16 is one of the most disturbing chapters in the Bible. God finds an abandoned newborn, raises her, adorns her as a bride, and she becomes a prostitute. The judgment that follows is described in language of public stripping and shaming.

Do not soften it and do not skip it, and do not read it without preparation. Two things to have ready. First, this is covenant lawsuit rhetoric, a recognized genre in which the offended party publicly recites the history of the relationship and the terms broken. Its force comes from the shocking reversal, not from a description of how husbands should treat wives. Second, notice where the chapter ends. Verses 59 through 63 promise that God will remember his covenant and establish an everlasting one, and that Israel will be silent because of her shame when God forgives her. The text holds both together, shame and atonement, and does not resolve the tension for us.

A caution you must say out loud in the session: no passage of Scripture licenses a husband to punish, shame, coerce, or lay hands on his wife. If any participant is hearing this text as permission, that is a pastoral emergency and not a difference of interpretation. See the safeguarding note.

THE TENDERNESS UNDERNEATH

Hosea 2:14 is the hinge of the entire book and it is easy to miss. After all the accusation, God says he will allure her, bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. The Hebrew is literally to speak upon her heart. And then 2:16: she will call him my husband and no longer my master, playing *ishi* against *baali*. Many readers hear an answer to the domination of Genesis 3:16 in that, and it is worth offering as a reading rather than as a claim the verse makes.

Then the betrothal in 2:19-20, which is your memory verse tonight, and which are customarily recited in the tefillin prayer in many Jewish communities, subject to local practice and the calendar. God does not merely forgive. He proposes again.

MALACHI AND THE DIFFICULT VERSE

Malachi 2:14-16 does two things at once. It calls the wife a man's companion and the wife of his covenant, and it says something extremely severe about divorce. Be honest that the Hebrew of verse 16 is textually difficult and translations differ significantly. What is not in doubt is the surrounding argument, which treats the breaking of a marriage as an act of faithlessness against a covenant witnessed by God himself.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah all describe the covenant as a marriage, and all of them describe Israel's idolatry as adultery. The image is not occasional. It is the standard prophetic vocabulary.
- Isaiah 54:5 says the Maker is the husband, and 54:7-8 describes an abandonment for a brief moment answered by everlasting love. Isaiah 62:5 has God rejoicing over his people as a bridegroom over a bride.
- The Song of Songs is read by the Jewish and Christian traditions alike as speaking of God and his people, without denying that it is also, in its plain sense, love poetry about a man and a woman. Both readings are legitimate and the Church has never required choosing one.
- In the New Testament, John the Baptist calls himself the friend of the bridegroom (John 3:29), Jesus calls himself the bridegroom (Mark 2:19-20), and St. Paul says he betrothed the Corinthians to one husband (2 Corinthians 11:2).
- The last book of the Bible ends with a wedding (Revelation 19:7-9; 21:2, 9). Session 14.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX ON WHY THE SONG IS IN THE BIBLE

Across dozens of sermons on the Song of Songs, St. Bernard taught that the soul's union with God is genuinely spousal, and he read the Song's language of desire, allegorically and at length, as the vocabulary Scripture itself gives us for what God wants with us.

He preached these sermons to monks, which is worth telling your couples. The nuptial language of Scripture belongs to every Christian, married or not, because marriage is the sign and not the substance.

Summary of his teaching in the Sermons on the Song of Songs.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: POPE BENEDICT XVI ON THE LOVE GOD HAS FOR US

In his first encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI argued that the prophets, and Hosea and Ezekiel above all, describe God's love for Israel in frankly passionate terms, and that this love is at once a searching desire and a wholly gratuitous gift.

His conclusion is the one your couples need: God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love, and not the reverse. We do not learn what God is like by studying good marriages. We learn what marriage is by studying God.

Deus Caritas Est, sections 9 to 11. Note for the leader: a papal encyclical, not the voice of a canonized saint.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. TERESA OF AVILA ON THE MARRIAGE THE SOUL IS OFFERED

St. Teresa of Avila described the deepest union available to a soul in this life using the language of spiritual marriage, and she was careful to say that it is God who initiates, God who sustains, and God who gives what no amount of effort can produce.

Read that against Hosea. The betrothal formula in Hosea 2:19-20 has one subject throughout, and it is not Israel. I will betroth you, three times, and the woman does nothing at all.

Summary of her teaching in the seventh dwelling places of The Interior Castle.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1611-1612 is tonight's core: the Church reads the prophets' nuptial imagery as preparing for the covenant of Christ and the Church, and sees in it the deepening of Israel's understanding of marriage itself.

CCC 1617 states that the sacrament of matrimony signifies the union of Christ and the Church, and that this is why the Church has always read the nuptial covenant this way.

CCC 1639 describes the consent by which spouses give and receive one another as sealed by God himself, so that the bond arises from a human act but no longer depends on it.

CCC 219 speaks of God's love for Israel as stronger than a bridegroom's for his beloved, and of a love that survives infidelity.

A caution on scope: these paragraphs ground the nuptial reading of the covenant. They are not a rulebook for allegorizing every detail of Hosea or Ezekiel, and applications beyond them should be presented as our extension, not as the Catechism's teaching.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

The Bridegroom is planted tonight, and it is the biggest plant of the study. After the live discovery moment the group will have found God calling himself a husband in four prophets and Christ calling himself a bridegroom in the Gospels. Do not tell them where this ends. The payoff is Session 14, and the intermediate payoffs are Sessions 5 and 6.

One Flesh does not appear tonight by name, but the covenant formula, I will be your God and you shall be my people, is the same logic in different words. If someone in the room notices, let them say it.

They Have No Wine arrives next week. Say nothing.

Leader note on restraint. Do not preview Ephesians 5. Half the value of Session 6 is the shock of finding that St. Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 and then says he is talking about Christ and the Church. If you spoil that tonight, you spend it early and cheap.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

A couple where one has been unfaithful during the engagement. Hosea makes this session the likeliest night for that to surface. If it does, do not treat it as a reason the marriage cannot happen and do not treat it as nothing. Send them to the priest preparing them, and to confession. Full honesty before consent matters for reasons Session 8 will make plain.

A couple who cannot hear the marriage imagery because of a parent's affair. Watch for the person who goes quiet during Hosea. Follow up privately and gently afterward. For them the prophets are not abstract, and the good news of the book is aimed straight at them.

A participant who is not baptized. Tonight is one of the sessions where they may feel most outside. Make sure they are drawn into the discovery moment by name. Session 7 will explain what their situation means for the wedding; tonight they simply need to be included.

Session Goals

1. The group works through Hosea and Ezekiel themselves and can state why God chose marriage as the image of the covenant.
2. Every participant can distinguish covenant from contract in at least three specific ways.
3. The group discovers on its own that the nuptial image runs from the prophets straight through the Gospels.
4. The disturbing material in Ezekiel 16 is handled honestly, with the abuse question named and answered rather than avoided.
5. At least one couple says out loud that a covenant sounds heavier than what they were expecting to promise.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 5 minutes. Win questions, 10. Reading Hosea 1:2-3 and 2:14-20 aloud, 8. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. Live discovery moment, 12. Ezekiel 16 with the steelman, 22. Send and Live It, 8. Closing prayer, 3.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut Build question 3 and the Dig Deeper box. Read only Ezekiel 16:8-14 and 59-63 rather than working through the chapter.

Never cut the steelman tonight. If time is short, cut a question instead. Leaving the Ezekiel objection unanswered in a room of engaged couples is worse than not raising it.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Faithful God, you have never once broken your word to anyone. We have broken ours many times, to you and to each other. Tonight we are going to read about a love that keeps going after it has been betrayed, and we are afraid of that love, because we know we will need it. Speak to our hearts as you promised to speak to hers. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** Tell us about a promise someone kept to you when it would have been reasonable for them to walk away.
- B.** What is the difference between someone who has to stay and someone who chooses to stay? Can you tell from the outside?

Build. Into the Text

Read Hosea 1:2-3 aloud, then Hosea 2:14-20, then Hosea 3:1-3. Let the first one sit a moment before you move on.

- 1.** God's opening instruction to Hosea is to take a wife of harlotry. What is God doing, and why would he use a prophet's actual marriage to do it?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He is making the prophet into a sign. Hosea will not merely announce the message, he will live it publicly for years while everyone watches.

And notice what that implies about the covenant: God is saying that his relationship with Israel is the kind of relationship in which betrayal is possible and devastating. You cannot commit adultery against a business partner.

Someone may ask whether this was fair to Hosea. It was not comfortable, and the text does not pretend it was. That discomfort is doing theological work.

- 2.** Chapter 3 sends him back a second time, and he pays to get her. What has changed, and what has not?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

What has changed is that she is now demonstrably guilty and the cost is now literal. He pays for her. The text does not tell us who held the claim, so do not fill that in.

What has not changed is the instruction, which in 3:1 is explicit: love her as the LORD loves the people of

Israel. The redemption is not a reward for her repentance. It comes first.

The word your couples should hear here is redeem, which means to buy back. It will show up again in Session 6 when a husband is told to hand himself over for his wife.

3. Look at Hosea 2:14-16. After all the accusation, what does God actually do, and what does the woman start calling him?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He allures her, brings her into the wilderness, and speaks tenderly to her. The Hebrew is literally to speak upon her heart.

And she calls him my husband rather than my master. The Hebrew turns on ishi against baali, with a deliberate jab at Baal worship. Many readers also hear an answer to the domination named in Genesis 3:16, though that verse uses a different Hebrew verb, so present the connection as a reading rather than as a lexical reversal.

Ask the room what it means that the wilderness is where this happens. In Israel's memory the wilderness is the honeymoon, the place where the covenant was made in the first place.

4. Read 2:19-20 slowly. Who does what in these two verses?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

God does everything. I will betroth you, three times, and every quality named comes from his side: righteousness, justice, steadfast love, mercy, faithfulness. She contributes nothing except being betrothed.

The verb is betroth, not remarry. He is not resuming an old arrangement, he is proposing again, as if for the first time, to a woman who has already broken it.

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

This is the largest discovery moment of the first movement. Split into pairs and give them ten minutes.

The question: find every place you can where God, or Christ, is called a husband or a bridegroom, or where the people are called a bride. Old Testament and New. Write down the references.

What they will find, roughly in this order: Isaiah 54:5 and 62:5. Jeremiah 2:2 and 3:14. Ezekiel 16:8. Hosea 2:16-20. Then, if they push into the New Testament, Mark 2:19-20, John 3:29, 2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:25-32, and Revelation 19:7 and 21:2.

Then ask two questions and stop. First: is this an occasional image or the standard one? Second: if God chose this image on purpose, what does that tell you about what he thinks marriage is for?

Take answers and let them stand unresolved. Do not connect it to Ephesians 5 tonight. That is Session 6 and the surprise is worth protecting.

NOW THE HARD CHAPTER

Read Ezekiel 16:8-14, then summarize verses 15 through 58 briefly in your own words, then read 16:59-63. Tell the group before you begin that this chapter contains disturbing imagery and that you will take it head on.

5. In verses 8 through 14, what is the sequence of what God does for the foundling?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He passes by, sees her, spreads his skirt over her, swears an oath, enters a covenant with her, and she becomes his. Then he washes her, anoints her, clothes her, and adorns her with jewelry, and her beauty becomes famous.

Everything she has, she was given. That is the argument of the chapter and it is the reason the betrayal is so severe.

BUILD THEN PRESS: THE PROPHETIC MARRIAGE IMAGERY IS ABUSIVE AND SHOULD NOT BE USED

Build it at full strength.

Build this at full strength. It is raised seriously by serious people, including believing Christians, and a room of engaged couples deserves to hear it made properly rather than as a straw target.

In Ezekiel 16 and Hosea 2, God is portrayed as a husband who responds to his wife's infidelity by stripping her publicly, exposing her, and handing her over to her lovers. If a human husband did this we would call it violence, and rightly. Presenting God this way in a book that also tells wives to submit has, in fact, been used to justify controlling behavior in real marriages, and survivors of domestic abuse have said so plainly. The objection is not that the passage is unpleasant. It is that the passage seems to model, in God himself, exactly the pattern of jealous punishment that we now recognize as dangerous.

Then press.

Concede first, and concede fully. The imagery has been misused. There are wives who were told to endure violence because Christ endured, and that was a betrayal of the text and of them. The Church today is clear that no one is obliged to remain in danger, and that separation is legitimate where safety requires it (Session 13 takes this up directly).

Then press on genre. These chapters belong to a recognizable form, the covenant lawsuit, in which the offended party recites the history and the terms broken in deliberately shocking language. The rhetoric is aimed at producing recognition in a nation that had stopped seeing what it was doing. The rhetorical target is Israel's idolatry, and Israel is the audience, not a wife receiving instructions.

Press second on where the passages end. Hosea 2 ends in a betrothal. Ezekiel 16 ends with God establishing an everlasting covenant and forgiving. If the point were punishment, the chapters would end at the punishment. They do not. The trajectory is restoration, at the offended party's expense.

Press third on the New Testament reversal. When the nuptial image is picked up by St. Paul, the husband's role is defined by handing himself over to death for her (Ephesians 5:25). Whatever the prophets are doing, the completed picture puts the cross where the punishment would be. Session 6.

Do not overclaim. These chapters remain genuinely hard, the Church has not issued a settled interpretation of every verse, and it is honest to say that some of this language would not be chosen today. Leaving the difficulty visible costs you nothing and buys you the room's trust.

6. Malachi 2:14 calls the wife a man's companion and the wife of his covenant, and says the LORD was witness. What changes about a promise when a third party witnesses it?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

It stops being a private arrangement that the two of them can quietly renegotiate. A witnessed oath has standing outside the two people who made it.

This is exactly why the Church requires that a wedding happen in a particular form, in front of witnesses,

rather than privately. Session 7.

Be honest about verse 16: the Hebrew is difficult and translations differ substantially. The argument of the passage as a whole is not in doubt, and it treats breaking a marriage as faithlessness against a covenant that God himself witnessed.

DIG DEEPER: COVENANT AND CONTRACT, IN THREE LINES

A contract exchanges goods. A covenant exchanges persons.

A contract is enforced by penalty. A covenant is sworn by oath, with God as witness.

A contract ends when someone breaks it. A covenant, when broken, is mourned and restored, and the cost of the restoration falls on the one who kept it.

Ask the couples which of the two they think they are signing up for, and then ask them which one they have been planning for.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you.

If I discovered next year that you had betrayed me, what would I want to be true about myself in how I responded? Not what would I do. What would I want to be true.

Have we been planning a contract or a covenant? Be specific. Where has our planning assumed an exit?

7. Why would God choose marriage, of all things, as the image for his covenant, when he could have chosen kingship, or friendship, or fatherhood?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He does use all of those elsewhere. Offer this as a pastoral observation rather than a proof: marriage is uniquely apt for the image because it gathers a free choice of one particular person, an exclusive claim, a public promise, a bodily union, and the possibility of new life.

And it is the only one in which betrayal is possible in the specific form the prophets keep describing. You cannot commit adultery against a king.

Turn it around at the end: if God chose marriage as the sign, then a marriage is not a private arrangement between two people who happen to be religious. It is saying something in public about God, whether or not the couple intends it.

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

- Y.** If your marriage is going to say something about God to everyone who watches it, what do you want it to say?
- Z.** Whose marriage in your life has said something true about God without ever talking about it?

Live It This Week

- **Read Hosea 2:19-20 out loud to each other once this week.** Not as a sentiment. As a description of the kind of promise you are about to make and the kind of promise God has already made to you.
- **Find the exit.** Each of you name one assumption you have quietly been carrying about what would justify leaving. Say it out loud to each other. You do not have to resolve it tonight.
- **Pray one decade together for a marriage you know that is in trouble.** Do not tell them you are doing it.
- **Read Matthew 19:1-12 again before next session,** slowly, and note every question anyone asks in the passage.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, you betrothed yourself to a people who were not faithful, and you have never taken it back. We are about to make a promise like that one, and we are not able to keep it on our own. Teach us what a covenant is by keeping yours with us. When one of us has been wronged, let us remember that you bought back what you could have abandoned.

Our Lady, faithful Virgin, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy.

Hosea 2:19

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- Hosea 1:2-3. The command to marry.
- Hosea 2:14-20. The wilderness, the tenderness, my husband and not my master, and the threefold betrothal.
- Hosea 3:1-3. Go again, love her, and buy her back.
- Ezekiel 16:8-14. The covenant, the washing, the adorning.
- Ezekiel 16:59-63. The everlasting covenant and the forgiveness.
- Isaiah 54:5-8. Your Maker is your husband.
- Malachi 2:14-16. The LORD as witness, the wife of your covenant, and the difficult verse on divorce.
- Isaiah 62:5; Jeremiah 2:2; Jeremiah 3:14. Found by the group in the discovery moment.
- Mark 2:19-20; John 3:29; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7; 21:2. Found by the group in the discovery moment. Do not expound.
- Matthew 19:1-12. Assigned reading before Session 4.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 219, 1611-1612, 1617, 1639.

Before Next Session

Read Matthew 19:1-12 before Session 4, slowly, noting every question anyone asks in the passage.