

Faithful in the Midst of Decline

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[0:00] Hosea chapter 12 verses 2 through 6.

! He took his brother by the heel and in his manhood he strove with God.

He strove with the angel and prevailed. He wept and sought his favor. He met God at Bethel and there God spoke with us. The Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord is his memorial name.

So you, by the help of your God, return. Hold fast to love and justice and wait continually for your God.

May God add a blessing to the reading of his word. Would you please be seated? Amen. Now, as you've looked around the sanctuary this morning, you can tell that we don't have as many people here this Sunday as we did last Sunday.

[1:14] What's the problem? Come on. Right? None of us are surprised, those of us who have gone to church for a long time, are we? We know that the Sunday every year where we're going to have our highest attended Sunday is Easter.

And we all know, amen. And we all know why that is. And then we come back the next Sunday, many of us, and yet we still can't think, what happened to all those people?

Why aren't they here every Sunday? Why can't it be like that every single time that we gather? And so, when that happens, we can be distraught.

We can be upset. We can be let down. Many pastors have something called, I call the post-Easter blues. We are on the mountaintop on that Easter Sunday, seeing more people, new people.

And the service, you know, is usually great because so much extra time has been put into that service, and for good reason. And then you come back the next Sunday and you think, well, what happened to all of them?

[2:25] Did they not like something? You know, did they not like us? Or what else could we have done? And maybe those things are the case. We don't know, but it can be a week after.

I'm telling you, for many pastors and churchgoers can be a time where we feel like we're in just the blues. We've got the blues. It can be difficult in times like that where we feel like, you know, things were going really well, really good, and then to see that decline.

And it can be difficult to be positive in the midst of decline, can't it? I'm sure that this is not any new information to you, but you're aware that right now in the United States of America, the church is in decline, at least as the statistics say.

They say, you know, across the board, no matter what denomination you're in, church attendance is down, baptisms are down, giving is down.

As a matter of fact, in the SBC, a denomination with which our church belongs, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States of America, entering 2019, we began our 18th consecutive year of decline.

[3:48] Did you guys know that? And it's declined in attendance numbers, and it's declined in baptism numbers. That's how they've determined that decline. As a matter of fact, since 2009, the SBC has planted 871 new churches.

That's great.

What's going on? Many people have spent a lot of time and a lot of money and put a lot of thought into trying to answer that question.

What can we do to end the decline? What can we do to get things back to the way that they used to be? They've come up with all different kinds of strategies.

You know that different churches have adopted different ways of conducting their services, different ways to try to reach out into their communities in order to try to attract a larger audience, especially the younger people who seem to be missing from the church.

[5:14] And so for a lot of churches, their corporate worship time has been replaced by a concert environment. Sermons have been replaced by 15 to 20 minute TED Talks in order to try to attract more people back into the church.

Honestly, I think that the reason for the decline in the church in the U.S. is due to God's judgment of this nation and of the church here. I don't have to tell you these things. Sin and corruption abounds in our society, doesn't it? We just expect that the people that we elect to office are going to do backhanded, dirty things. It just goes with it now. The things that are going on in our society, you turn on the news, I'm not giving you any new information. You know that our society is totally and increasingly more so, I should say, corrupt and sinful.

[6:21] And so you read Romans 1, 18 through 32. Read that. If you haven't read that, read that and tell me that that isn't exactly what is happening right now in the United States of America.

The more we push God out, the less of God that we want, the more that God withdraws His grace. Okay, that's what you want.

You want to exchange the truth for a lie? So be it. The worst thing that can happen for people is that God gives sinful people what sinful people want.

And we're experiencing that right now. A culture that is suffering from the debased mind. Only the debased mind would think that gender is fluid. Only the debased mind thinks there's no such thing as absolute truth.

Only the debased mind thinks it's okay to abort babies even after they're born. Only the debased mind. And you may disagree with me, but to me this is perplexing.

[7:20] I know that Notre Dame is a beautiful building and I'm sorry to hear the tragic thing that happened to it. But the millionaires and the billionaires who are scrambling to give to rebuilding it.

And yet we've got starving children all throughout this world and they're not nearly as eager to try to meet their needs. That to me is evidence of a debased mind.

Only the debased mind refuses to see that the more we've pushed Christ out of society, at the same time the more our society unfortunately is crumbling. So, what should followers of Christ do in the midst of such decline?

What can we do, if anything? Well, in Hosea, you know that Hosea is preaching to a nation that is in the midst of such decline.

They turned their backs on God long ago, believing that they didn't really need Him, believing that they had it all figured out. They'd go their own way. They'd exchange the truth for a lie. Thinking that His ways would only slow them down, would only prevent them from becoming a more powerful or more wealthy people.

[8:36] More prosperous nation. This decision led them to their decline. And ultimately results with their being taken over by the Assyrians and exiled to a foreign land where once again they would live their lives as slaves.

Even though this was going to happen, God would preserve a remnant of that nation, of the people of Israel.

And He tells them that a time will come when He will rescue them. He will bring them back to their homeland. He will restore them to the place where they were before.

That though the people of God had abandoned Him, God would not abandon them. That's grace. That's love.

That is who our God is. As difficult as things may seem to be for the church, let me tell you, God has not abandoned His church.

[9:43] God has not abandoned us. And though our churches may seem to be in decline, we still have reason to hope. And we still have a very important mission.

Even more so important, I'd say, in our time to undertake. Hosea chapter 12, verses 6 through 13, we'll cover that the rest of that next week, provides us with that hope and that instruction on how we can be faithful to the Lord during times of decline.

And so here's the main idea for this morning's message. When a nation or a church is in decline, they must not seek to use worldly methods to stop or prevent it.

Instead, they must turn to the Lord and hold fast to His Word and His ways. We don't turn to the world for answers.

We turn to the Lord. And we hold fast to His words and to His ways. So the beginning of verse 6, we see that believers must hold fast to God's Word.

[10:51] And there again, the instruction is, so you, by the help of your God, return. Hold fast to love and justice. So it's through God's Word that we are given instruction on what it means to love.

And it's through God's Word that we are given instruction on what it means to be just. God is a perfect being. And so as the perfect being that He is, He is perfectly loving and He is perfectly just. And there's no better image of God's perfect love and God's perfect justice in all the world than the cross of Jesus Christ where His love and His justice meet in His Son.

So God tells us to be a people, His Word tells us to be a people marked by our love for Him and for others. Israel during this time when Hosea is ministering to them was not a very loving people.

They did not love God. And they did not love their neighbors. And they did not love their enemies. They were, in fact, the polar opposite of who God is.

[12:08] And what God had called them to be. Now again, from Scripture, we understand that Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God.

And that in Him, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. Well, Hebrews 1, 3 says of Jesus, He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature.

So, we know God the Father and what He's like by looking to Jesus Christ, His Son. And so we look to Christ and we see in Him a perfect example of how we are to love people and how we are to be marked by our love for people in this world.

And let me tell you, that's not easy. And I don't want to pretend like it is. It isn't. And let me tell you also that apart from Christ and salvation and His Holy Spirit dwelling inside of you, I believe it's impossible to love people in such a way.

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed us to love not only our neighbors, but took it to the next level, but to love our enemies as well. Matthew 5, 43-48.

[13:28] You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.

For He makes His Son rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Let me tell you, Jesus practiced what He preached. He didn't just say it. He did it as well. In John chapter 15, actually I believe it's John chapter 13, Jesus washes His disciples' feet.

A task that was reserved for the lowliest slave. Because you remember, this is before the days where they had shoes with soles like we did. They had sandals. And they didn't have the paved streets and the sidewalks like we have.

[14:41] They had dirt roads and dirt paths. And so you imagine that feet are already gross. Right? And then they're covered in dirt and grime and they're all calloused and just disgusting.

Pieces of dirt probably underneath the toenails. And so it was common. It was courtesy when you were invited into a person's house, if they had servants, that the servants would wash your feet so that you could recline at the table.

And they'd get down and they'd have to do that chore. And if you were a servant this time, if you weren't the only servant in the house, guess what? You were competing. You were trying to make yourself busy. So that wasn't the job that you were reserved to have.

And understandably so. And yet here's Jesus, the Son of God, God in the flesh, getting down on His knees and washing His disciples' feet. Let's read that. When He had washed their feet afterwards, when He had washed their feet and put on His outer garments and resumed His place, He said to them, Do you understand what I have done to you?

You call Me teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and your teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

[15:57] For I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done to you.

Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. And from that moment on, Jesus goes on to talk about the fact that one of them there will betray Him.

And at that time, the disciples weren't sure who it was. They were, Oh, it's Judas. We all knew it was Judas the whole time. Duh. They had no idea. Is it me, Lord? Is it me, Lord?

They were saying, Who could it be? They had no idea. But Judas was there. And this is what baffles me. This is what not baffles me, but just causes me to be in amazement.

Jesus Christ, the omniscient Son of God, knew what Judas was going to do to Him. And He got down on His feet, on His knees, and He washed the feet of His own betrayer.

[17:03] Can you imagine that? If you knew that information? Look, I'm a Chiefs fan, and I struggle to be nice to people when I see them wearing Oakland Raiders stuff. That's an amazing example of what it means to love even your own enemies.

You remember, God called the nation of Israel to be a light to the nations, to point them to God, but they weren't obedient in that call. They weren't obedient to God's Word. They weren't marked by love.

They weren't the light that they were supposed to be. And here's the thing. In church, where we are supposed to be marked by love, unfortunately, let's be honest, a lot of times, we don't look very loving to the world, and we don't look very loving even to one another.

There was a, back in Leavenworth, my church there, we had a gentleman who was in prison ministry. That was his job, and there was many prisons in Leavenworth, many.

Military, federal, state, men's and women's, you name it. And so in that community, we had a lot of people whose jobs or whose careers it was to be prison guards.

[18:17] And so this friend of mine, he had this prison ministry, and they were in the minimum security, these guys, and they got permission to take them on Sundays, load them up in a van, and drive them to churches.

churches where they could either be a part of the worship service or sometimes lead the worship service. And so, you know, we were talking to him and just saying, you know, hey, we love you, we support you, we would go into the prison and worship there, knew some of these guys, and say, hey, we know that, you know, you wouldn't put our church in a dangerous situation because he's also one of our deacons, so we know that you would, you care about what happens here, and so if you feel like it's a safe thing for you to bring those men to our church on a Sunday and to lead us in worship, then we would be willing to have them come and do that, and it was great.

In fact, some of those guys got out of prison, and a couple of them, one of them for sure joined our church and was one of the best church members I've ever had. But like I said, we had people in our congregation who used to be prison guards, and when you're a prison guard, I'm not speaking from experience, but from stories, they see a lot of things that prisoners do that hardens their heart to those men.

And so we had one deacon who was really upset that we had them come, and he didn't come for that worship service, and then the next Sunday, his comment to me and a few others was this, you know, I'm glad that those prisoners have come to salvation because they need it.

But let me tell you, let them worship someplace else. And I, at that point in time, I just, I turned and I had to leave that conversation because my heart was broken.

[20:11] I understand what Jesus has done for us, that we were enemies of Christ and he died for us. And since coming to Oklahoma, and I've met with that brother afterwards and we've had conversations about it, but I've, since coming to Oklahoma, I've realized there's a term for that and that's called a mossy-backed deacon.

So, you could, you know, I don't think we have any mossy-backed deacons here, but you know what I'm saying because I think your silence says that you have experienced the same things. You know, we're called to love in a radical way, but so few times do we love in the radical way that Christ has loved us.

That's not an attitude that reflects the love of Christ. Remember, the Bible describes us as sinners and enemies of God, yet Christ still came and willingly died for us, sinners and enemies.

So let me ask you this morning, who is your enemy? Who do you consider to be your enemy? Is it someone at work? Someone you just can't stand every time they enter the room you try to find something to do to either leave or avoid talking to that person?

Is it someone in your own family? Could it be someone even in this church who you consider to be your enemy?

[21:35] As followers of Christ in the midst of decline, we are to hold fast to God and His love so that people may see the beauty of the gospel reflected through us.

That's why it's so important when we go and do things like engage, not only do I want and I hope and I pray that people see the love that we have for them, but the love that they see that we have for one another.

And they realize that's different. That's so unworldly because it is. God calls us to be people marked by love. He also calls us to be people marked by justice.

And this is pretty easy, I think. If we love God and our neighbors and our enemies as ourselves, you know what will naturally flow out of that?

We will be just. We will be just people. The Israelites weren't being just with one another. As verse 7 points out, they loved to oppress and they employed the usage of false balances to cheat one another.

[22:36] And here's the thing I want to say about this too. When we see others oppressed, we should come to their aid, but we don't come to their aid by seeking to oppress those who are oppressing them.

Does that make sense? That's not justice. So we are to be marked by our love. We are to be marked by our justness.

Secondly, believers must patiently hold fast to God. The rest of verse 6. The instruction is to wait continually for your God.

And so Hosea used Jacob as an illustration of how impatience with God results in disaster. Jacob tried to find purpose and success in life through deceit, doing things his own way, taking shortcuts, just as Israel had done the exact same thing.

And as a result, God put both Jacob and Israel in places where they would be forced to depend on him. Remember, just not too long ago, we covered those verses about Jacob and how he was afraid to meet his brother Esau who was coming at him with an army who had vowed before to kill him.

[23:51] And so God puts Jacob in a place where all he has left, all the hope that he has left is God. And so he turns his attention to God and God wrestles with him.

As a result of that, Israel would also be put in a place where they would have to come to their senses, where God would show them the errors of their way, which meant they would have to spend some time, significant time, in exile in Assyria.

People like to call such things as those experiences. We see in Bible, we experience them personally as severe mercies where God puts us in a place that's difficult, that's painful.

But he does so to remind us that though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, guess what? He's right there with us to help us to turn our attention and our eyes to him to see that all we need is Christ and Christ is enough.

Some severe mercies last for longer durations than others, some are more severe than others, but let me tell you they all serve a purpose and that purpose is to bring us closer to God.

[25:07] In my personal Bible study time, I have been going through the Gospel of John and I also like to take another book written by a Christian and read something along, you know, just always be reading and learning and trying to grow.

And so I've been reading through the Gospel of John and at the same time probably a few weeks ago, or actually it was last week, Tom Holland gave me a copy of Sinclair Ferguson's book called Maturity.

And as I've been reading this book and as I've been reading through the Gospel of John, it just so happens that as I arrive on John chapter 15 where Jesus is talking about abiding in the vine, abiding in him, right?

It just so happens that as I read through that, the chapter that I'm reading in Sinclair's Ferguson book is entitled what? Abiding in Christ. And so let me tell you, I'm not very smart, but when I'm reading something in Scripture and I'm reading something else, I'm saying, okay, Lord, I think you're trying to say something to me.

Let me read to you that passage of Scripture, John 15, 1 through 11. I am the true vine and my Father is the vine dresser.

[26:27] Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I

have spoken to you.

Abide in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit for apart from me you can do nothing. I love that part. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers and the branches are gathered thrown into the fire and burned.

If you abide in me and my word abides in you ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. By this my father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

As the father has loved me so I have loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love just as I have kept my father's commandments and abide in his love.

[27 : 38] These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. The Christian life involves ongoing pruning and as Jesus explains the father the fathers the vine dressers the one who is pruning and that pruning includes his providence and intervention in our lives which are designed to produce in us maturity and to make us more well-rounded Christians with more well-rounded Christian character.

in the early stages of a plant's life the basic function of pruning is to prepare for future fruit. Good pruning helps to create the proper form and shape in the plant so that it can both produce and support quality fruit in the future.

God's way provides for the long term. It's slow and it's steady and that's often his way.

And that's hard when we live in a world that expects everything right now. as the plant matures the pruning further aims to cut back the growth in order to produce a balance between new growth and the production of fruit.

The vine dresser is concerned for present production but he is also concerned to make sure that the vine is able to produce food in greater quality and quantity in the future.

[29 : 21] And to the untrained eye who's watching him go through doing this his cuts may seem arbitrary almost as if he's just carelessly cutting here and there as foliage amounts around his feet.

Patience in trusting we need to be patient in trusting that there are no accidents in the Christian's life. God is going to send Israel into captivity and it wasn't by accident.

It would serve a greater purpose. One of those little purposes was to establish synagogues in foreign lands so that when the church was birthed and was persecuted those Christians would scatter into these foreign lands and there were these places already of worship.

The Jews that they could go to and say hey let's tell you that the Messiah has come and so it was already there. It would have already been prepared for much fruit to be born.

Jesus had experienced the Father's pruning first hand in his own life. He was the vine and his Father was the vine dresser.

[30 : 45] He had been pruned during his early life. Hebrews 5.8 says that he learned through what he suffered. And I want to read to you a quote from Sinclair Ferguson in that chapter that I read.

It's a little lengthy but it's so helpful. He says even as he spoke in the upper room he was on the verge of being pruned so severely that he would cry out under the sharp pain of God's cuts.

First that if possible he might be spared from them and then in his dreadful experience of being God forsaken. In a sense our Lord bore more fruit through his dying than through his teaching and through going to the cross than through his coming to the manger.

His death was no accidental slip of the vine dresser's knife. Indeed it was written in the manual of old. Zechariah 13.7 Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.

He continues As it was with the true vine so it is with the branches. Older writers used to employ well known words from the song of Solomon to illustrate this.

[31 : 49] He brought me to the banqueting house and his banner over me was love. Nothing can happen to us they would say unless it enters our lives underneath that banner.

Yes Jesus taught that his disciples would experience persecution and sorrow but when these cuts when these cut into our lives like the sharp edge of a pruning knife we can be sure that our father's steady hand holds the handle.

We must therefore fix our gaze not on the blade that cuts but on the hand that holds. Patience in trusting also that there is no waste in the Christian life.

This one is hard But we must understand that nothing that God takes away from us is ever wasted. To the naked eye that may not seem to be the case.

To the flesh Christ is lost and the world is gain. But Christians live by a different exchange rate. We live by dying and we gain by losing.

[33:07] So when our plans are thwarted and come to nothing, when we feel the Father's blade of providence in our lives cutting us, taking people and places away from us, things that we valued, things that we treasured, things that we couldn't dream that we could live without, understand and rest assured that God is not doing so in a wasteful way.

In taking those things away, He is preparing you to bear more fruit for Him. I want to share another quote from you, this one from Amy Carmichael.

She was born in Ireland and her dates are 1867 to 1951. She spent most of her life as a missionary in India. There she opened an orphanage and founded a mission and she served there 55 years without a furlough.

The thing about Amy is that when she was a young woman she had let her friends and family know that she had been called by God to the mission field and they seriously doubted her because she had a condition, a neurological disease that made her body very weak and often times and very achy.

She would have to spend weeks in bed. But yet this woman whom God called is one of the heroes of the faith. And when she was reading John 15 she said this and I want to read that quote to you as well.

[34:44] Very deep words of a very mature believer. She says rid me good Lord of every diverting thing. What prodigal waste it appears to be to see scattered on the floor the bright green leaves and the bare stem bleeding in a hundred places from the sharp steel.

But with a tried and trusted husband's man the vine dresser there is not a random stroke in it all.

Nothing cut away which it would have been lost to keep and gain to lose.

Man those are deep words. The reality is that while our numbers may seem to be inclined the truth is that the church of Jesus Christ is not.

I'll say that again. While the numbers may seem to indicate that we are in decline understand that the church of Jesus Christ is not.

Weak superficial surface level Christianity is getting weaker while deep mature orthodox Christianity is getting stronger.

[36:04] And again the way God works I had a good friend of mine who teaches in the military college in Leavenworth a member of our church sent me an email and he said hey I remember you talking about how where the church was going and that eventually these superficial surface level churches they were going to begin to decline but yet at the same time that God's true church would always remain would always be strong and even though I had said those things I don't remember but I sure appreciated his reminder and hey if you want to give me books or you want to help with those sermons that's really helpful for me if you have those things but what that article he gave me sent is that while that superficial surface level separating away true Christianity people who have been saved people who no matter the persecution that may come they are not going to depart when the going gets hard they don't get leaving they get going they stick it out this is

God's way he's got the winnowing fork right separating the chaff from the grain and the chaff blows away and that's what I think we're seeing but the fruit remains and it will continue to grow I firmly believe that I want to read another verse for you and then we'll close 1 John 2 18 through 20 children it is the last hour and as you have heard that antichrist is coming so now many antichrists have come therefore we know that it is the last hour they went out from us but they were not of us for if they had been of us they would have continued with us but they went out that it might be complained that they all are not of us but you have been anointed by the holy one and you all have knowledge so even though it may seem to be to we are in the midst of a decline and I do believe nationally that is the case we know from

God's word and through our risen victorious Lord and Savior that Christ has prevailed not that Christ will prevail he will prevail because guess what he has prevailed we love we practice justice and we wait on our Lord knowing that as we do these things as individuals and collectively as his church we will bear fruit and there will be results and they will give glory to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ Thank you.