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Staying faithful in an unfaithful generation

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Hosea 4:1-19; Revelation 2:8-11

Who on earth would want to be an Old Testament prophet? In the great roll-call of faith contained in chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews, its writer says some of the prophets “were tortured and refused to be released ... some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated ... They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.” (Hebrews 11:35-38). None of the prophets had an easy life, but “[their] weakness was turned to strength ... [so they] became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.” (Hebrews 11:34).

From time to time, God told prophets to become a sort of visual aid to help people understand the message they were bringing. Jeremiah had to wear a yoke around his neck to symbolise captivity in Babylon (Jeremiah 27:2). Ezekiel had to act out Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 4:1-8), the defilement of Israel (Ezekiel 4:9-17), the killing of many Jews, the scattering of survivors among the nations and God’s saving of a remnant (Ezekiel 5:1-4). And, in an earlier generation, Hosea was required to marry an unfaithful wife so that people could better appreciate how God felt about their turning away to other gods. His book reads like God’s love letter to the Jewish people, but it also has a message for Gentile believers in our own age and in our own nation.

Hosea’s preaching spanned some thirty-eight or so years. In that time, he saw his own country (the northern Israelite kingdom of Israel) decline from its high water-mark under King Jeroboam II to the point where absolutely nothing was left. In 722 BC the Assyrians under Sennacherib invaded. They captured the capital, Samaria, deported thousands of Israelites and brought in people from other regions to settle the depopulated land. Israel was effectively wiped off the map.

It's not hard to draw parallels between this and our own circumstances. During the present Queen’s reign, Britain has come a long way down in the world. We’ve lost political and military power and have reduced economic clout, but these things are just a consequence (an outward sign) of a much more serious spiritual and moral decline. When Hosea records the “charge [the LORD brings] against you who live in the land” (Hosea 4:1), this applies just as much to us as it did to ancient Israel.

1. Hosea starts by describing **the root cause of the malaise and what flows from it:**

First, he diagnoses failure to keep in right relationship to God: “There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land.” (Hosea 4:1).

Second, from this lack of respect for God flows abusive and transgressive behaviour towards our fellow men: “There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; [we] break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.” (Hosea 4:2).

Third, this impacts the natural environment and the creatures that depend on it: “Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying.” (Hosea 4:3).

Lack of regard for God and each other, environmental degradation and a failure to steward Creation properly; there’s evidence of this all around us. **Guilty as charged.**

2. The prophet next addresses **guilt, responsibility and consequences:**

First, it’s clear no-one’s in a position to point fingers at anyone else: “But let no man bring a charge, let no man accuse another, for your people are like those who bring charges against a priest” (Hosea 4:4). Therefore, God says, “I will not punish your daughters when they turn to prostitution, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery, because the men themselves consort with harlots and sacrifice with shrine prostitutes” (Hosea 4:14).

Second, everyone’s in the same boat – even those who ought to be giving direction and guidance – with no proper leadership and no real attempt to get to the root of the problem: “You stumble day and night, and the prophets stumble with you.” (Hosea 4:5). In fact, it’s worse than that, because the priests “feed on the sins of [God’s] people and relish their wickedness.” (Hosea 4:8).

Third, the result of this is confusion, and that confusion impacts people in every area of their lives: “my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6) and “a people without understanding come to ruin.” (Hosea 4:14).

Again, **the cap fits**. Our people are being destroyed before our eyes: poorly led, badly taught, eaten up by sin and the surrounding culture of death.

3. Which lead us on to **God’s judgment**. The immutable law of heaven is, “As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head.” (Obadiah 1:15) and “with the measure [we] use, it will be measured to [us].” (Matthew 7:2, Mark 4:24, Luke 6:38). There’s always fairness and proportionality in how God acts, so we see perfect symmetry in what follows:

Israel “rejected ... He [will reject]” (Hosea 4:6)

Israel “ignored ... [He] will ignore” (Hosea 4:6)

Increase in the numbers of corrupt priests, increase in the amount of sin (Hosea 4:7)

“Like people, like priests. [God] will punish both of them for their ways and repay them for their deeds.” (Hosea 4:9).

“They will eat but not have enough” (Hosea 4:10)

“They will engage in prostitution but not increase” (Hosea 4:10)

God’s sentence against Israel is pronounced: “A whirlwind will sweep them away, and their sacrifices will bring them shame.” (Hosea 4:19). It happened exactly as God said. The desire of His heart was to “pasture them like lambs in a meadow” (Hosea 4:16), but they made this impossible by their own stubbornness. They were “stubborn, like a stubborn heifer” (Hosea 4:16) and there was nothing God could do but give them up to the consequences of their own attitudes, behaviour and choices: “they exchanged their Glory for something disgraceful” (Hosea 4:7), just as Paul later talked about people who “exchanged the truth for a lie” (Romans 1:28) so that God “gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.” (Romans 1:28).

That’s a quick canter through the landscape Hosea describes, and it’s a depressing prospect. If we left it at that, we’d risk sinking into despair and despondency. As a nation, we’re on the same path as ancient Israel, and if we don’t mend our ways soon, a similar fate awaits us. But incredible as it may seem, a final, irreversible judgment against us hasn’t yet been pronounced. Though we’re far gone, all is not yet lost. We’re in the same position as Judah, the kingdom to the south of Israel, and God’s cry to us is the same as it was to them: “let not Judah become guilty. Do not go to Gilgal [a place of false worship]; do not go up to Beth Aven [meaning, house of wickedness, which is what Israel had made of Bethel, meaning house of God].” (Hosea 4:15). A corrupt priesthood had made God’s house a place of wickedness, and the first element of judgment God pronounced was to “reject you as my priests” (Hosea 4:6). This happened “because you have rejected knowledge” (Hosea 4:7). Since “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7), rejecting knowledge is choosing not to fear God. And for this, Judgment came first on Israel in its priestly role, since “*judgment* begins at the household of God” (1 Peter 4:17). This should make anyone who considers themselves a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ tremble. Our own nation is in the state it is first and foremost because of *our* compromise and *our* failings. The question now is: what are we going to do about it?

Hosea lived in a time of political uncertainty, economic upheaval and national calamity. His own rickety family life mirrored what was going on in the nation, and the pain this caused him must have been acute. Through it all, time and again he proclaimed God’s warnings to people who consistently rejected them. He was a man who showed us what staying faithful in an unfaithful generation looks like.

When he saw God “high and exalted” (Isaiah 6:1) in His throne room, Hosea’s younger contemporary Isaiah could only lament, “Woe to me! ... I am ruined! For I am a man of

unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” (Isaiah 6:5). But when Isaiah “heard the voice of the LORD saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ ... [he] said straightaway, ‘Here I am. Send me!’” (Isaiah 6:8).

God has a job for us to do in our nation at this time, just as He had a job for Hosea and Isaiah. The letter He caused the apostle John to write to the church in Smyrna tells us a great deal in terms of how to go about performing the tasks God has charged us with:

The starting point is to **know who it is we serve**. He “is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again” (Revelation 2:8) – Jesus the Messiah, the Way, the Truth and the Life, King of the Jews, the Word of God, the great Shepherd of the Sheep and much more besides.

We need to **see things from His perspective**: he knows “[our] afflictions and [our] poverty – yet [in his eyes we] are rich!” (Revelation 2:9). Paul waxes lyrical about God’s “glorious riches” (Ephesians 3:16, Philippians 4:19 and Colossians 1:27) – in **Romans** “the riches of [God’s] kindness, tolerance and patience” (Romans 2:4), “the riches of [God’s] glory” (Romans 9:23), “the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God” (Romans 11:33), in **Ephesians** “the riches of God’s grace” (Ephesians 1:7), “the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (Ephesians 1:18), “the incomparable riches of his grace” (Ephesians 2:7), “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8) and in **Colossians** “the full riches of complete understanding” (Colossians 2:2). Meditating on these riches will give us context to understand what God’s called us to do, and how we should go about doing it.

And, in turn, this perspective will allow us to **accept and act according to His assessment** of what’s going on around us: “the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” (Revelation 2:9). Hosea was told, “Ephraim [that is, the northern kingdom of Israel] is joined to idols; leave him alone!” (Hosea 4:17). There’s a time for us to leave the rotten structures of this fallen world behind, to “Come out of [Babylon] so that [we] will not share in her sins, so that [we] will not share in any of her plagues” (Revelation 18:14). But we come out of Babylon in order to take God’s Word back to a lost and hurting world, and to manifest the Kingdom of God through our lives and testimony.

We’re entering unpredictable and uncharted waters as a nation, as storms rage at home and abroad. Challenging times will become even more challenging, but **Jesus says, “Do not be afraid** of what you are about to suffer.” (Revelation 2:10). Our Lord told us, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.” (Matthew 6:25, Luke 12:22). His advice was, “make up your mind not to worry beforehand” (Luke 21:14).

The enemy wants to blow our ship of state off course. He can only achieve this if he neutralises the praying people of God, for **we have power and authority to calm the storm** just as Jesus did on Lake Galilee (see Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25). That’s why “the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer

persecution for ten days.” (Revelation 2:10). This could just as easily be a prison of the mind as the physical sort – a prison of doubt or fear or weariness or ill health or whatever else. And persecution can come just as readily in challenges from those we’re closest to as from the activities of the state. Withstanding these buffetings means continuing to “Be faithful, even to the point of death” (Revelation 2:10) – that is, to keep plugging away, even when (especially when) it feels like we’re wading through treacle.

Being faithful in prayer, faithful in fellowship, faithful in obedience to the Word of God – this is the path of the overcomer. “He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death” (Revelation 2:11). These are the ones Jesus promises, “I will give you the crown of life.” (Revelation 2:10). If we never did it before, or need to rededicate ourselves to God’s service in this hour, today’s as good a time as any for us to **make a firm decision of the will**: to resolve that, whatever happens, whatever anyone else does or fails to do, by the grace of God and by His power at work in us, we’re going to be overcomers.

The calamity that befell Israel happened “because they ... deserted the LORD” (Hosea 4:10). Cast loose from the firm anchor of His ways and His Word, and consequently prey to every evil influence, they indulged sins “which take away the understanding of [God’s] people” (Hosea 4:11). And so, “a people without understanding [came] to ruin.” (Hosea 4:14).

The amazing thing is, that wasn’t the end of Israel’s story. The final chapter of Hosea sees God once again call out to a nation He loves, “Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips. Assyria cannot save us; we will not mount war-horses. We will never again say, ‘Our gods’ to what our own hands have made, for in you the fatherless find compassion.” (Hosea 14:1-3). The many fatherless ones in this land are desperately in need of God’s compassion, and He’s not yet turned His face away from this nation completely. In these next weeks, at this time of transition, of Changing of the Guard, let’s cry out to Him for mercy and a stay of execution. Let’s seek His face for fulfilment of the promise He made through Hosea: “I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them.” (Hosea 14:4). May it be so in our day.

Amen