

# “Faithless No More”

Psalm 51; Hosea <sup>1</sup>

In this age of computers, it’s often possible to undo digital mistakes if we have good backups or have other programs such as Norton *Go Back*™ or *Carbonite*™ that can put things back like they were a little while ago . . . that is, if things work as they’re supposed to. Life as a whole is seldom like that, though.

The message of the prophet Hosea is not “go back,” but rather, “come back.” *“I have been the LORD your God ever since I brought you out of Egypt,”* God said to Israel. *“I took care of you in the wilderness, in that dry and thirsty land. But when you had eaten and were satisfied, you became proud and forgot me”* (Hosea 13:4-6).

And when the Lord first began speaking to Israel through Hosea, God’s instructions were shocking indeed: *“Go and marry a prostitute, so that some of her children will be conceived in prostitution. This will illustrate how Israel has acted like a prostitute by turning against the Lord and worshiping other gods”* (Hosea 1:2).

Astounding as that instruction was, it’s a powerful example of the ways in which the Bible uses the covenant of marriage as a primary illustration of our relationship with God. This morning’s message, built on Hosea’s situation and message, has a simple outline of four points: PURPOSE; PROBLEM; PROVISION; and DECISION.

God’s **PURPOSE** in your life and mine is that we be secure in the sure knowledge of what is truly True; that we have wisdom to move successfully through every trouble and trial; that we live lives that are above reproach; that we be set free from worry and anxiety; that we be enabled to give thanks in all things; that we experience the power to love our enemies; that we be able to rejoice always; and that we be overcomers who move through each day, not “somehow,” but triumphantly (Matthew 5:44; Romans 8:37; Ephesians 5:20; Philippians 2:15, 4:4, 6-7; 1 John 2:6). And that’s just a partial list. How closely do those things describe your life this morning?

I suspect that for most of us, there’s often a gap—and sometimes a huge one—between God’s purposes for our lives and how we’re actually living them. The Bible tells us that *“God looks down from heaven on the entire human race; he looks to see if there is even one with real understanding, one who seeks for God. But no, all have turned away from God; all have become corrupt. No one does good, not even one!”* (Psalm 53:2-3). And that, my friends, is our **PROBLEM**.

The Bible says that every single one of us is corrupt, and that even the best of our deeds are no better than filthy rags compared to the holiness to which God calls us (Isaiah 64:6). Through Hosea, God said, *“They look everywhere except to the Most High. They are as useless as a crooked bow . . . . By making idols for themselves from their silver and gold, they have brought about their own destruction. . . . They have planted the wind and will harvest the whirlwind”* (Hosea 7:16, 8:4, 7).

The biblical word for our corruption, our uselessness, our idolatry, and our outright rebellion is “sin.” From the very beginning, sin has masqueraded as that which it is not and promised that which it cannot deliver.

Adam and Eve were deceived, thinking that by disobeying God’s instructions and going their own way they would gain a more rewarding life. But what they discovered, and what we have discovered after them, is that contrary to what was promised, our sin brings only guilt, anxiety, despair, and death.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on October 4,

Sin is a spiritual disease. Sin is to the soul what disease is to the body, and the effect of disease on our physical organism is a picture of what sin produces in our spiritual nature. If you'll turn to the back panel of your worship order, you'll see some of the effects of sin as they are described in Psalm 51: sin soils our souls, saturates our minds, stings our consciences, saddens our hearts, sickens our bodies, sours our spirits, separates us from God, softens our will, stains our hands and seals our lips. That's what sin does.

Sin is a devastating corruption that continually eats away at the spirit of every one of us. It is an awful sickness that required the Cross for its healing. Sin opened a breach between us and God that only the Cross could span. And that brings us to God's **PROVISION**.

God's instruction to Hosea to marry a prostitute as an illustration of sin was hardly more offensive than the Bible's statement that "*without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins*" (Hebrews 9:22). The fact of the matter is that our sin is far more serious than we will ever understand, and our release from it comes only at the price of the Cross. As Jesus told His disciples, "*my blood . . . is poured out to forgive the sins of many*" (Matthew 26:28).

I think the ancient Israelites may have understood the horror of sin and the cost of forgiveness better than we do. How could we miss the point if we brought a huge bull without any blemish—a perfect animal—to the altar of sacrifice, placed our hands on the bull's head to symbolize that he bears the penalty for our own sin, and then watched his blood gush against the altar, heard his agonizing bellows, and watched his gradual death . . . in our place?

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus, our Perfect Sacrifice, once for all time, told Peter, "Put your sword away, Peter. This isn't about power. This is about Love. No one takes my life from me. I am giving it . . . for you" (Hebrews 9:12; Matthew 26:52-53; John 10:17-18).

The Bible says that "*God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners*" (Romans 5:8). "*Come now, let's settle this,*" says the Lord. "*Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool*" (Isaiah 1:18).

The Bible says that "*if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness*" (1 John 1:9). And that brings us finally from PURPOSE, PROBLEM, and PROVISION to **DECISION**.

Hosea told us, "*Return . . . to the Lord your God, for your sins have brought you down. Bring your confessions, and return to the Lord. Say to him, 'Forgive all our sins and graciously receive us, so that we may offer you our praises'*" (Hosea 14:1-2). And the Bible tells us that "*Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*" (Romans 10:13).

The Bible's word for this "*returning to the Lord your God*" is "repentance," or "to repent." The New Testament is shot through with this word, which appears forty-eight times from Matthew to Revelation. In fact, the very first recorded words of Jesus when He began His ministry were "*The time promised by God has come at last! The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!*" (Mark 1:15; Matthew 4:17).

When Peter preached at Pentecost, he told the people to "*repent of your sins and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away*" (Acts 3:19). And Paul wrote that "*I have had one message for Jews and Greeks alike—the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus*" (Acts 20:21).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See also 1 Kings 8:47; 2 Kings 22:19; 2 Chronicles 32:26, 34:27; Job 42:6; Zephaniah 2:2; Matthew 3:8; Mark 6:12; Luke 3:8, 5:32, 13:5, 24:47; Acts 26:20; 2 Corinthians 7:10; 2 Peter 3:9.

So what does it mean to “repent”? The central concept of repentance is to do an “about face” or a U-turn, so that we dramatically change the direction of our lives. This turning has two movements: a turning away from sin, and a turning toward God. While such turning is initially an inward, spiritual decision, it’s a decision that results in observable behavioral change.

The Bible says that repentance involves acknowledging our need, our failure, and our guilt, confessing our faith in God’s salvation through Jesus, and returning to God so that our sin may be forgiven and our relationship with God restored (Jeremiah 3:13-14). The first time we do this, we are “born again” (John 3:3), and that birth lasts forever, but that one act of repentance is not enough. Across the years, sin continues to creep back into our lives in ever more stealthy ways, moving from the more obvious destructive behaviors to the more covert and more easily rationalized sinful attitudes of the heart.

Even after following Jesus passionately for many years, Paul still confessed that *“I am rotten through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn, I can’t make myself do right. I want to, but I can’t. When I want to do good, I don’t. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway”* (Romans 7:18-19).

The Good News is that if our PROBLEM continues throughout our lives, God’s PROVISION also remains good through every moment of our lives: *“If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong”* (1 John 1:9). Paul also wrote that *“I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven”* (Philippians 3:13-14).

And so we come once more to DECISION. There are many ways to make confession and to renew our relationship with God, and I invite you to consider a very powerful way this morning. Some of you have been wondering what that *Post-It Note™* is doing in your worship order. I invite you to take that out and turn it over so that the sticky side faces you.

Now I invite you to write a word, a phrase, or a sentence on that note that represents your confession of the sin that God’s Spirit brought to your mind as we looked at the principles of Psalm 51. Don’t put your name on your note. Then I invite you to quietly walk to the altar and affix your sin to the Cross. No one will read these notes. After the service, I will burn them as a sacrifice to God.

Through Hosea, God told us, *“I will heal you of your idolatry and faithlessness, and my love will know no bounds. . . . Let those who are wise understand these things. Let those who are discerning listen carefully. The paths of the Lord are true and right, and righteous people live by walking in them”* (Hosea 14:4, 8-9).

We’re going to sing our final hymn, “Have Thine Own Way, Lord,” now rather than later, so that you may reflect on its words as you come to the altar. Once we’ve sung all the stanzas, Eric will continue to play until all who wish to come have been able to do so.

The Bible says that we should examine ourselves before we eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord’s Table (1 Corinthians 11:28). After we’ve examined ourselves, we will come to the Lord’s Table together.

PURPOSE, PROBLEM, PROVISION, DECISION. The time for decision has come.