

✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

Some people say that America's best days are in front of her, which of course brings joy to Americans who crave a reason to hope and who want to be positive. But there seem to be quite a few people who assert that America is in decline. A recent political slogan was trying to come off positive, and maybe it sounded positive when it proclaimed, "Make America Great Again." But did you notice? In trying to be positive, this slogan actually made the point that there's something wrong with America if it needs to be made great again.

So is America in decline? People in America have been worried about this for a long time. Almost 30 years ago I came across the following quotations. (Thanks to the internet I can report that these quotations are at least from 1951 and 1943, but perhaps as early as the late 1700s.). "A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover that they can vote themselves largess [financial benefits] from the public treasury. From that moment on the majority always votes for the candidates promising the most benefits from the public treasury, with the result that a democracy always collapses over loose fiscal policy, always followed by a dictatorship." "The average age of the world's greatest civilizations has been about two hundred years. These nations have progressed through this sequence: from bondage to spiritual faith; from spiritual faith to great courage; from courage to liberty; from liberty to abundance; from abundance to selfishness;

from selfishness to complacency; from complacency to apathy; from apathy to dependence; from dependence back again into bondage."

If the second quotation is true, and if we can measure the level of apathy in America, we might be able to tell how far along we are into the decline of our great civilization. One way to do this is to survey 1000+ people. Show them a picture of a popular person like Billie Eilish or Justin Bieber or Drake or Ariana Grande and see if the people can put a name to the popular person. Then show the same people a picture of, for instance, President Biden or Vice President Harris or Senator Klobuchar or Representative Craig, and see if the people can put a name to these persons who hold the power of government. As you can imagine, popular people are better known, even though they can't change laws or enact policies.

For me the evidence of decline comes in the stats on worship attendance. There have been only two decades in American history where worship attendance at Christian churches exceeded 50% of the population. Compare this to where we are today: perhaps 10%. What then can we who still attend Christian worship do to benefit this land that we love? On the basis of these words from Lamentations, let's COUNT ON THE LORD'S GREAT LOVE. Count on him for what? Let's COUNT ON THE LORD'S GREAT LOVE to sustain this country, according to his grace, for as long as it benefits the spread of the good news about Jesus.

If we are to understand today's sermon fully, we have to look back 2,600 years. The prophet Jeremiah had been warning God's people for decades, "If you don't repent and turn back to the Lord and his ways, our nation is going to be destroyed." And that's what happened. The Babylonians demolished Jerusalem and carried God's people into exile. Jeremiah was caught between two emotions. On the one hand, the people had become morally degenerate despite warnings. They deserved what had happened. On the other hand, these were Jeremiah's fellow citizens, and his homeland was now wrecked. God's judgments cut Jeremiah to the heart, even though the judgments were just. The Holy Spirit moved Jeremiah to pour out his laments into what we now call the Book of Lamentations. Listen to the prophet. "*My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within, my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city*" (Lam 2:11).

What did Jeremiah do after his beloved country was destroyed? He turned to the Lord in hope. Listen: ²²*Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.* ²³*They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.* ²⁴*I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."* ²⁵*The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him;* ²⁶*it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.* ²⁷*It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young.* ²⁸*Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him.* ²⁹*Let him bury his face in the dust—there may yet be hope.* ³⁰*Let him offer his cheek to one who would*

strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace. ³¹*For men are not cast off by the LORD forever.* ³²*Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love.* ³³*For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.*

See what the Lord is looking for? Regular repentance over our frequent rebellion as a nation. Whenever a majority of the people of our country were listening to God's Word, there was spiritual renewal in America. The First Great Awakening happened in the 1730s and 1740s, before we were even a nation. The other two Great Awakenings happened in the early 1800s and in the late 1800s. Our St. John's Church was formed as a result of the third spiritual renewal.

The Lord prefers to reach people through his Word. What happens when people aren't listening to his Word? It appears that he relies on more drastic measures to wake them up, like the fall of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day, or in our times the pandemics of 1920 and 2020, and two world wars, etc. Jeremiah asserts that such difficulties prove God's faithfulness. It's as if God wants people to ask, "What is going on that we are having so much trouble?" And he wants his followers to be ready with a loving reply, such as, "The Lord is showing his mercy by leading us to repent and to have his full forgiveness in Christ before the final judgment, which will be much worse than the disasters of our day. The Lord loves us too much to let us get away with disobeying him." O Jeremiah, you are so right to say to the Lord: "*Great is your faithfulness.*" If our nation were to

renounce its sins and lay hold of the mercies of God, which are new every morning, God would listen and forgive because of Jesus.

Some Christians have wondered how much longer God will tolerate wickedness in our country. It displeases God when we talk unlovingly of others or take what belongs to others. It isn't right to behave as if God is pleased with all kinds of sex, or with not loving, honoring, and cherishing our spouse. It isn't right to ignore the Bible as if it is not God's loving message to humankind.

So why doesn't the Lord do to us like he did to Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day? Perhaps he still will someday, but according to our text, ²²*"Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed.* ³³*For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men."* The Lord knows that if he were to send a disaster to destroy all those who are not sorry for their sins, many of his believers would be destroyed too. And so we see his mercy in most disasters. For a moment let's accept the official statistic that 605,000 Americans have died from COVID-19. That's not even one fifth of 1% of America's population. When there are hurricanes and tornadoes, take note of how few die compared to how many are in the path of destruction. When the Bay Bridge collapsed during rush hour in the 1989 San Francisco earthquake, the death toll was quite low: most Bay-area workers had gone home early so they could watch the Giants play in the world series. By showing mercy in his judgments, the Lord is calling on people to repent of all sin, giving most people more time.

So what's in store for our country's future? Further moral decline? Or repentance and renewal? One thing is sure. No matter what, we can COUNT ON THE LORD'S GREAT LOVE. As long as there are believers in the United States who recognize how wealthy even the poorest Americans are... who acknowledge the responsibility we have as Christians to spread the teachings about Christ both near and far, I believe God will maintain the US as a nation. But when apathy takes hold, apathy about sharing Christ with our acquaintances and relatives, apathy about supporting our missionaries, then it will be time to anticipate the destruction of this nation because it will have outlived its usefulness before the Lord. God wants everyone to be saved through faith in Jesus, but if we don't want the same, how are we useful to him anymore? The only use we still might have to God is as scoundrels. I'm referring to the observable pattern in so much of history that the Lord raises up one scoundrel to bring an end to another scoundrel: lather, rinse, repeat. That's all that would be left to us if we aren't going to share the Savior Jesus with others.

Fellow believers, if we have become apathetic about filling our own hearts with God's Word so that we can share it with others... If we have become apathetic about working for the betterment of our nation and our community, it's time for us to repent for contributing to the moral decline of our nation. But let's go beyond repenting. Let's turn away from anything God labels evil by making appropriate changes in our lives. As citizens of this town, state, and country, let's become informed about current events. Take the time to write

letters, or attend meetings and speak up for what is wise. And vote. You're not going to get your way every time, but can you listen to those on the opposite side of an issue and work toward areas of common ground? Can you also go talk to those who have been wronged and advocate for them? And consider running for office. These are all ways we can demonstrate that, while our first commitment is to Jesus, our allegiance is very much with this country and its betterment. Let's COUNT ON THE LORD'S GREAT LOVE to forgive our part in the moral decline of our country.

²²“*Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.*” ²³*They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*” Let's rely on this faithful God for the strength to do what is good for our country and for his kingdom.

We know that God wants us to be concerned about the place where we live. Through this same Jeremiah, God told the people he had sent away, “*Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper*” (Jer 29:7). If our nation is to have a better moral foundation, it will need its people to pray for it and to set examples of living with good morals, like giving excellent customer service, like selling people only as much as they need. Prior to 1920 many visitors to the United States reached the same conclusion: that America became great because its citizens were also church-going people who put into practice what they heard from the pulpit.

As a child I wondered why everyone thought George Washington was such a great man. Ok, so he didn't lie about chopping down a cherry tree. Later I learned that from the battle lines he wrote some rather depressing letters to the leaders of the Colonies. So why was he elected the first President by a unanimous vote? Let me give an oversimplified answer by quoting from his inaugural address to Congress. “I now make it my earnest Prayer, that God would have you, and the state over which you preside, in His holy protection; that He would incline the hearts of the citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to government; to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another, for their fellow citizens of the United States at large, and particularly for the brethren who have served in the [military] field. And finally that He would dispose us all, to do justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with charity, humility, and pacific temper of mind, which were characteristics of the Divine Author of our blessed religion, and without humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy nation.” Here was a leader who understood the connection between ‘a great country’ and ‘citizens who put their country ahead of themselves.’ Washington became wise by applying himself to the Word of God and then practicing it daily. May God strengthen us and the rest of our country to do the same. And when we fail, may he lead us to repent, turn to Jesus, and COUNT ON THE LORD'S GREAT LOVE.