

Bold Prayer at the Brink of Judgment



Gary Wilkerson October 24, 2016

I'm not used to writing messages on this subject, and you may be surprised by this one. I prepared it with great reservations; it took me far beyond my comfort zone, even though I'm dedicated to preaching the whole counsel of God. Right now I'm compelled to speak because of something I see happening in our culture. I've grown convinced that America now stands on the brink of one the most extreme judgments it has ever faced. And in this bleak hour God has something to say to his church that may begin to turn the tide.

When I grew up, it wasn't unusual to hear this kind of difficult message in the denomination my family was part of. Occasionally I heard my father preach on the subject. What I'm talking about is a prophetic message (though my dad was adamant about not being called a prophet. He said he was a "watchman"). If you know my father's ministry—he authored not only *The Cross and the Switchblade* but also the book-length prophecy *The Vision*—you know he could be stirred to preach on what he saw happening in the culture and what might be coming down the road. Yet at the center of it all was a holy, loving God moved by things that were ruining his perfect Creation and his wonderful purposes for man.

Growing up I never fully appreciated the mantle my father wore in this role. At Bible college I had classmates who read Dad's books and asked me, "Do you think all the cataclysmic events will start in 1989? Or in 1990?" I never had an answer for them; I was more worried about making the basketball team or seeing my girlfriend back home. I didn't really understand the purpose of prophetic messages. My Bible was filled with underlined passages about grace, peace and the unity of Christians, not judgment, wrath and societal chaos. I didn't compute sermons that predicted economic collapse or sexual immorality overturning whole societies.

Today I better appreciate the messages my dad preached and the anguish they caused him. And I trust the hours he spent wrestling with God over the difficult sermons he had to deliver. As a pastor myself, I appreciate A.W. Tozer's lesson that God loves to speak to the man or woman who loves to listen. Yet I fear the church has lost that practice. God wants to speak to us about our family, our marriage, our life's direction, but our ear is less and less inclined to his voice and more to the world's.

The Bible calls this condition a famine of the Word of God. It's a lack of knowledge of God and his ways, and in times of chaos he'll use the famine to get our attention. He has my full attention right now. And if he's speaking to grace-oriented pastors like me with hard messages about society, it tells me he's up to something.

I've come to see our society falling hard in three ways.

The first—and maybe the most obvious—is the American political scene. In any campaign season we see bad behavior and hear unhealthy messages. And this may be the worst election cycle yet. But that's not what I'm concerned about. What I see is a pattern of awful behavior by our leaders over the past twenty years with no remorse, no consequences and no change. You may say I'm extreme for saying this, but Satan has gotten a foothold among our leaders that's becoming more and more evident.

Twenty years ago, a former President was caught in a sex scandal in the Oval Office. He continued as President without facing removal. The Speaker of the House at that time led an aggressive impeachment trial against him, but

all the while the Speaker was having an affair himself. Even today a current U.S. Senator today admitted using an escort service, apologized for it and remains in office.

Just a few decades ago, if a national leader was caught in any kind of scandal he resigned immediately. But today there's little shame attached to these acts. I think of the Lord's words to Jeremiah: "Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among the fallen; when I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord" (Jeremiah 8:12).

As Christians we know our hope doesn't rest in this world. Whenever we've put our hopes in a leader or institution, we've been disappointed. Yet the open sin that has built up over the last twenty years has become an outrage. And as God told Jeremiah, he won't remain silent.

A second way our society is falling is our downward moral spiral on a broad scale.

In just a few years' time homosexuality has become normalized when the Bible clearly teaches against it. Laws have been passed that require tolerance of homosexuality, but on a cultural level we're being required to welcome it gladly. This is obviously problematic for Bible-based churches. As Christians we love homosexuals and anyone else dealing with a sexual sin. Yet no matter how you look at it, same-gender sexual practice can't be reconciled with Scripture. (Some churches say it can be, but by trying to make it happen they compromise God's authority profoundly.)

Meanwhile, as we follow Jesus' example to sacrificially love all people, including homosexuals, we're labeled haters and bigots. But there is no hate speech in the Bible—only uncomfortable speech about sin. Right now society is basically commanding us to extract the passages that speak of homosexuality as sinful. My heart breaks over this, because homosexuals are being sold a lie. It doesn't matter who we are—if we don't turn from sin, our relationship with God derails horribly.

I'm the first to say the church doesn't have an edge over anyone when it comes to morality. We're not better than anybody else; biblical theology tells us that much. But sometime soon newspaper headlines will accuse pastors of using hate speech whenever they address sexual sin. Once that accusation settles into our culture, laws will follow, and churches will lose more than just our tax-exempt status. We'll lose our standing with those who need to hear that Jesus is Good News.

Sadly, the people left out of this conversation are Christians with a gay orientation—faithful ones who say, "I may have to struggle against this the rest of my days, but I want my life to please God. If that means I don't marry or never have a spouse to share life with, so be it. My God loves me, he knows what's best for me, and he has proven trustworthy again and again in my life."

I applaud these brothers and sisters who won't opt for an easier way than the godly one Jesus has for them. Satan always looks for a foothold that will set our hearts against God's truth. But these have resisted, standing up to say, "It's not about me. It's about you, Lord."

The enemy is stoking a third way our society is falling: through fires of violence.

Troubles have come to our cities more visibly than ever. Some of this is racial, some of it is economic, and much of it is violent. The most visible problem is the conflicts between the police and African-American communities. There's widespread fear among African-American children who are uncertain about how police will treat them. At Springs Church we directly support our police, knowing the risks in their service. And we reach out directly to inner-city kids who face so many difficulties in life.

In his last years, my father foresaw 1,000 fires burning in American cities. I wonder if the violence we see now is a glimpse of what he envisioned and trembled over. At World Challenge we're moved to do something about this. For over forty years we've worked in deeply troubled areas from Asia to Africa to Latin America and eastern Europe. Now we plan to start domestic outreaches in cities and towns across the U.S. Our mission is to preach the gospel of peace and justice, to bring hope where there is fear, and to restore life where it has been destroyed.

Satan has gained a foothold through the violence. But he never settles for that—he always seeks to kick the door in and take over completely. And I believe he wants all-out war in the streets. I pray this violence doesn't increase.

Yet I foresee urban gangs taking up arms to wage war, military style, against police. I tremble as I say this. Yet this is just one result of societies that turn themselves over to godlessness. When evil is called good, and good evil, God allows judgment to fall. He doesn't do this to destroy, but so that we may recognize the evil we've allowed and turn our hearts and hope back to him.

Paul warned we would face this in the final days.

"Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty" (2 Timothy 3:1). Paul doesn't say this to scare us. He attributes it all to the sin of the human heart: "For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people" (3:2-5).

That's quite a list of sins. Yet Paul is talking not only to the world but also to us Christians: "having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power." When he says people would be lovers of themselves, he quite accurately describes the situation in many churches today. While evil increases, these churches increase their pursuit of self-promotion, gain and comfort. God never tells us to avoid the unsaved; they are our primary mission. So when he says to "avoid such people," he's referring to fellow Christians who deny God's authority in their lives. Paul affirms this, saying, "For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. 'Purge the evil person from among you'" (1 Corinthians 5:12-13). As God's people, what clearer call to repentance could we hear?

Satan will continue to spew forth death. And only one thing can resist his hell on earth: a church that's able to stand up and speak his Word boldly with integrity. Without a holy presence in this darkening world, the world will never know an alternative.

Our problem is we're trying to be like the world. We're afraid of turning people off, so we bend over backward to appease everyone who enters our doors. Some churches make it their mission to be places where people learn about themselves, are built up in themselves, and feel good about themselves. I'm all for encouraging the downcast, but these churches may encourage the sin that Paul says is behind all the upheaval: a love of self.

God has called us to be different from the world—markedly different. "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (2:14). That difference is exactly what the world needs. It awaits what we have to give it. As Paul says, "If all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you" (14:24-25).

Our first task is to stop the famine of God's Word among us. An encounter with his Word will rid us of "business as usual" as Christians. It will confront us with our dryness, coldness and casualness toward Christ's way. And it will send us to our knees in dependent prayer for God to bring change.

Prayer changes things. It changes our hearts, our families, our churches, and ultimately our world. Would you join me in committing to do three things: to pray for God's Word to do a work in our hearts; to stand with integrity as a voice for his Word; and to pray for him to bring about changes only he can bring?

I pray we'll see God manifest himself, as he has done in so many revivals and movements that turned cultures around. He alone can stop the tide of evil being unleashed—and bring reverence again to a culture that has lost its way. He alone can revive the church, turn us toward repentance and even bring spiritual awakening to our society. Let's return to the Lord with all our hearts. Let's seek his face and call on heaven to see a new and great work in our country. Amen.

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