

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, April 30, 1995, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

PROVERBS 16:18

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.”

AMERICA: How Did We Get Here from There?

(1) The Nineteen Sixties—A Decade of Rebellion

We’re going to look at the 1960s this morning, and as we do so, I want to ask you two rather lengthy questions:

(1) What do you get when millions of military men return home from four years of fighting in far away lands, and fall into the open arms of millions of sweethearts who have been working in war-related jobs all day and then writing love letters at night supporting their soldier boys?

The answer is that you get lots of marriages and a whole bunch of babies! And those babies were born between 1946 and 1965. How many of you parents had children during those years? We had five! How many of you were born during the years 1946-1965 as “Baby Boomers”?

(2) What do you get when you take this whole new generation of young people, and raise them on the permissive theories of Dr. Spock, and educate them in experimental open classrooms, and saturate them with rock and roll, and introduce them to drugs and alcohol, and dangle the threat of a nuclear holocaust over their heads, and then tell them that GOD IS DEAD?

The answer is that you get the sixties generation. I remember the sixties well, as our own children grew up. The great sports heroes were Johnny Unitas, the intrepid quarterback, and Wilt Chamberlain, the seven-foot center and scoring machine. Mickey Mantle was the home run king, and Arnold Palmer was the golfer of the decade. You had rock stars like Elvis Presley, the Beach Boys, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. It was when Detroit was putting 400-horsepower motors in 3,000-pound cars and selling them for \$2,500.

1. The sixties were a time of PROMISE.

Where do we start when we consider the 1960s? I suppose we start at Camelot with J.F.K., the young charismatic President, asking us to give what we could for our country, establishing the Peace Corps, and telling us that before the decade was over, we would put a man on the moon. We remember his quiet courage during the Cuban missile crisis when he made the bully from Moscow, Nikita Khrushchev, blink first. The economy was robust. There were new movements cropping up everywhere — the Civil Rights movement, the women’s movement, the poor people’s campaign, and all kinds of social initiatives which they called “The Great Society.”

Who could ever forget July 20, 1969, and the first moon landing, as two brave men left their footprints on the lunar dust and in the history book of mankind. It was a time of promise, when things looked good.

2. The sixties were a time of PASSION.

I don't think that any decade within the last one hundred years has had more passion in it than this one had. Go with me on August 28, 1963, to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial where perhaps the most important speech since the Gettysburg Address was delivered by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. He looked out over the hundreds of thousands of people listening to him that day, and he said, "I have a dream that one day in the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood... I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will be judged, *not* by the color of their skin but by the content of their character..." And as that man spoke that day, something happened in America. It was a time of incredible passion.

Do you remember Resurrection City, and how the poor people came from all over the country and set up a shanty-town between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, as they sought to impress upon the government the desperately poor condition in which so many of them lived? Our Lord spoke about His coming 'to proclaim freedom for the prisoners..., and to release the oppressed'" (Luke 4:18). In the 1960s, that was the passion that was upon the lips of those who were our leaders.

It was a time of social activism, supercharged by high idealism. March 6, 1965, was one of those days when a unique incident would help turn the heart of America concerning racial prejudice. On that day 600 brave black civil rights leaders walked steadfastly toward Selma, Alabama, realizing full well that white racists were waiting at the other end of the bridge with bricks and bottles and bullets. But they marched on anyway. And I can see the pictures of them reaching the end of the bridge and the billy clubs coming down upon those black heads. And Walter Cronkite gave it to us on the nightly news.

3. The sixties were a time of PROBLEMS.

Let me give you four dates and the significance of those dates:

- a. June 15, 1962. The Supreme Court bans prayer in the public schools of America. I will come back to that in a few moments.
- b. November 22, 1963, the day when President Kennedy was assassinated. I remember exactly where I was when I heard the news of that dastardly deed, and I believe most people *also* remember where they were when they heard it. Of course, many of you weren't even born until long after his death, but we mark time by events like that.
- c. October 1, 1967, was a very significant date. Vietnam protesters marched on the Pentagon. Fifty-five thousand of them stormed the building in an attempt to force our leaders to

stop the war, and it took 10,000 law enforcement officers to subdue those protesters. Isn't it ironic now to learn that the hypocritical Robert S. McNamara, who by that time believed that the war was "unwinnable," was yet sending brave men to their deaths while he sat in his office that day as Secretary of Defense, listening to the turmoil outside his window?

d. August 15-17, 1969. Put down the word, "WOODSTOCK." I believe Woodstock really marked the end of that decade. That "in your face" rebellion, with its significant slogan, "Make love — not war," had, by this time, come to an all-time high; that anti-anybody-in-authority mindset had now risen to a major peak. Remember, it was in the latter part of the 60s that a famous musical group belted out the song, "Born to Be Wild," a song which perhaps sums up that decade better than anything else. They came together at Woodstock in a way of saying, "Rebellion has triumphed, and we are now in control."

Listen to what Brandon Jones wrote: "Woodstock is a summary of all the forces that had been churning throughout the 60s — drugs and rock and roll and rebellion and mass action and idealism and ultimately total disenchantment. When the music ended, they all broke camp and went their separate ways. For all intents and purposes the decade was over."

That was the 60s. That's how it ended, not with a bang but with a whimper. The 60s left some major legacies, but most of all it left a major vacuum.

You see, it was in the early 60s that the major fabric of our nation slowly began to tear, even though we didn't realize it at the time. In fact, most people would look back and say that it was in the 1970s where all the difficult times began, but it was in the 1960s that the fabric began to tear. Relativism and pragmatism began to be the dominant thinking of our society. Moral absolutes were just washed down the drain.

But when the Supreme Court in the early 60s made the decision to ban prayer in the public schools it was as if they took scissors and snipped the tether that connected us as a nation to our God. Basically, the banning of prayer in our schools was a statement by the highest court in our land — "God has no formal place in our society any more, and our children from henceforth will be led to believe that God doesn't really matter in the life of our country. 'God, we don't need You in America any more.'" We may pledge allegiance to the flag and say, "One nation under God," but I want you now to look closely at the graphs I have placed in your sermon outline which, I believe, show you the true significance of the banning of prayer in schools. Surely, we cannot be so naive as to believe that what happened after 1962 was not related directly, as cause and effect, to the banning of school prayer.

- Look at the first graph: Consider the SAT scores. We know that education in our country is in deep distress. In 1962 the scores were the highest they had ever been. Look what happened after prayer was banned in schools. Could Paul's words in Romans 1:21 have any possible relevance in this context?

"For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened."

- Consider graph 2: See how the divorce rates more than doubled for the next few years after 1962.
- Graph 3: After 1962 there was a catastrophic increase in violent crime.
- Then in Graph 4: Look at the cases of sexually transmitted diseases. All of a sudden, the incidence of these horrible diseases zoomed almost off the chart.
- Graph 5 is very sad as it examines pregnancies to unwed girls under 15 years of age and the reported abortions which they had.
- And then finally, in graph 6, we see the birth rates for unwed girls aged 15 to 19. From 1960 to 1962 the rate was going down. But look what happened after the banning of school prayer—a major, sharp, calamitous upturn.

And you say, “Pastor, what does all this mean?” Surely the explanation is very simple. What it means is that as a nation we made a statement. We literally made an “in Your face, God” statement. We basically told Him that we were quite self-sufficient. In spite of our godly heritage and the whole purpose for which our nation was founded and the blessings we enjoyed because of our adherence to our moral and spiritual foundations, we can take it from here *on our own*.

Some time ago in *Forbes* magazine there was an article entitled ‘What Is Happening to Us as a Society?’ It was written by Peggy Noonan, one of the most insightful social commentators of our time. She is not a Christian, but listen to what she wrote:

“After just a few years in the modern times we could tell that we were beginning to lose God. It’s as if we were banishing Him from the scene, from consciousness, losing the assumption that He was part of the daily drama. It is a terrible thing when people lose God. Life is difficult, and people are afraid. And for people to be without God is to lose man’s great source of consolation and coherence. I don’t think that it is unconnected to the Baby Boomers’ predicament that, as a country, we were losing God just as the Baby Boomers were being born.”

The only argument I would have with that last sentence is that I don’t think we “lost” God. It was not that passive. I think that in the 1960s, people *chose* to be without God. I think we made a moral choice for which as a nation we are completely responsible. I think that in the 1960s we decided that we could go it on our own. And when an individual, a family, or a nation fires God — writes Him out of the picture and begins to stick its chest out and say, “I can make it on my own,” — watch out! because the Bible says, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.”

Now let’s get to the biblical principles that we can learn from the decade of the 60s. Let’s consider just three examples of leaders and nations that fell because of pride.

1. Pharaoh and Egypt.

In Exodus 5:1-2 we see what happens when a leader says, “I don’t need God.” Listen to this: “Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, ‘This is what Jehovah, the God of Israel, says: “Let My people go, so that they may hold a festival to Me in the desert.” ‘Is that so?’ retorted Pharaoh; ‘And Who is Jehovah, that I should listen to Him and let Israel go? I don’t know Jehovah, and I will *not* let Israel go.’”

We know the rest of the story—the ten awful plagues that were visited upon Egypt, the killing of the firstborn of man and beast, and the drowning of Pharaoh and his forces in the Red Sea. “*Pride goes before destruction...*”

2. King Hezekiah and his Kingdom of Judah.

2 Chronicles 32:20-26 gives a wonderful account of how God rescued Hezekiah and his people when their capital city of Jerusalem was surrounded and besieged by the mighty King Sennacherib of Assyria. Look what it says: “King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah cried out in prayer to heaven, and the Lord sent an angel who annihilated all the fighting men and the leaders and officers in the camp of the Assyrian king. So, he withdrew to his own land in disgrace. And when he went into the temple of his god, some of his sons cut him down with the sword.” And that was the end of the king who would, in his pomp and pride, have fought against God’s chosen people Israel.

But read on — “So the Lord saved Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib, king of Assyria, and from the hand of all others. From then on King Hezekiah became immensely respected among the surrounding nations, and many gifts for the Lord arrived at Jerusalem, with valuable presents for King Hezekiah also. But about that time Hezekiah became deathly sick, and he prayed to the Lord, and the Lord replied with a miracle.”

Now notice what follows; it’s quite incredible. This next verse jumps out at me: “But Hezekiah didn’t respond with true thanksgiving and praise.” When we as Christians, when we as a nation, do not truly thank God for the blessings He has bestowed on us, I promise you, it marks us. And Hezekiah gave no thanks to God; he gave no sacrifice in return for his miraculous recovery. But listen to this: “For he had become proud, and so the anger of the Lord was upon him.” Notice what else happened — the anger of the Lord not only came upon Hezekiah; it came also upon his kingdom, Judah, and upon his capital city, Jerusalem. A nation often has to pay a price for the folly of its leaders.

But we will not leave Hezekiah in a bad light because in verse 26 it says: “But finally Hezekiah and the residents of Jerusalem humbled themselves, so the wrath of the Lord did not fall upon them during Hezekiah’s lifetime.” You see, the good news is that we *can* repent and humble ourselves as individuals and as a people, and God will withhold His hand of judgment upon us.

3. King Belshazzar and Babylon.

I am going to refer specifically to Daniel 5:1 8-23. Belshazzar, you remember, was the son of the great and famous King Nebuchadnezzar. At that time Babylon was a proud and powerful nation, the most powerful nation of its time. You remember the dramatic story of the handwriting on the wall of the banqueting hall in Belshazzar's palace one night when they were having a big party. When Belshazzar saw the handwriting, he was gripped with terror, and they brought Daniel in to interpret the handwriting. That is the setting.

Now let's read what Daniel said to the king, beginning at verse 18: "Oh king, the Most High God gave your father, Nebuchadnezzar, sovereignty and greatness, glory and splendor." In other words, Daniel said, "I want you to know that God really blessed your father." "Because of the high position He [God] gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled." Notice the awesome power this despot Nebuchadnezzar wielded. "But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal [i.e. he became insane]. He lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he acknowledged that the Most-High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone He wishes. But you, his son, Oh Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you know all this. Instead you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from His temple brought to you [i.e. he defiled that which was holy], and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand [i.e. he worshipped gods that were not gods at all, just as America does today]. But you did not honor the God Who holds in His hand your life and all your ways. Therefore... this is the inscription that was written:

MENE — 'God has numbered the days of your reign and bought it to an end.'

TEKEL — 'You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.'

PERES — 'Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.'

That very night, Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom."

God simply said, "It's over, Belshazzar. Your pride has destroyed you. You have cut the tether that has connected you to Almighty God. You're on your own, Buddy. Your kingdom is finished."

You say, "Pastor, is there still hope?" Indeed, there is hope. Listen to that great revival passage in 2 Chronicles 7:14:

"If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sins, and will heal their land."

We need to ask forgiveness for any personal rebellion against God. Remember, this is not something new — something that was invented in the 1960s. It happened in the Garden of Eden when Eve wanted to be like God. *That's* where pride began. We need to humble ourselves and tell God we realize that every perfect gift comes from Him. There is nothing we have today that is not a gift from God. Think of the blessings of health and family and work and whatever. You see, when we take God out of the picture and put ourselves in control, and exhibit rebellion against our God, from that moment on, whether it's for ourselves, our family, our business, our church, or our nation, we begin to go downhill.

And then we need to repent for our nation. I think my favorite patriotic song is Irving Berlin's "God Bless America"; yet I must confess that sometimes when I sing it, I feel like a hypocrite, and I sing it with a tinge of guilt.

We are a nation that, through pride, has drifted away from God. How can God bless a country that tells Him in His face that they don't need Him anymore? —His wisdom, His protection, His direction? How can God bless a nation that kills millions of little babies? How can God bless a nation where the media and the film industry flaunt sin and worship the gods of money and sex? How can God bless a nation that sanctions lifestyles that are rapidly making a moral sewer of our country? How can God bless a nation that flaunts, as an accepted form of moral conduct, unnatural vice which, 50 years ago, was unthinkable? How can God bless a nation that will not call *right* right, and *wrong* wrong?

We plead for forgiveness for a nation that will not ask forgiveness for itself. God will spare us, I do believe, for the sake of the seven thousand who have not bowed their knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18). God would have spared Sodom if He had found ten righteous men in the city (Genesis 18:32). God honors the faithful remnant. Our hope is not in a Democratic or a Republican President or Congress. Our hope is not in liberalism or conservatism. We have only one hope, and that is in the holy, righteous, sovereign God Whom we have spurned, but Who yet desires to save and bless those who will lift up His name, and honor and worship Him.

AMEN.

[Note: In the original text, graphs were shown on the next page, which could not be legibly reproduced.]