

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, June 11, 1995, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

JOSHUA 24:15

“If serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

AMERICA: HOW DID WE GET HERE FROM THERE?

(4) The 1990s — A Decade of DECISION

In the past few weeks we have been examining the decades of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, trying to learn something from history that would help us to understand why we are in the straits that confront us in 1995. Today I want to speak about the 1990s — a decade of DECISION.

Perhaps this is the most difficult decade to talk about. It's much easier, is it not, to look back at history, and view events after a period of time has transpired, and to be able to evaluate and understand a little bit more clearly what happened.

I want you to ask yourself this question: “Am I a person of the 90s?” Someone wrote a while back about how to tell if you're a person of the 90s:

- You work 90 hours a week and still end up with 90 items on your “To do” list; while life is whizzing past you at 90 miles an hour.
- You're on a 90 calorie a meal diet because you look 90 pounds overweight in your “on sale” swim suit that cost \$90.
- You've got 90 bills to pay, and you're already \$90 overdrawn, and the minimum payment on your Visa card this month is \$90.
- You're still paying \$90 a month on your student loan from the 1960s, and you don't know where you're going to get \$90,000 to send your kid to college.
- You've got 90 channels on your cable T.V., and you still can't find anything worth watching.
- You drive your kids to 90 activities a month, and your toddler just asked “Why?” for the 90th time today.
- And you think everything would be just fine if you were making \$90,000 a year.

How many of you are a product of the 90s?!

As we look at the 90s, I want to draw your attention to several things.

1. It is a time of CHANGE.

If the next five years are like the last five, the 90s will be a decade of more change than any other decade in this century. Some of the changes have been wonderful. For example,

A. We have watched Communism crumble before our very eyes. Who would have ever imagined that the eastern European nations would so suddenly be emancipated from the clutches of the Russian bear? No one even predicted this. Who would ever have imagined that the Berlin Wall would have come down? This is a cherished possession of mine — a piece of the wall that Eleanor Lease brought back to me from her visit to the wall some years ago. It was an incredible event after the Russian people had endured 70 years of unspeakable conditions.

And with the fall of Communism good things have been happening:

(1) There is less of a nuclear threat today. Now there is still a nuclear threat. We have only to think of Iran or North Korea to realize how true that is; and we must never be naïve about the intentions of these power-hungry tin-pot dictators. But over all, the nuclear threat has diminished.

(2) There are new international trade opportunities — incredible opportunities for us here in the USA. We have the ability now to go into the Eastern block countries to help them re-establish a sound economy and to sell them our goods which they so badly need.

(3) The evangelistic opportunities are exciting, as we see those people in Eastern Europe so hungry for truth. They have lived under a lie for so long, and they are a field that is ripe for harvest.

Billy Graham has said that in the 1950s he prayed that some day he would be able to conduct a crusade in Russia. And in 1993 it became a reality; and every night when he gave the invitation to receive Christ, he would say to his audience, “Now don’t come forward to make a public profession of faith unless you really mean it.” And yet each night 15,000 to 20,000 people would come forward. And he has said that over the years, and in all of his crusades, he has never seen people so hungry for the gospel. What an amazing opportunity we have in Eastern Europe today.

But even more exciting is the fact that they want to put a Bible in the hands of every child in every public school in the former Soviet Union. Contrast that with the attitude toward the Bible or the Ten Commandments in the schools of America, where the constant refrain is, “Let’s keep prayer and the Bible and God out of our public-school system.” It makes you ask the question, “Which country is headed in the right direction?”

B. There is an amazing change in what is happening culturally in America today. Some of these changes are very positive, I’m glad to say. By and large, even in our secular society (1) fathering is in. There is a new emphasis upon fathers and their responsibility toward their family. And history, I believe, will record that the “Promise Keepers” movement is becoming one of the most potent forces for spiritual renewal in America today. (2) There seems

to be an increased interest in God, especially in the last ten years. Twenty percent of the people in 1990 had an increased interest in spiritual realities over what they had in 1980. And (3) there has been an increase in volunteerism, and a desire for people, especially young people, who want to get involved in helping others. The so-called "Generation X" people born between 1965 and 1983, seem to have a real heart for serving. I am delighted when I hear of so many young people going to college now for the purpose of preparing themselves to work with handicapped and hurting people.

This decade is one of change.

2. It is a time of CRISIS.

There has been a splintering across America, and this splintering has been in several areas:

(a) There has been a political splintering. There is an increasing number of self-interest groups who are fighting for their own special goals. We have witnessed the alarming increase in political action committees which seek to divide masses of people into powerful voting blocks.

George Will, in a recent article in Newsweek, talking about some of the political splintering that's going on, said, "The University of California at Berkeley commemorated the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America by renaming Columbus Day "Indigenous Peoples' Day". Scientists say that on August 14, 2126, a huge comet named 'Swift Tuttle' may smack the Earth without first filing an environmental impact statement, or even getting Al Gore's permission. And if it hits a spotted owl habitat there will be litigation." There is political splintering all across our country.

(b) There is racial splintering. In spite of the idealism of the 1960s and the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., and his "I have a dream" message and the social idealism that it inspired, we're not a "melting pot." America today is what we might call a "salad bowl." There are a lot of different ingredients, but we are not really coming together. And I think the reason for that is we're more complex and diversified racially than we were years ago. Our country grew by 100 million people between 1950 and 1990. But in 1950 our country was 90 percent white and 10 percent black. Today our country is 78 percent white, 11 percent black, 8 percent Hispanic, and 3 percent Asian. And the prediction is that by the year 2050 America will be just 50 percent white. We're not a melting pot; we're a salad bowl, and with all the different nationalities, with diversities of background coming together, it is not always a black and white issue. If you consider the Los Angeles riots, it was a black and Korean issue.

George Will, in giving a review of 1992 said, "The unsurprising headline of the year was 'Many L.A. riot suspects found to have a criminal record.' "He said that the media coverage stressed the rioters' raging anger against an unjust social system, but the pictures showed many of them merrily conducting a shopping spree as looting went on unimpeded!

(c) There is a social splintering. Because of the increase of lawlessness, it has threatened the very fabric of our society. A recent statistic from Chicago revealed that the largest group of

lawbreakers in that city are between the ages of 15 to 20. The second largest group of lawbreakers are between the ages of 10 and 15!

(d) There is a relational splintering. We're becoming more disconnected from each other. There are fewer "friends" today than there used to be, and friendships are more on a surface level. Only one out of three people say they have a friend who really knows them. The majority of people say they expect to have fewer friends in the future because people increasingly live to themselves, boxed up in a family room in front of a T.V.

Why do people live to themselves? There are several reasons:

- Geographical changes account for some of this. People don't stay in the same place. The average person born today will move 14 times during his lifetime. Half the population now live in metropolitan areas of a million or more people.
- There are career changes. People used to work at the same job all their working years. But this is no longer the case. People are often forced by the economy to make career changes, and indeed, much of the job upheaval today is in the major transitioning of jobs themselves.

(e) And there is religious splintering. In 1990 Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun, writing the majority opinion in an important case, made a statement that had never been made before by a member of the high court. He said that America is now a "secular" nation. And he was probably right in affirming that in practice this is no longer a nation "under God." Indeed, it is a very secular nation. Think of the city of Zion, Illinois, where they had to erase a religious symbol from their city seal; or the forced removal of the Ten Commandments from the wall of a school in Kentucky. The ACLU is now fighting to have the cross removed from the chapel of Arizona State University. By the way, whatever the ACLU is against, I'm for! Even if I don't know what they're against, I'm for it, as a matter of principle!

Now let me make a prediction. I honestly believe that those who live authentically Christian lives here in America will increasingly find themselves part of a distinct subculture. And that hurts. Our Christian subculture runs against the grain of the nation's current sociological and political movements. And in this new era, Christians will undoubtedly be seen as obstacles of social progress, and we will probably face much more ridicule and much more intolerance. I pray that I am wrong, but we are certainly in a decade of Crisis.

3. It is a time of CHOICE.

There is much moral decay around us. People today want to live by their own commandments. I saw a survey recently that said that only 13 percent of Americans believe in all Ten Commandments.

And then there's Ted Turner, the cable king out of Atlanta. About five years ago he made the profound announcement that the U.S. could now dispense with the outmoded Ten Commandments. He said, "Nobody pays any attention to them." And he said that Christianity is

“a religion for losers.” Do you remember when the Atlanta Braves, whom Turner owns, were in the World Series against the Toronto Blue Jays in 1993? Do you know that every time the camera would focus in on Ted Turner and Jane Fonda in the front row, chopping away with their crazy tomahawks, I couldn’t help saying, “Come on, Blue Jays, beat the ‘you know what’ out of them!” And they did!

Turner said the Commandments are outdated; but he said, “I have ten voluntary initiatives that should be given to American society.” Well, thank you, Ted. You are such an outstanding example that I want to write them down immediately! If the country would just follow Ted, we’d get out of our mess — we’d go directly to hell.

In George Will’s article in Newsweek to which I have already referred, he was telling about the lack of credibility in people’s lives today. What they say, and what they do, are not the same thing. He said, “Bob Packwood voted against the confirmation of Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas primarily because he is so very sensitive about women’s rights! Murphy Brown and Woody Allen illustrated variations of family values. And two members of Britain’s seedy royalty agreed to continue their parasitic lives in separate palaces.”

It is a time of CHOICE in America today. I go back to the testimony I gave of Lee Atwater not long after his conversion, and not long before his death, when he said, “I don’t know who will lead us through the 90s, but they must be made to speak of the spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, for this is the tumor of the soul.”

I believe there are two choices in this decade that need to be made:

(a) We need leaders who will make godly decisions.

I recall a 1993 headline that read, “Clinton overturns curbs on abortion.” I’m not uttering a blanket condemnation of the President, but we just need leaders who make godly decisions. And such leaders are in short supply these days.

And I don’t think the answer is the Democrats or the Republicans. In case you think I’m picking on the Democrats, we had Republicans in office for 12 years, and we got all excited in 1980. Here comes the Moral Majority, and we’re going to take our nation back for God; and here comes President Reagan and apple pie and Grandma, and a disarming smile. And we thought the country would turn around. But ask yourself this question: “By the time Bush was out and Clinton got in, had the moral state of the country improved or had it gotten worse?”

You can’t change your country morally and spiritually simply by changing the administration. You can change policy, but you can’t change the heart of man by political maneuverings, “for the heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.” (Jeremiah 17:9) You can’t change the country from the top down; you must change it from the bottom up. Only God can change the wicked heart through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, which brings me to the second choice that needs to be made:

(b) We need Christians who will live transformed lives.

We need to think less about who is in office and worry a lot more about “Am I living a life that glorifies God?”

George Gallup, in a recent poll, found that only 10 percent of Americans live transformed Christian lives. “Transformed Christian lives” he defined as “lives that are truly Christian seven days a week.” You see, what Gallup found was that a lot of people go to church, and pray, and talk about God and have Bibles in their homes; but, he said, “Most of those people live it on Sunday, but it doesn’t change their behavior at work; it doesn’t change the way they treat their family; it doesn’t change their agenda on Monday through Saturday. In other words, they are Sunday Christians, and I think we are now beginning to pay the price of people who go to church on Sunday, but somehow haven’t been salt and light in their society Monday through Saturday.”

People don’t flock in here on Sunday morning to pack this room to capacity. Where are all those people going to find out about Jesus? From you! And if your life isn’t a reflection of Jesus from Monday through Saturday, then it’s over, folks. This needs to be a place where we can come together to learn, to be equipped, to assimilate truth, and then begin to live out that truth every day of our lives.

As we bring this message to a close, look with me at Joshua 24. It’s a very crucial passage because Joshua was about to die. The people are now in the Promised Land. It was very similar to where we are in America today. We’re in our Promised Land. And in verse 13 we read how God said, “I gave you a land on which you did not toil, and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.” That’s just us, isn’t it? We’re living off the heritage of our past and the benefits our Founding Fathers bequeathed to us. And we have all these blessings that have come down to us from former generations.

Look at verse 14, where Joshua says, “Now, therefore, fear the Lord, and serve Him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped. . . in Egypt and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

Go now to verse 28, “Then Joshua sent the people away, each to his own inheritance.” And then verse 31, “Israel served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him, and who had experienced everything the Lord had done for Israel.”

Notice that they served God as long as Joshua lived, and as long as the elders who outlived Joshua survived. And they served the Lord as long as there were people who had experienced everything the Lord had done for Israel.

Now how does that relate to where we are today? It’s very simple. What is our liberal, God-denying culture trying to do? They are trying to remove the very memory of everything the Lord has done for us as a nation — all the landmarks, all the fingerprints of God on our country. And we must not let them get away with it.

I'm afraid we're very close to having a generation that is absolutely illiterate about God and the gospel of Christ. Isn't it scary to realize that we may be very close to being a land that needs missionaries to be sent to us?!

As a nation, we must choose whom we will serve. As individuals, may we exclaim with Joshua — “As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord!”

AMEN.