

IF MY PEOPLE?

A Biblical Look at “Awaken the Dawn”

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The signs are everywhere. The United States of America has lost its Christian moorings. It's becoming unarguably evident to many of us that our nation has reached a level of decadence and despair that is beyond human reversal. And if the projected attendance at “Awaken the Dawn” proves valid, then it's also evident that multiplied thousands of people have realized that God alone can turn the course of our history back toward the spiritual foundations our ancestors laid on the fertile soil of this continent.

Although “Awaken the Dawn” is primarily a call to prayer, two other prominent themes are worship and unity. However, unlike many such efforts that seek revival, they aren't explicitly appealing to 2 Chronicles 7:14 as a central focus: “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

The reason might be, as some argue, that “my people” only refers to Israel (an argument Paul challenges in Romans 9:24-26). But I suspect there may be a different—and significant—reason for this decision.

The phrase “Awaken the dawn” comes from Psalm 57. This powerful psalm was written by David when he was running for his life from King Saul. It combines a prayer for mercy with a heart of praise. He begins, “Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me! For my soul trusts in You; and in the shadow of Your wings I will make my refuge, until these calamities have passed by.”

The question I would pose is this: should the believers in our nation more accurately identify our nation's troubles with David's situation in Psalm 57 or with the situation of the children of Israel in 2 Chronicles?

While David wrote this psalm long before his famous moral failing, he certainly was an imperfect man. Nevertheless, Scripture is clear that, in this context, David is innocent and Saul is his tormented and deranged enemy. On the other hand, with the Israelites, the “If my people” promise was to be invoked in the context of God's discipline on them as a nation due to some form of disobedience to Him.

Why does this matter? It seems to me it's vital that in our quest for God's favor and intervention, we would be careful to understand His perspective on, and His response to, times of human distress. It's for this reason that I want to look more closely at the section of 2 Chronicles in which the “If my people” promise is found.

In 2 Chronicles 6, Solomon has finished the construction of the temple, and all the people have gathered for a grand celebration. As the climax of this event, Solomon kneels before the Lord and makes seven specific petitions. In each case, he asks God to intervene in the lives of the people over whom he now rules. In most of these petitions, he includes a plea for forgiveness and restoration when the people stray from God's will.

God's immediate response to these prayers was to send fire from heaven on their altars, a sign that He was pleased with their sacrifices. For the next seven days, the people feasted and worshipped God and were filled with joy. Some time later, however, God came to Solomon alone in the night with two more explicit responses to the petitions he had made.

Then the Lord appeared to Solomon by night, and said to him: "I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for Myself as a house of sacrifice. When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among My people, 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 I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." (7:12-14)

Solomon and God both understood that such natural disasters were God's instruments to train His people (6:28-31). In other words, these were measures of His mercy toward them, drawing them back to repentance and righteousness.

God's second response, however, was quite different.

But if you turn away and forsake My statutes and My commandments which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods, and worship them, then I will uproot them from My land which I have given them; and this house which I have sanctified for My name I will cast out of My sight, and will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples. (7:19-20)

Based on these two passages, and assuming that God's posture toward people who follow Him is unchanging through the ages, then how are we to approach Him today? Can we rightfully pray David's prayer, or should we be praying the prayer of the Israelites? And further, on what basis might we expect to see revival—to experience another national "awakening"? Or have we reached the point where God will soon cast our nation "out of His sight"?

As I mentioned, David was in a position of danger due to no fault of his own. In fact he specifically says in Psalm 57:7, "My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast." This brings me to my first concern with "Awaken the Dawn." Where in its statement of vision and purpose is there a foundational call to "steadfastness" and holiness?

Consider how leader David Bradshaw expressed their vision in 2017:

We want to call 20-year-olds all over America...and all ages, to immerse themselves, to give themselves to a prayerful, intimate pursuit of His person, a relationship with Him. That's the amazing thing. It's not just theological ideas—it's a living, supernatural encounter with the superior pleasure above all other pleasures. His name is Jesus, and that's why we're going to the mall—to sing a love song and enter into the worth of Jesus in our nation.

Contrast that with this summary from Wikipedia of the character of the other historic awakenings in the United States:

The Awakenings all resulted from powerful preaching that gave listeners a sense of personal guilt and of their need of salvation by Christ. Pulling away from ritual and ceremony, the Great Awakening made religion intensely personal to the average person by fostering a deep sense of spiritual guilt and redemption, and by encouraging introspection and a commitment to a new standard of personal morality.

If the God we serve today is the same God who led and guided His people in David's day and in Solomon's day, then it seems to me we must take seriously all four components of 2 Chronicles 7:14. That is, in addition to prayer, we must humble ourselves, seek His face, and turn from our wicked ways. That's what happened in our country in those vital and wonderful seasons of our history when God truly intervened to bring large numbers of people back to Himself.

Before considering what these steps might look like, let's look at one more Bible story where God responded to a repentant city with forgiveness. In the familiar story of Jonah, God first told him simply to speak of their sin. "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me" (Jonah 1:2). Later, when Jonah actually arrived in Nineveh, his message to them was this: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:4).

To his surprise, the king of Nineveh responded quickly and decisively. Even though it's not clear that Jonah also communicated the original message, the king obviously understood their guilt.

Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish? (3:7-9)

Notice carefully what actually caused God to withhold His judgment.

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. (3:10)

It wasn't their sackcloth or mighty cries that made the difference. It was that they turned away from their evil works.

So yes, clearly prayer matters. Acts of worship matter. A united voice matters. But the bottom line for God is what is lived out. Are we truly humble people? Do we seek His face, especially as He is revealed in His Word? And are we ourselves, as people who bear His name, not only denouncing national wickedness such as abortion, but also turning from our own personal wicked ways?

The great prophet Isaiah ended his book with these powerful words from God.

"Heaven is My throne,
And earth is My footstool.
Where is the house that you will build Me?
And where is the place of My rest?

For all those things My hand has made,
And all those things exist,”
Says the Lord.
“But on this one will I look:
On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit,
And who trembles at My word.” (Isaiah 66:1-2)

We can erect magnificent church buildings—or we can pitch simple tents. But nothing in our worship will impress God until we have become humble enough to tremble at His word.

“Awaken the Dawn” has noted that the dates of their event coincide with the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. But had they looked more closely at God’s scriptures, they might have realized that this Feast was the culmination of seven feasts described in Leviticus 23. It isn’t insignificant that immediately preceding this final celebration God called for a Day of Atonement. “It shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire to the Lord.” (23:27)

Is that simply an Old Testament pattern, one Christ has now done away with? We know that the sacrifices of that day were fully completed on Calvary. But can we also presume that our need for poverty of soul is also removed? Or was Christ drawing us back to this picture when He opened His beatitudes with “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”?

This then is my second concern with “Awaken the Dawn”—there appears to be little or no agenda for encouraging people to seek the face of God in His Holy Scriptures. Although they deliberately tie themselves to Promise Keepers, an earlier event on the National Mall, they appear to have less regard for an explicit goal of Promise Keepers, for “men to have a passion for the Word of God.”

This brings to mind another Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, who spoke these words from God:

“Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,
Let not the mighty man glory in his might,
Nor let the rich man glory in his riches;
But let him who glories glory in this,
That he understands and knows Me,
That I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth.
For in these I delight,” says the Lord. (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

Clearly throughout Scripture God reveals Himself as “exercising lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness” in the earth. “Awaken the Dawn” fully and appropriately celebrates His lovingkindness. But to the extent that they seek the face of God, are they seeing and embracing the justice side of His nature as readily as the mercy side? In other words—and this is my third concern—are the participants in “Awaken the Dawn” being drawn to an explicit and convicting understanding of all that God views as wickedness?

It has often been said that our American society is no more wicked than many other societies in past history. In one sense that’s true. Other cultures have been—and still are—far more violent and immoral and cruel. But I would contend that there is a flaw in the modern Western mindset that is

unique in all of history, and that is our deliberate and pervasive decision to redefine sin as virtue (and the spillover effect we're now seeing of redefining virtue as sin).

To be sure, the majority of true believers aren't accepting these redefinitions, at least not fully. But what we are finding is a strong propensity to see our lesser failings as really not sinful at all, especially when compared with the secular world around us. And while the grace and forgiveness Christ purchased for us on the cross is real and complete, it has no power over us until and to the extent that we specifically acknowledge our need for it (1 John 1:8-10).

What are our sins? Very often they're familiar, "normal" things. The innumerable commercials we see bring us to covet things we don't have. The movies we watch and the books we read stir up lustful thoughts. The endless pictures we're given of the perfect life combined with an incessant message that we have a right to such happiness results all too frequently in habitual complaining and self pity.

Yet how many of us realize the seriousness with which God judges the simple act of complaining? Paul warns us against it very specifically in 1 Corinthians 10:10-11, and Jude lists grumblers and complainers near the beginning of his description of apostate people.

What we fail to understand is that unless we are deeply gripped by our ongoing offensiveness to God in the way we live, we'll never really grasp the deep mercy He has offered to us in the greatest expression of His lovingkindness: the brutal sacrifice of His sinless Son on our behalf. And only when we receive His mercy through authentic repentance and by the power of His Spirit will we actually be able to "turn from our wicked ways."

This brings us back to the question of which of God's two words to Solomon applies in our day. Will the disciplines of God in our nation be sufficient to call at least His followers to turn to Him in humility and repentance, to the extent that our land might be spared? Or is it possible that we—like the Israelites in their day—will reach the point where God will no longer protect our land, but will "cast it out of His sight" (Jeremiah 15:1)?

If you recall, the point of no return for the Israelites wasn't so much their wickedness or injustices, but rather their decision to turn from the commandments of God to serve and worship foreign gods. It's true that most of us don't bow down to literal idols or worship little statues in our homes. But we still need to ask ourselves: what are our gods?

Think about it. Something becomes a god when it plays a certain role in our lives. A god provides the standard against which we determine the value of everything else. A god is usually given a significant part of our attention, our energy, our time and our resources—in other words, we tend to conform ourselves and our lives to whatever the god represents or requires. This is because we truly believe it will provide us with security, with comfort, with pleasure, and with personal worth.

These can be things like money, food, beauty or fitness, education, our skills and talents, our personal connections, our accomplishments and fame—even our popularity on social media. Very often that which dominates our attention, time and resources is our extensive array of entertainments. Even our worship itself can be a distraction from the true God, if what results is an emotional cure for our stress or guilt that has not actually engaged God on His terms.

Thus the words of yet another prophet, Amos, should cause us to soberly evaluate even something as God-focused as “Awaken the Dawn.”

I hate, I despise your feast days,
And I do not savor your sacred assemblies.
Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings,
I will not accept them,
Nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings.
Take away from Me the noise of your songs,
For I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments.
But let justice run down like water,
And righteousness like a mighty stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

Friend, my heart is not to discourage anything that God is truly doing in our nation and in His people. But we cannot afford to neglect the clear words of Scripture regarding His holy nature and His requirement that we too walk, not just in His forgiveness, but in an authentic manifestation of His justice and righteousness.

One more thought. If these are indeed the final days leading to His return—and I personally believe they are—then Scripture promises that deceptions will be more prevalent and more subtle than ever in history. Paul warns us about this in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12.

The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

What this is saying is that we cannot trust power, signs or wonders, but must instead cling firmly to “the love of the truth” as it is revealed in the entire expanse of Scripture. And when we do this, we will discover that our fullest satisfaction and security and blessing only come as we conform our thoughts and lives to the righteousness and holiness of God Himself.

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