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Title: Seek Spiritual Awakening

Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9

Topic: Spiritual Awakening

Series: Ten Years After 9-11: Building the Kingdom Today

Seek Spiritual Awakening

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Thesis: when we seek awakening, God heals our land
Persuade: to seek awakening with passion and purpose

Ten years ago today, 19 radical Muslims killed nearly 3,000 innocent civilians in the worst terrorist attack in American history. As long as you live, you'll never forget where you were on that fateful morning.

In this series, we have claimed the fact that God redeems all he allows. How would he redeem for greater good the tragedy of that day and the suffering which has followed? More than 6,000 American troops have died in Iraq and Afghanistan; the United States has spent more than \$1.283 trillion on the war effort. That is nearly the amount we spent on Vietnam, Korea, and World War I combined. We have been fighting in Afghanistan longer than any war in our nation's history, with no end in sight.

I am convinced that God wants to use 9/11 to bring spiritual awakening to our people. A "revival" changes a person or church; an "awakening" changes a nation. America has experienced four "great awakenings" in our history—in 1734, 1792, 1858, and 1904-5. Each marked our country for a generation.

Today we are seeing more people coming to Christ around the world than ever before in history—more than 82,000 a day, according to David Barrett's *World Christian Encyclopedia*. But only 6,000 are in Western Europe and North America, combined. The great need of our day is for moral and spiritual renewal, before it's too late.

Seek awakening

A spiritual awakening is not a brief, mountaintop experience with God's glory and power. It is the kind of relationship he created us to experience with him every day. The Bible is a drama in four acts: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Evangelicals emphasize acts two and three—our sin and God's plan of salvation. However, God seeks not just the salvation of our souls but the restoration of our lives and world.

He made Adam and Eve for the Garden of Eden, where he would walk with them in intimate, personal communion. He intends such a personal, passionate relationship with each of us. To experience spiritual renewal is to be restored to the fellowship with our Father which he created us to know.

How can we experience this restoration? This week we have focused on this statement in God's word:

"When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague 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 will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:13-14).

We are facing droughts, locusts, and plague—natural, financial, and personal disasters and challenges. God is waiting for us to humble ourselves before him as our King, pray together for our nation, seek his face personally, and turn from our wicked ways. When we do, he promises his people that he will hear from heaven, forgive our sins, and "heal their land."

"Heal" translates *rapha* ("raw-faw"), which means to mend by stitching, repair thoroughly, bind up what is broken, make whole, restore. "Land" translates *erets*, which refers to the ground, a country, and the world. God wants to restore our nation and planet to himself. When we humble ourselves, pray, seek his face, and turn from our wicked ways, he will.

Don't be deceived

Our last parable portrays the four ways people have responded to 9/11. It begins: "A farmer went out to sow his seed" (Matthew 13:3). The Greek original begins with the word "Behold!", a term used to call attention to something important. What follows is of the utmost urgency.

And it is delivered by a very common occurrence. Palestinian fields could be sowed in the fall or the spring. Sometimes the field was prepared by plowing, and sometimes the seed was first scattered and then plowed into the ground, as is the case here. Most likely a farmer in a nearby field alongside the Sea of Galilee began this actual work just as Jesus began teaching the crowds, and Jesus used him for his text.

The farmer could put his bag of seed on the back of his donkey, cut a hole in it, and let the seed spill out as the donkey walked along. But more likely he was scattering the seed by hand, probably wheat or barley seed. We will soon learn that the "seed" being sown is the word of God (v. 20).

Now Jesus describes the soil which the seed finds. Farmers in the first century did not plant in tidy rows, but scattered the seed along the ground. The very results Jesus notes were common. In fact, all four conditions we find in our parable were typical of the same field, if it was of any size at all.

Some soil typifies the deceived heart: "some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up" (v. 4). The "path" would be the footpath worn by years of farming, as well as the roads which passed through the farmland. The wind scattered the seed onto these rock-hard surfaces, where it sat exposed to the birds. Today it is common in the Middle East to see a large flock of birds following a farmer as he sows his seed, eagerly picking up every grain which has not sunk into the soil.

Jesus' point is spiritual, as his interpretation shows: "When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path" (v. 19). By deceiving those who receive the word of God, the enemy steals away the word of truth.

Has our nation experienced such spiritual deception in the years after 9/11? Shortly after the tragedy, celebrities took to the airwaves to assure us that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, that it doesn't matter which religion we follow so long as we're

sincere in our beliefs and tolerant of others. "Postmodernism" has taught a generation of Americans that truth is individual and subjective. There's just "your truth" and "my truth."

Try that worldview with any other dimension of life. It doesn't matter which key you use to open your car, since they're all the same. It doesn't matter which road you take to get home, since they all lead to the same destination. It doesn't matter which medicines you take before going to bed tonight, since they all do the same thing.

The deception of our post-9/11 day is that all religions lead up the same mountain to the same "higher power." As C. S. Lewis noted, the man who denies the sunrise doesn't harm the sun.

Don't fall away

Jesus' parable continues to a second agricultural problem: "Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root" (vs. 5-6). Thin soil is a persistent problem in Palestine, where so much of the ground is limestone covered with a layer of topsoil.

The seed in this rocky soil "sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow." A week into the agricultural season, this part of the field looked to be the most productive. The rocks just beneath the surface of the earth would heat the soil quickly, so that seeds planted here would germinate. Water and fertilizers on the surface of the soil could penetrate quickly to the roots of the new plant.

And so the sprout "shot up quickly," to translate the Greek literally. But the sun came up, as it always does. The sprout in shallow soil could not put down deep roots to trap the moisture of the ground. And so the plant "withered" and died.

In Jesus' interpretation of the parable he says, "The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy" (v. 20). Unlike the heart hardened by deceptions and distractions from the enemy, this soul welcomes the word instantly. The "joy" which results is clear and early proof of the sincerity of this person's faith. Or so we think.

But nowhere does the Bible say how it feels to become a Christian, or to walk with him. Our emotions are to be the caboose at the end of the train, not the engine driving it. Our emotions depend on the pizza we had for dinner, or the weather, or the stock market, or a million other variables. Do not judge faith by emotions. This sprout had joy, but not for long.

Judge faith by faithfulness. Jesus warns the person with quick but rootless faith: "since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away" (v. 21). "Trouble" translates the word for pressure, difficulty, stress. It was literally the word for the roller used by Romans to press wheat into flour.

Such trouble is to be expected by Jesus' followers: "We were under great pressure, far our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life" (2 Corinthians 1:8). Jesus warned us: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

And we will have "persecution." This word speaks to the deliberate infliction of intentional pain, usually for religious reasons. Some of our struggles as Christians are the result of a fallen world. Others are the result of fallen people with fallen motives.

Whichever is the source of the struggle, the short-rooted hearer "quickly falls away" from the faith. The Greek uses the word "immediately." "Falls away" translates the Greek word for "tripped up," showing not a gradual loss of interest but a sudden collapse under pressure. The word of God does not collapse under such stress: "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8). But those who do not grow in their faith may soon prove that they do not possess it at all.

Some 25 million Christians have been killed for their faith in the first 19 centuries after Christ. More than 45 million believers were martyred in the 20th century—nearly twice as much as in all previous history combined. In the years since 9/11, persecution against God's people has risen steadily around the world. Of the 10 nations in which the worst Christian persecution exists, eight are Muslim-majority countries.

The number of atheists and agnostics in America has quadrupled over the last 20 years. The number of "unchurched" people in America (those who have not attended a church service or event other than a wedding or funeral in the last six months) has increased from 24% in 1991 to 37% in 2011. Two days after 9/11, the church I pastored in Dallas was filled with more than 2,000 people from our community as we gathered for an interdenominational prayer service. Two Sundays later, attendance was back to normal.

For God to redeem 9/11, his people must seek him with renewed purpose and passion. Have you sought his face today?

Don't worry about money

Some soil in the farmer's field was too hard to receive the seed. Some was too shallow to give it roots. And some was too filled with weeds to let it live: "Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants" (v. 7).

"Falling among thorns" was a common agricultural problem in Jesus' day. Farmers had no access to chemicals which would destroy weeds and their root systems. So they had two remedies. They could plow the field under, which would tear up the growing weeds but do nothing to their roots. Or they could burn the field, with the same effect. Either way, the farmer could not see the weeds hiding in the soil where he sowed his seed.

But they were there, and they "grew up and choked the plants." Luke used the same word translated "choked" for the hogs who rushed into the lake and "were choked" or drowned (Luke 8:33). What weeds choke us spiritually?

Jesus names two varieties which are especially deadly: the "worries of this life" and the "deceitfulness of wealth" (v. 22). "Worries of this life" translates the Greek "anxieties of this age," meaning worldly concerns and interests. The "deceitfulness of wealth" translates "deceit of riches," the "uncertainty or deceit inherent in wealth."

Sin is deceitful in its very nature (Hebrews 3:13), and sinful wealth especially so: "People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith

and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:9-10). Money is not evil, but pursuing it can be deadly.

As we saw on September 4, the Great Recession was one of the most severe economic catastrophes in U.S. history. It cost Americans \$19.4 trillion, and affected 40% of our families. Under- and unemployment has risen above 22%. Financial instability in Europe continues to roil the stock markets, raising the possibility of a second recession.

When Peter found himself on the stormy Sea of Galilee, he was able to walk on the water until he took his eyes from Jesus to the wind and the waves. In that moment he sank and would have drowned except for our Lord's power and grace.

Have the financial challenges of these days distracted you from focusing on Jesus? Are you trusting your boat in the storm, or the One who calms the seas?

Join the Fifth Great Awakening

At last we come to the good news: "Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown" (v. 8). This "good soil" is bereft of footpaths, rocks, or weeds. But the farmer cannot know this until the harvest is in. The success of the soil is not measured by its appearance or its early successes, but only by its fruitfulness.

The same God who created the earth can make it as fertile as he wishes. And our souls as well: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). As he grows our souls into fruitfulness, he uses us to reproduce the harvest in our culture.

God is growing his harvest around the world today. A worship movement is sweeping Australia and churches around the globe. A tribal movement is bringing more people in Africa to Christ than ever before. When I was in Beijing last year, I learned that 100,000 people come to Jesus every day in the People's Republic of China. More than a million Cubans have become Christians in the last 10 years.

Now God invites you and me to join this great spiritual movement. He wants to redeem the tragedy of 9/11 by using it to show us our desperate need of his grace and strength. If we will humble ourselves and make him our King each day, pray fervently for awakening to come to our land, seek his face with personal passion, and turn from all that grieves him in our lives, he will hear us, forgive us, and heal us. He will restore our nation to himself. And he will have used 9/11 to extend his Kingdom in America and around the world.

Conclusion

These words are inscribed inside the cover of my Bible:

There is one thing that must never be forgotten. It is as if a king had sent you to a foreign country with a task to perform. You go and perform many other tasks.

But if you fail to perform the task for which you were sent, it will be as if you had done nothing at all.

Your Lord has sent you to be make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20), beginning in your city and nation (Acts 1:8). He is redeeming all he allows for his glory

and our good. Do you believe our King can use the tenth anniversary of the worst terrorism attack in our history to advance his Kingdom?

Dr. S. M. Lockeridge was one of the most profound orators of our day. Listen to his description of our risen Lord:

He is enduringly strong; he is entirely sincere. He is eternally steadfast; he is immortally gracious. He is imperially powerful; he is impartially merciful. He is the greatest phenomenon that has ever crossed the horizons of the globe. He is God's Son; he is the sinner's Savior. He is the captive's Ransom; he is the breath of life. He is the centerpiece of civilization; he stands in the solitude of Himself. He is august and he is unique; he is unparalleled and he is unprecedented. He is undisputed and he is undefiled; he is unsurpassed and he is unshakeable. He is the loftiest idea in philosophy; he is the highest personality in psychology. He is the supreme subject in literature; he is the fundamental doctrine of theology. He is the Cornerstone and the Capstone. He is the miracle of the ages.

He is still on his throne. Is he on yours?