

AFTER THE DARK 7-13-14

(Judges 2) Every year the President of the United States gives what is called a *State of the Union Address*. In theory, it is a time for our chief leader to assess the condition of our republic and propose some direction for the way ahead. Well, suppose I, or someone else were to give a *Spiritual State of the Nation Address*. What would that be like? If you were to give it what would you say? Would you have good news about where we are as a society? Hard to imagine that. Church attendance is the lowest it has been in my lifetime for sure -- and especially so among the youngest adults. More than ever, Americans are listing themselves in surveys as "nones" meaning they have no religious attachments. But then what about the majority who still identify with some religion? Especially those Christian ones? How are they doing? Well, just a couple of weeks ago the mainline Presbyterian body (not our group) met in Detroit and voted overwhelmingly to support men marrying men and women marrying women, something unthinkable just a decade ago. The cultural shift away from traditional marriage has been one of the most amazing things I have seen in my lifetime. Homosexual relationships are now not only normalized, but protected like an endangered species so that the force of societal pressure and even law comes down on anyone who dare oppose. We are at a point where members of our church could and will lose jobs if it is learned that you are a part of a church that holds to those "hateful" Biblical understandings of marriage and sexuality. Our vice-president recently warned the world that America was prepared to bring pressure against countries that did not embrace same-sex marriage. Other nations can treat women and Christians like dogs. They will get our aid in the billions, but watch-out if your country keeps illegal what is still illegal in much of our nation. It's unbelievable! This from a man who has said, *My religion defines who I am. And I've been a practicing Catholic my whole life. It has particularly informed my social doctrine.* End quote. And you see in that, how even those who retain some attachment to their religious traditions have largely abandoned those principles under the pressure that popular culture, the political correctness of the moment, brings to bear.

The homosexual revolution of the last few years is not the first such revolution in my lifetime. Some of us are old enough to remember the 1960s and the assault on the idea that only marriage legitimates a sexual relationship. The anti-establishment hippy movement promoted sex, drugs and *peace*. By the latter they meant surrender in Vietnam. The pro-drugs attitude led to the popularity of marijuana and other uppers and downers. The "free-love" revolution led to skyrocketing rates of premarital sex that eventually brought us to where we are now, with nearly half of American births

involving unmarried women. I am finding that this decade, the twenty-teens, is starting to resemble the 1960s. As I pondered the retaking of Iraq by militant Muslims, just a few years after 4500 American died there to make Iraq a free nation, I couldn't help but think of Vietnam where nearly 60,000 Americans died to keep a people free from a brutal Communist takeover. But, then we decided that war was a bad idea and we essentially handed over South Vietnam to the communists and our own military to a monumental sense of futility. Sexual revolution, foreign policy confusion, and what about drugs? Well, we again see revolution there as well with the legalization and popularizing of marijuana.

My point is simply that it is a bad time in the USA if measured by standards of Biblical morality. The church and the gospel we preach is not exactly on the ascendancy. Those who hold to Scriptural convictions find themselves marginalized more and more. That is the pattern of the last decade for sure and if you are paying attention to it you may find yourself prone to despair. Frankly, it is hard to find positive markers to balance out all the negativity. It just is. What do you think? Is there any real hope? Or should we expect to see the church in America become like the church in most of Europe, characterized by apostasy and irrelevance? Someone said that in times like this folks can be found in one of three groups: those who are afraid, those who are ignorant, and those who know their Bibles. I want us to be in that latter group. I want us to be concerned, sure, but I also want us to act and pray in hope. Our God gives us plenty of reason in Scripture for that.

Please take a look with me at the second chapter of the book of Judges. Here we find the people of Israel having newly entered the promised land under the leadership of Joshua. It was a high time in their history. So Judges 2:**7-10** *The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the Lord which He had done for Israel. 8 Then Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of one hundred and ten. 9 And they buried him in the territory of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. 10 All that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel.* Are you with me? We are getting here a broad look at a historical movement and a generational shift. As a people-group, as a society, a change has come and it is one of spiritual declension. A new generation arose that was ignorant of history. They were not aware of the great works of God. So, we read on **11-13** *Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals, 12 and they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought*

them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the Lord to anger. 13 So they forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtaroth. Notice there in verse 12 that the new generation Israelites were influenced by the peoples living around them. They abandoned their distinctiveness as the Chosen People and sunk into the ways of the pagan nations around them. Sound familiar? The church was not influencing the world, but the world was influencing the church. And if you think this leads to trouble, you are quite right. **14-15** *The anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. 15 Wherever they went, the hand of the Lord was against them for evil, as the Lord had spoken and as the Lord had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed.* This is precisely as God had promised. He would not let His people prosper in their idolatry. They would go through difficult times. A dark season would come in which all the leading social indicators would be trending downward. The nation would suffer spiritually, materially, militarily. Darkness. But -- as we read on we see that the gracious Lord does not leave them there. Judges 2:**16** *Then the Lord raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them.* ® Look at the first word of that verse. *Then. Then.* Then when? When the people were in deep distress, when the nation was in a dark time, God would intervene by raising up a deliverer, a leader who would provide some rescue. Judges 2:**18** *When the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge and delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them.* This is the grace of God who looks beyond our fault to see our need. However, the Lord's ways are not our ways. We would like the story to have a happy ending, but this story in Judges doesn't so much have an ending as it becomes a loop, a pattern. History in this period repeats itself and the book of Judges makes this plain for us. **19** *But it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them.* Oh my! We wonder why these folks don't learn from history. But part of what we do learn from history is that few people learn from history. As a result, what happens in Judges is this cycle of sin and idolatry, followed by decline and difficulty, followed by God's rescue and revival, followed by a season of faithfulness and then back to the beginning. Judges 3:**7-15** *The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth. 8 Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, so that He sold*

them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the sons of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years. 9 When the sons of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. 10 The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the Lord gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand, so that he prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. 11 Then the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died. 12 Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord. So the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the Lord. 13 And he gathered to himself the sons of Ammon and Amalek; and he went and defeated Israel, and they possessed the city of the palm trees. 14 The sons of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years. 15 But when the sons of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for them, Ehud the son of Gera. And so it would go. Judges 4:1-3a Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. 2 And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; and the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. 3 And the sons of Israel cried to the Lord. So, guess what happened with they cried to the Lord? That's right. God raised up Deborah. They were delivered and we read that the land was undisturbed for forty years. Then guess what happened? Judges 6:1 *Then the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord gave them into the hands of Midian seven years. But the bad news is always followed by? Good news 6:6* So Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the sons of Israel cried to the Lord. So guess what God did? The Lord, merciful and patient and longsuffering, raised up Gideon and the people were brought back to God once again. Here is what I hope you see from this. The direction of a decade or two or three does not determine the direction of a century. I will say that again. Because our God is full of grace, the direction of a decade or two or three does not determine the direction of a century. We see that when we read the Biblical books of the Kings and Chronicles as well. Long seasons of national decline were followed by seasons of revival which were followed by seasons of decline, which were followed by seasons of revival. And, get this, often it was darkest just before the dawn. At times when despair would crawl all over the faithful remnant of God's people, BOOM! the Lord would show up whether through a Moses or a Josiah, or an Elijah or through a prayerful faithful few who cried out to God for mercy.

So it was for the seasons of revival about which we read in Scripture. So too has it been during those seasons of revival best known to us in the history of the church. The most well-known

historical revivals would be the Reformation of the 16th Century and the Great Awakening of the 18th century. At the time of the Reformation in Europe the state of Christianity had fallen to an astonishing degree. Godliness within the church and its leaders was the rare exception rather than the rule. Popes were known to have numerous children through numerous women and this was not considered extraordinary or even problematic. If you know the story of Martin Luther you realize that he was raised up by God in a season when the church was openly, brazenly selling to poor people the idea that a gift to the church could free their relatives from purgatory. The church was big business and had lost its holy mission. The influence of the church was slipping in France, slipping in Germany, slipping in England. If you had studied the history of the church in 14th and 15th century Europe you could have predicted nothing but increasing irrelevance for the Jesus people. The church was more of an embarrassment than a witness to the world. But God. But God raised up a monk named Martin and a lawyer named Calvin and revived the dying embers of the church all over Europe. The Protestant Reformation changed Germany and England and Holland and through the people of these nations it shaped America and the world. Historically speaking, it really happened rather suddenly and was possibly the greatest revival of the church since the time of the apostles.

Another great revival occurred in the 1730s in England and America that we call *The Great Awakening*. The Great Awakening was another historical movement that changed the course of history among the English-speaking people. It resulted in the abolition of the slave-trade, it resulted in the establishment of schools and orphanages and many, many churches - even entire denominations trace their roots back to the Awakening. The leading lights of this movement were the Englishmen, George Whitefield and John Wesley, who ministered in their native land and in ours. In our own country there was Jonathan Edwards whose preaching sparked revival in New England. It was a season in which the Spirit of God was moving in extraordinary ways. Entire communities were revolutionized. It was not unusual in American and English towns for half the populace to come to faith in a matter of months. Can you imagine that? Sleepy little churches were made alive with the worship of Christ and the preaching of His gospel. That something extraordinary was happening was undeniable, but no one could explain it without appealing to the sovereign mercies of God. And what was the condition of the church in England and America prior to the Great Awakening? It was terrible! Just terrible! So bad was it that one of the great sparks of the Awakening was a sermon preached and distributed by Gilbert Tennent in which he opposed the ordination of unconverted men to the gospel ministry. Did you hear that? He was considered a

radical because he believed you should have to be a Christian to be a pastor. That is how low the church had sunk. Once again, leadership in the church was considered not a passion, not even a calling, but a profession and your own spiritual state was of no consequence. Things were pretty much the same on both sides of the Atlantic. In terms of cultural influence, the church offered little to nothing. As one English clergyman, Bishop Butler put it: *"It is come to be taken for granted by many persons that Christianity is not so much a subject of inquiry, but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly they treat it as if in the present age this were an agreed point among all people of discernment: and nothing remained but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule, as it were by way of reprisals for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world."*

So, once again, this was the England in which God raised up a Wesley and a Whitefield and many like them in one of the greatest revivals we have ever known. Thus, it is known as the Great Awakening. And it occurred in a day that looked bleak and hopeless.

Now, all of that may seem long ago and far away, but revivals come in all shapes and sizes. Some are happening in parts of the world even now - praise God. But what I want to tell you about in the next few minutes is a revival or awakening that happened within the lifetime of many of us in this room. I speak of the revival in the USA that went from the late 1960s until the late 1970s. Once again when the social markers were all pointing to spiritual decline and moral degradation, God chose to move in awesome and mighty ways to revive His people, to call many out of darkness into light, to build His church and to preserve what is good in society. It came during and after the days of the Vietnam war. It came at the time of the Hippy movement. It came when drugs were increasingly popular. It came after the assassinations of a president and his brother and Martin Luther King Jr. It came when sexual norms were being tossed overboard. It came in a very dark season marked by cynicism and rebellion. And how did it come? It came by God raising up great men and women of faith. It came by God raising up prayer warriors to cry out to heaven. It came by God pouring out His Spirit in great measure and in astonishing ways. I was just listening to the Gospel Coalition podcast and ran across an interview with Tim Keller and Don Carson talking about their own experiences of revival. Both pointed back to this season. Keller was a student at Bucknell in central Pennsylvania where he joined an Inter-Varsity group on campus. Keller said that they started his freshman year with about ten students in the group and by year's end they had more than a hundred. When they went to the IV regional conference they discovered this was not the exception but the norm. In 1970 these campus ministries exploded in vitality and growth. These

were the glory days on college campuses of the Navigators and Campus Crusade for Christ. Students were transformed from getting high on LSD to getting high on Jesus. What we know of now as contemporary Christian music was birthed in this season. Some of us remember the names of cutting edge artists like Larry Norman, Love Song, Second Chapter of Acts, Maranatha Music and later in those years came Keith Green with his tremendous influence and ministry cut short by a tragic death. These were the days of the charismatic renewal, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Bill Bright, the Jesus festival that would draw nearly 200,000 and was sort of the Christian version of Woodstock. PDI was birthed as People of Destiny International. Out west there was the Jesus movement where millions of young people were coming to faith. The Calvary Chapel and Vineyard churches were birthed in California. An astonishing revival occurred at Asbury College in Kentucky where students broke up a chapel service by confessing their sins and the confessions did not stop for days as the campus was revolutionized. Revival followed from there at Wheaton College in Illinois. Here in Pittsburgh you had the Pittsburgh Leadership Foundation and the influence of Reid Carpenter and others seeking to make Pittsburgh more famous for God than for steel. Ligonier Ministries under RC Sproul was birthed and exploded with growth. In the Southern States the Presbyterian Church in America was born and became the fastest growing denomination in the country. That was the wave that swept me along. Did you know this stuff?!! This was a real move of God. Some of us couldn't recognize it as revival because it was what the church was like when we first got into it. We thought it was normal for people to come to Jesus in droves. We thought it was normal for young people to be in love with the Savior. But looking back we can see it for what it was. I miss it, but I praise God for it.

Let me tell you briefly about my own experience. My first year out of high-school I got involved in a little Presbyterian Church plant and was discipled by the young pastor named Jimmy Young. Jimmy was led of God to start a youth group with me as one of the five starting leaders. We had a church of about sixty and started our youth ministry with about fifteen folks that first summer. By summer's end we had 50-60 coming out. Then next summer that doubled. We largely focused on summer ministry, and we would see dozens of kids come to Christ. We were witnessing to our friends and watching the devil fall like lightning. By the following summer we had as many as 200 coming out to what we call the *Thursday Nighter*, sponsored by a fast-growing church that was still not as big as the youth ministry. We had Sunday evening sharing services at this church that were dominated by the teenagers, many of whom were talking about how the Lord was working through their witnessing. Our church would gather for prayer. Lots of folks came out and half of them were

college-aged or younger. It was beautiful and it was extraordinary. It was a precious work of God. I thought you should know. Psalm 78:**4** *We will not conceal them from their children, But tell to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, And His strength and His wondrous works that He has done.* Psalm 145:**3-7** *Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised, And His greatness is unsearchable. ⁴ One generation shall praise Your works to another, And shall declare Your mighty acts. ⁵ On the glorious splendor of Your majesty And on Your wonderful works, I will meditate. ⁶ Men shall speak of the power of Your awesome acts, And I will tell of Your greatness. ⁷ They shall eagerly utter the memory of Your abundant goodness And will shout joyfully of Your righteousness.* So, that is what I am trying to do, in hopes that you will not despair over where you see history seeming to be moving. It is often darkest before a glorious dawn.

Now, my primary purpose behind all of this is to give you hope. It is to provide some fuel to fight off discouragement. But it is also to do one other thing. That is to call you to pray. You may remember as we read from the book of Judges that the turning point in the history of God's people came usually when they would cry out to God. We read of how God would raise up deliverance when the people humbled themselves and cried out to God. Many of you know that great verse in II Chronicles 7 that says that when things in the nation get dark and seemingly hopeless **14** *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, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.* God moves in mysterious ways, through timing that I cannot explain. Nor can I explain the connection between prayer and revival, but I know from God's word and from church history that the connection is there. So, don't despair. Do pray. Something like the prayer of Psalm 85:**4-7** *Restore us, O God of our salvation, and cause Your indignation toward us to cease. ⁵ Will You be angry with us forever? Will You prolong Your anger to all generations? ⁶ Will You not Yourself revive us again, That Your people may rejoice in You? ⁷ Show us Your lovingkindness, O Lord, And grant us Your salvation.* Yes, do pray with expectation and fervor -- and strength will rise as we wait upon the Lord.