

# FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

WILLIAM L. SELF

*WILLIAM L. SELF, a native of Winston-Salem, N.C., has served as pastor of churches in Florida, Georgia and North Carolina. He has earned degrees from Stetson University, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Candler School of Theology at Emory University, and received honorary degrees from Mercer University and Hanyang University in Seoul, Korea. He is presently pastor of Wieuca Road Baptist Church, Atlanta, Ga. He and his wife recently returned from an official State visit to Korea, extended by the prime minister.*

Esther 4:14

In 1976 the nation pulled up a peanut plant in South Georgia and twelve million Southern Baptists marched out. The nation does not know what to make of Southern Baptists. We are a strange species not easily classified. We are as diverse as the talented W. A. Criswell and the insightful John Claypool, as Duke McCall and Randall Lolley, as Foy Valentine and Adrian Rogers.

Strange people these Southern Baptists—united but autonomous, cooperative but independent, regionally named but worldwide in vision.

Strange people these Southern Baptists. We have more members than there are people and budgets that stagger the imagination. We have programs that IBM would be proud of and institutions that would be the envy of any federal bureaucrat. We have enough debt to satisfy even a democratic administration.

Strange people these Southern Baptists. Our flag is planted in every state and in 87 countries of the world and if there is a place where people hurt, we are organized to heal in Jesus' name. Where the world itches, we have developed programs to scratch. We refuse to be provincial, racial, or narrow in social understanding. We love the scriptures, the gospel, and have a disposition for building churches and institutions.

Strange people these Southern Baptists. We now have Episcopalian money, Methodist organization, Pentecostal zeal, and Calvin's theology.

Our place in the national life is providential and significant and can best be understood against the background of our text for this hour.

Nestled in the backwaters of the Old Testament is the intriguing little book of Esther. The name of God is never mentioned, but the purposes of God are clearly demonstrated. Esther, a beautiful Jewish girl, had risen from the ranks of an exiled semi-slave people to a place of prominence in the court of Xerxes, ruler of Persia. From slave girl to a king's harem, and to take the place of Vashti on the throne was a miracle in and of itself. However, anti-semitism had infected Persia; and Haman, the Prime Minister, had incited the king to authorize the destruction of all Jews in the empire (3:8). When Mordecai heard of this, he informed Esther, urging her to appeal to the king. In his appeal to Esther, he made it quite clear that the providence of God had placed her in the royal court at this decisive time in the life of Israel. He further

reminded her that even though she was queen, she would not be spared when the destruction came (4:14). The words used by Mordecai were simply, "Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Mordecai was persuasive and was able to overcome her hesitancy to risk her life. Esther agreed to his plan and said to Mordecai: "If I perish, I perish." Then Esther approached the king, told him of the edict that would mean the destruction of her and her people. She persuaded him to issue a new edict permitting the Jews to take vengeance upon their enemies. Haman, the villain, was executed on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

Esther, in her response to the appeal of Mordecai, had clearly seen that (1) where there was a need and (2) an ability to meet that need, (3) there was a calling from God. Her people had been spared because she was willing to seize the hour that God had provided.

Southern Baptists stand at a critical juncture in the national life. We did not ask for this mantle—it was thrust upon us. Like David of Bethlehem, we have been sought by Samuel to be anointed for our destiny. Like Moses, happy with Jethro's flocks, we have been led to a burning bush and told that the nation must be delivered from its secular Pharaohs. Like Nehemiah, we have been given an opportunity to rebuild the temples of our land that lie in disarray.

In the providence of God we have come to this place—no grassy meadow where flocks may graze and comfort be received. Like Daniel, we have come to the king's table and we must opt for a strong and disciplined place, not a soft and easy one. God has not raised us up for ourselves, but for others. We can go down as well as up, and our God has a history of sending his people into exile when they do not see his dreams. Candles are removed from lamp stands by our God if they do not shine brightly. Didn't Jesus say something about cities being set on a hill that cannot be hid and lamps being placed under a bushel?

Amos said to Israel on the behalf of our God: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). Jesus reminds us that "Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required" (Luke 12:48 RSV). If a clear reading of the times and of scripture is correct, it seems evident that this denomination set on a hill had better let its light shine; for if we do not, our candlestick may be removed. The Convention stands like Esther and I shall take the role of Mordecai and suggest that we have come to this place on the national scene by the providence of God. This hour demands positive action on our part. Like Esther we must see the need.

## I. THE NEED

The temptation in a sermon like this is to talk too much about the needs of our day. But in the midst of all of the peripheral needs our world is experiencing, I suggest that there are two basic needs which we are uniquely equipped to meet. From these needs all of the peripheral needs seem to grow.

First of all, our world has lost its sense of meaning. In our effort to secularize, we've given up any sense of belief in the spiritual. We have pulled out the old structures that have given us an understanding of our universe, and the children of this disaster are tossed about like dry leaves in the wind. Instead of man come of age, we are discovering that we are simply primitive man who has learned to shave and use deodorant. We are empty, gray flannel clad savages who have developed sophisticated tools for destroying one another. Modern science may have given us a world where some men live longer and better, but we are also more frightened and disturbed, more rebellious and alienated.

We are learning that man can bear great physical and spiritual hardship, but he cannot bear a sense of meaninglessness. Even in the midst of our affluence, we are finding that satin and gold does not really answer the question: "Why am I alive and what meaning does life have?" We are like so many overweight Peggy Lees asking the musical question in a syncopated monotone, "Is this all there is?" Another house, a bigger office, another rung on the ladder; and we cry out again, "Is this all there is?"

A life dedicated to garden parties and bridge clubs is as empty as the beer cans that line our highways. Bigger and better is no life and we know it. Perhaps Freddy Prinze is Everyman. He grabbed the top rung early; the brass ring came easy, only to reaffirm what our gospel has been saying. There was no meaning there. Our world cannot live without meaning.

In the effort to rid its house of meaningless theological clutter and to find its answer in rank secularism, the world is like the man in Jesus' parable who cleaned his house thoroughly only to find that the empty house was filled by seven times as many demons as he destroyed. Nature abhors a vacuum and into this spiritual vacuum has rushed every huckster ever devised in the bowels of hell to haunt us. Our theological understanding of life today in our search for meaning is not being filled by strong churches preaching and living the gospel but rather by media experts who manipulate the minds with sick religion.

The second need Southern Baptists must address in our national life is: we live in a land of people who are trying to survive. Our technology has reduced us to the primitive state and every new technological advance brings us new technological disaster. A break-through in the power plant brings us a crisis on the ecology front; a break-through in cancer research is a disaster for the food business.

On a New Year's television program a year ago I heard a prominent citizen of Atlanta, when asked by the hostess what he was grateful for as he viewed the year just past, reply simply: "I'm grateful that I survived." This creeping sense of desperation has produced the feeling of "hanging on by the fingernails" existence. Every businessman suspects that each deal simply causes him to hurry so that he can stand still. Pushing the rock of Sisyphus up the hill again only leads to his continuing exhaustion and causes him to mark the day until Social Security takes over.

We are much like the squid and the lobster in Theodore Dreiser's little story. You recall they were in the tank outside the fish store and a young man went by every day watching these two natural enemies as they tried to adjust to each other in the tank. The squid tried desperately to encircle the tentacles around the lobster and each time the lobster would use a giant claw to push him back and chop off a little more

of the tentacle. The squid would squirt the ink-like substance in the water and retreat. The young man passing each day noted that although it seemed to be a contest that was evenly divided, slowly the lobster chopped away at the squid until his tentacles were reduced to nothing, until his glands could secrete the inky fluid no longer. Finally on the last day, he watched the battered squid succumb to the wily lobster as the giant claw finally had worn it down.

Too many of our people today feel like the squid, well-equipped but slowly being worn away by drugs and the economy, by the impulse of advertising, and the pressure of next year's sales record until meaning is a luxury and survival is the only goal in life.

Our culture is too much like the book, *Alive*. It is the story of a soccer team that crashed high in the Andes mountains. One survivor had a steel shaft through his stomach and another had his leg severed at the knee with the bone exposed. They were a motley crew of broken limbs and dead flesh sprawled all over the top of the mountain in sub-freezing weather.

They organized themselves into a community of survival. They gathered up all they could of the debris to sustain life and rationed what food they could find from the crash among themselves. Finally they realized they were not going to make it unless they stacked the dead bodies of their departed companions in a special area. The elements stripped away every veneer of civilization until they were reduced to a state of having to decide whether to live or to die and the only way they could live would be to succumb to cannibalism. The deepest ethical mores of their lives had been worn away and the old lobster had gotten through to them. They found themselves, in order to live, chewing the flesh of a dead companion. Any sensitive minister knows the pressures of living in a highly syncopated pressure-cooked society that has reduced our people to the same level.

## II. OUR ABILITY TO MEET THESE NEEDS

There is a little book that I have enjoyed entitled *Children's Letters to God*. It contains one letter that seems appropriate for this hour. The child said: "Dear God, some of my friends say that you're not real. If you are real, you'd better do something quick." Perhaps this is God's word to us now. If we are real, we'd better get at our task quickly, for it is to this world we are called to minister. Southern Baptists have been sheltered from the ravages of heological liberalism that, like locusts, has eaten the heart out of other communions. Our fields may have produced the weeds of racism, narrowness, and provincialism, but these are easily plucked out when the crop is healthy. However, if the crop itself is diseased for lack of the gospel, all is lost.

We have never thought that man was perfectible, for we have observed firsthand his ability to cultivate Gardens of Eden and then destroy them. It was man that built the ovens of Dachau, but it was also man that sang and prayed as he entered. To man's search for meaning we bring an unyielding, clear-eyed experience of grace and affirmation. Man's capacity for evil frightens us, but God's capacity for grace encourages us. It is to this ghetto of the soul that we speak, for in his Holy Spirit we have experienced the capacity to change. It is the gospel of God that replenishes the malnourished soul of this land. Our world has lingered too long at the table of secularism. Southern Baptists are still naive enough to believe that God can change men; he can change nations; he can change our world.

To answer God's call in this hour it is imperative that we lose our massive corporate inferiority complex. Let's pull up our white socks and admit that God has made us to be in tune with the hunger of our day. Our massive institutional strength and our organizational genius must be focused on the targets left by the ravages of the last two decades.

Recently I read that the combined plans of all of the missionary agencies and churches to win the world were insufficient if they were all 100% successful.

Alan Watts, the Zen-Buddhist philosopher, spoke to a group in Atlanta ten years ago. He suggested that if the central thrust of the Christian faith is true (the resurrection of Christ and the defeat of death), then we should be doing more and with greater boldness. We deny the resurrection power by our small vision and our safe stance. My life wish for the churches is that they will rediscover Jesus and his resurrection as the core and power of their faith, that they will know this faith power in its detail and teach it to their members. This will make them living centers of meaning. I wish for them a resurgence of life and meaning pulsating in their veins. This will only occur when the resurrected Christ is rediscovered.

I confess that there are times that I wonder about the powerlessness of our churches. My mind runs through the buildings that we occupy, the bureaucracies that we have built, the wealth that we control, the programs that we have mastered and the brains that we have commandeered. This drives me to ask myself: Did ever so many labor with so much to produce so little? Jesus said to his disciples, not to the world at large: "Without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). We can produce buildings and issue position papers; we can structure committees and hold annual assemblies; but where it requires the energizing of God's Spirit, it is still what the Master said: "Without me, ye can do nothing." There are times when it seems we have everything in the church in the Christian community except the power of God's Spirit. We have developed a form of godliness but have denied the power thereof (II Timothy 3:5). Perhaps we are suffering from sterility that comes when we abandon our first love. We need to rediscover Jesus Christ. A dead church cannot witness to life, but a living church can. A dead society will respond to a living Christ and a living church. That's bold.

I wish for our pastors that they would rediscover the essentials of their calling. They need to be delivered from the errand boy mentality and to rediscover the joy of serving living bread to dying men rather than delivering Sunday School literature and keeping records for a committee. God called our pastors to preach his living word and the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God (Luther). Perhaps our churches are not bold because of the generations of leaders who have trivialized the gospel. Now abideth administration, counseling, and preaching, but the greatest of

these is preaching. God intended for a living church to be his instrument for winning this world.

Now to the agencies. This is God's hour for you, too. Make some mistakes. Be willing to risk some money in marginal ministries. I'd rather see you strike out aiming for the center field fence than not even coming to bat. Boldness and playing it safe seem to be at opposite ends of the pole.

Let's be bold enough to devise a workable urban strategy. Let's be bold enough to crusade against the ghettos of the mind. Let's be bold enough to act redemptively toward singles and divorcees. Must we always live with the illusion that our homes are like *Home Life*? Seven per cent of Americans still live the way we imagine. The rest of the nation lives with marital brokenness. When will we learn to speak to the "woman at the well"? My life wish for the agencies is that Bold Mission Thrust will not be a retreading of the old campaigns of the past. Let's not let it become our 1977 edition of "A Million More in '54" or "Every Baptist a Tither." We have the ability to meet the needs if we will risk using our massive institutional and organizational genius to break new ground. If Bold Mission Thrust does this, praise God! If Bold Mission Thrust is only a resurrection of the rusty swords of other campaigns, let's pull down the banners and admit our blandness and get ready for exile. People on the streets of the world are still asking the crucial question: "Is there a God and does he care?" The Bible still answers this question affirmatively. Let's break some barriers.

### III. OUR CALLING FROM GOD

It is hard to recognize the providence of God in this hour. It is easier to acknowledge where he was in the past. However, it is our responsibility today to read the signs and follow even if it is into "the darkness where God was."

Esther cried: "If I perish, I perish." This is a clear focus on risk *taking* and not risk *management*. It is incumbent upon us to seize this hour whatever the cost.

In Edmund Rostad's famous play, "Cyrano de Bergerac," the ugly Cyrano, who loved the beautiful Roxanne, received word that Roxanne had summoned him to meet her in the back room of a pastry shop with her chaperone. Cyrano, one of the greatest swordsmen in France, had accrued many enemies. When he received this word while attending a play, someone stopped him at the door as he was about to run into the street to go meet Roxanne and said to him: "There are 100 armed swordsmen between you and the pastry shop, each wanting to destroy you. This is a plot. Don't go." Cyrano pulled the sword from the buckler, looked into the dark street, and cried: "What, only a hundred? Bring me giants."

Southern Baptists, who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?