

Ronnie Floyd

1996

"THE MIDNIGHT CRISIS BEFORE THE COMING MILLENNIUM"

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Convention Sermon of the Southern Baptist Convention

INTRODUCTION: The one thing we need to hear today is a message from God. I believe God's message to us is from the book of Joel. The spiritual vital signs in America, the church and in the lives of most Christians inform us how much we need a message from God and a fresh touch from Him.

I just concluded my second 40-day period of prayer and fasting with the Lord. On the 22nd day of the fast, God spoke to me concerning what I was to share with you today. I want you to know that over 500 members of First Baptist Church of Springdale, Arkansas have been praying and fasting since yesterday for the purpose of each of you to be open to God, to hear God and to obey His message to you today. I want to bring God's message to you entitled, "THE MIDNIGHT CRISIS BEFORE THE COMING MILLENNIUM."

As we race toward the coming millennium, the 21st century, we need to stop long enough to know where our country is, our church is and our denomination is spiritually. I believe we are in a major spiritual crisis. A midnight crisis. It is dark spiritually in America.

The answer to this spiritual crisis in America will not be found in the ballot box, but in the prayer closet. The answer to this spiritual crisis in our churches will not be found in some new program, but in a fresh touch from God that will interrupt all we do, changing the course of what we do in the future. The answer to the spiritual crisis in our denomination will not be found in our restructuring the denomination, but will be found by putting off the carnal mindsets of territorialism, pride and arrogance, and putting on the sackcloth of prayer, fasting and humiliation before God. Let's consider ...

THE SPIRITUAL CRISIS IN AMERICA: Are you aware that three out of four Americans believe there is no such thing as absolute truth? Therefore, they're no such thing as right and wrong. No sin. No judgment. No need for a Savior. At best, our culture promotes moral relativism which is a benign way to promote morals based upon your own situation.

The continual rise in teen pregnancy, abuse, violence, pornography, abortion, homosexuality and adultery all indicate our nation's #1 problem is spiritual. The moral crisis of our nation indicates the pitiful spiritual condition of America. Yes, our nation is in a midnight crisis. Let's consider ...

THE SPIRITUAL CRISIS IN OUR CHURCHES: In the Southern Baptist Convention, 70 percent of the more than 40,000 churches are plateaued or declining. The 30 percent that are labeled as growing have had to show a mere 10 percent growth rate over five years.

This means that if a church was averaging 100 people in 1990 and they were averaging 110 people in 1995, they were labeled as one of our growing churches. In 1994, 70 percent of our churches baptized 10 or less people in one year. Only three and one-half percent of our churches baptized 26 or more people in one year.

Churches are divided. Cold. Many dead spiritually. What is the problem?

The major issues of our churches today are really minor issues. Things like should we sing choruses or hymn, should we clap in church or not, are we going to be a seeker church or an unseeker church, to have big or small classes, whether we are offending the unchurched or appealing to them, should we preach on controversial moral issues or serve drive-through milk toast religion in a country club version of pseudo-church. These minute issues is what most stay on and the end result is usually division in the church in the church. Satan is in the corner of many of our churches laughing at our folly.

What has happened to the really big issues of church life? The big issues of personal, church and world evangelization, along with revival, repentance, prayer and fasting, reconciliation, and making disciples are taking the back seat because of weak and carnal spiritual leadership in our churches. Many men of God today are more worried about their golf score than they are how many people they are baptizing; the Dow Jones Average, rather than their Sunday school attendance; and who is running the church rather than the critical issue of taking the gospel to the world. One of the big issues of church life is relationships between God's people. God showed me recently that the number one barrier to spiritual revival in our churches is the wall of unforgiveness in relationships that are broken or strained. The church of America is in a major spiritual crisis. Let's consider now ...

THE SPIRITUAL CONDITION OF OUR DENOMINATION: What has happened in our denomination since 1979 needed to take place. God has given us a revival to the Word of God. This movement that began in the souls of grassroot Southern Baptists will never be over. Our commitment in belief and practice must be solely to the truth and the teachings of the inerrant Word of God.

This revival to the Word of God has now graduated to an organizational reformation in "The Covenant for a New Century." You can count on this: This organizational reformation would not have taken place without a revival to the Word of God. What has taken place in this restructuring comes about out of biblical convictions that we must use all of our resources God has given to us to take the gospel of Jesus to the entire world.

These two steps in and of themselves are not enough. We must go one step further. The most desperate need in the Southern Baptist Convention is a mighty spiritual awakening to take place among us. Now that we have the right biblical convictions and the needed organizational structure -- the wineskins are new and ready.

We are now ready and thirsty for new spiritual wine -- a fresh touch of the Spirit of God that will lead us to repentance of sin, to the restoring of relationships without compromising biblical truth, to see the churches of our convention revived spiritually, resulting in being thrust into the world for the sole purpose of world evangelization. These things will not occur without spiritual awakening and spiritual awakening will not occur without these things taking place.

There are two examples that indicate the true spiritual condition of our denomination. The first is related to reaching the

teenage generation for Jesus. Do you realize that youth baptisms in our convention have gone from 138,000 in 1972 to just under 90,000 in 1994. They have not been above 90,000 since 1984. Only 10 churches in our entire denomination baptized over 100 teenagers last year. While 70 percent of the advertising budget of many secular companies target teenagers selling them anything from make-up to pornography, the average church allocates 2 percent of its budget to reaching teenagers. If this does not change quickly, 20 years from now only people with gray hair will fit into our churches and only people with no hair will come to a denominational meeting.

Another example of the grave spiritual condition of our denomination has to do with what we are doing in most of the major cities in America. In metro New York City where 8.5 million people live, there are only 12,938 Southern Baptist Christians. In metro Miami where over 2 million live, there are only 55,147 Southern Baptist Christians. In metro Los Angeles where over 9 million people live, there are only 122,354 Southern Baptist Christians. This must change. This will not change if the Southern Baptist Convention does not experience a mighty touch of God's Spirit that will bring spiritual revival.

Let me ask each of you: What do we have if we believe in the inerrancy of scripture and have little evangelism? What do we have if we believe in inerrancy and have limited emphasis on soul-winning? What do we have if we believe in inerrancy and place people as leaders in our denomination that give mere lip service to evangelism? What do we have if we believe in inerrancy and place people on our various boards as trustees and they have demonstrated little or no commitment to the priority of evangelism in their church?

I'll tell you what we will have: We may have people who wear the label of inerrancy on their shirt pockets, rather than the label of moderate, but we will simply be a denomination of old wineskins who are brittle, inflexible and lifeless. Listen: An authentic believe in the inerrancy of scripture will result in the evangelism of the lost and in love for the brethren. A person who has not demonstrated the priority of evangelism and world evangelization has no place determining the direction of the Southern Baptist Convention. Friends, our only hope of being saved nothing short of spiritual awakening.

As we see the dawning of a new millennium on the horizon, we are in a midnight spiritual crisis. What does the Bible say about this spiritual crisis? Turn your Bible to the book of Joel.

BIBLICALLY SPEAKING: God's people in Judah were in a major spiritual crisis. Drought and locusts had served as God's judgment upon their sin. The devastation was so great upon the land that the people could not even offer up grain offerings to the Lord.

Heartfelt repentance was their only hope. The prophet Joel called God's people to repent of their sinful and unspiritual condition.

I am issuing from God the very same call to you that Joel issued to God's people of his day. God's call to each of us is to experience humiliation, prayer, fasting and repentance in the present midnight crisis so we can enter the coming millennium

experiencing a profound moving of God.

T.S.: I want you to notice two spiritual principles with me from the book of Joel. The first spiritual principle is:

# I. THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL LEADERS IN THE MIDNIGHT CRISIS BEFORE THE COMING MILLENNIUM.

Exp. Each one of us is a spiritual leader in our church. As your spiritual life goes, so goes the spiritual life of your church. As spiritual leaders, what must we do in this midnight crisis before the coming millennium? What must we do before the day of the Lord, the day of judgment comes upon this world? You must

...  
1. Model spiritual brokenness, humility and repentance before your people. (Joel 1:9,13-14; 2:1,15,17)

Ill: The alarm clock is going off in America. This is no time to push the snooze button. We must sound forth the alarm. The day of the Lord is coming. It is time to call God's people to brokenness, humility and repentance.

Exp: The priests and ministers of the Lord were grieved over the sinfulness of Judah. It broke their hearts they could not offer anything to God in worship because of not even having grain to offer as an offering. In anguish and mourning over their sinfulness, they put on sackcloth. They wept and wailed before God at the altar. They humbled themselves through fasting. They called for national repentance by calling a solemn assembly to cry out to the Lord. The real purpose of a solemn assembly was a call for national repentance of sin and to cry out to the Lord for mercy. Their tears were a sign of grief. In their grief, they interceded for God's people.

App: When is the last time you have been broken with grief and tears before your people over your own sin, their spiritual condition, and over their nation? When is the last time you interceded on their behalf with a heart of mourning and grief? When is the last time you fasted and prayed over your own spiritual condition, your church's or the spiritual condition of America? When is the last time you called your people to repentance of sin? When is the last time God gave you victory over one sin in your life? When is that last time you have called your people to a solemn assembly to repent of their sinfulness and to cry out to the Lord for mercy? Have you ever called your people to pray and fast for revival in their lives, their church and in America? We are in the midnight crisis before the coming millennium. As spiritual leaders, we must model brokenness, humiliation and repentance before our people. Another role of spiritual leaders in this crisis is to ...

## 2. Mobilize God's people to return to Him (2:12-13)

Exp: God's people are the key to spiritual revival. God is calling us to return to Him. As spiritual leaders, we are to mobilize God's people to return to him. As spiritual leaders, we are to mobilize God's people to return to him. How do you return to God with all your heart? With fasting, weeping and mourning. In moments of grief in the Old Testament, people would tear their garments. God says do not tear your garments, but your heart should be breaking over the spiritual condition of God's people. Return to God today.

App: Are we fasting, weeping and mourning over the spiritual condition of our nation, our churches, our nation and our lives? God's people return to God his way. This is God's way! In this midnight crisis, return to God with your whole heart.

T.S.: When spiritual leaders model spiritual brokenness, humiliation and repentance, as well as mobilize God's people to return to him, God said through Joel that we will experience the second spiritual principle found in the book of Joel. This principle is ...

2. THE REVIVAL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT UPON THE CHURCH IN THE MIDNIGHT CRISIS BEFORE THE COMING MILLENNIUM. (Joel 2:18-19, 28-32)

Exp: When the people of God repent and return to God with their whole heart, God says he will then give a revival of the Holy Spirit upon them. God says that he will pour out his spirit on all mankind. God says that he will do supernatural and miraculous things in our midst when we return to him with our whole heart. The initial fulfillment of this passage began on the day of Pentecost. However, the utter fulfillment of it will take place the nearer we are to the second coming of Jesus Christ. As the gospel of Jesus is preached to the entire world, the power of God will fall upon those who do it and receive it. His gospel is the power of God to those who believe.

App: Are you experiencing a revival of the Holy Spirit in your life? Is he pouring himself out upon you like never before? Is this happening in your church? Is God doing miracles in your life? Miracles through your church? Before Jesus comes, we will witness some mighty moves of God like we have never seen before. There will be a special outpouring of God's spirit upon his people who will return to him, repent of sin continually, and who will pray and fast over the spiritual condition of God's people. If you want to get in on the supernatural movement of God in your life and your church, you must get onto the lanes that will take you there. It is time to take off the garment of the skeptic. It is time to remove the skins of the proud and arrogant. God is moving in a great way in the lives of those who want to go on with him. He is going to do it with you or without you. He is going to do it with or without the Southern Baptist Convention.

\*I believe the next controversial thing in the Southern Baptist Convention may come over what we believe and practice concerning the supernatural moving of the Holy Spirit. For some of us, if it does not start in this convention or one of our churches, surely it could not be of God. How arrogant! How proud! How wrong! As a denomination that has fought and won the battle over the belief of biblical inerrancy, we above all people should embrace the supernatural power of God. If we truly believe in the scripture, we believe in the supernatural power of God. We believe in a God who has, can and is able to do miracles. If God does not step into America, into our churches and into our denomination in miracle-working power, all will be lost spiritually to this Christless, degenerate and pagan culture today.

Ill: As we enter the 21st century, are you going to be a 21st century Pharisee who always wonders, "Will it fit into my little Baptist box?" Are you going to be a 21st century Sadducee who "questions the supernatural?" Are you going to be a 21st century

Gnostic who says, "Only we have the true and special knowledge."

App: We need to be like a zealot who is radical in our culture, wanting God's spirit to fall upon us to do in and through us whatever he wants to do. Before the coming millennium, there will be a revival of the Holy Spirit even in this spiritual midnight crisis. In fact, it is already happening!

Conclusion: Prior to the great prayer revival of 1858, there were many contributing factors to this revival. One of the factors took place in 1857 among a group of Presbyterian bodies across the land. A hunger for revival had arisen and a special convention was held in early December in the city of Pittsburg in order to pray for revival. Two hundred people attended this meeting. One brother addressed the group under God's leadership and appealed to every preacher to preach on the subject of revival on the first Sunday in 1858 and to set aside the first Thursday of 1858 as a day of humiliation, prayer and fasting.

On the first Sunday of 1858 hundreds of pastors preached on the subject of revival. On the first Thursday of 1858, thousands of believers went in agreement before God in humiliation, prayer and fasting for the purpose of revival. What happened in 1858? One of the greatest moves of God. Over one million people were saved out of an American population of 30 million people. Do you realize that if we had a revival of similar manner in America today that over 8.5 million people would be saved in one year?

In these recent days of being with the Lord, God has burdened me to close this message by issuing four spiritual challenges to the 40,000 churches and over 15 million people that make up the Southern Baptist Convention. I struggled with God about this because of not wanting to be misunderstood in any way. Yet, God assured me that these challenges were his to you, not mine. So, I come humbly before you this morning asking you to join in prayerfully on what I believe God is leading us to do as a denomination.

I believe with all my heart that if we will obey God in these challenges before the end of 1996, we could see God usher in that mighty spiritual awakening that many of us have been praying about for many years. The urgency for spiritual awakening in this midnight crisis calls us to act together now. If your spirit bears witness with the spirit of God in these matters, then do whatever it takes to join God in his call to us. These challenges in the remaining part of 1996 are:

(1) On Sunday morning, October 27, every Southern Baptist pastor, evangelist, and denominational leader preach on the subject of fasting, calling for a commitment for God's people to fast and pray for revival for just one day in the coming week, preferably Wednesday, October 30.

(2) On Sunday evening, October 27, every Southern Baptist pastor, evangelist, and denominational leader lead their people in a solemn assembly calling them to repentance of sin and to cry out to the Lord for mercy. As well, once again ask for a commitment to fast and pray just one day for revival in the coming week, preferably October 30.

(3) On Wednesday, October 30, we observe a day of humiliation, prayer and fasting, as we encourage every Christian who is a member

of a Southern Baptist church to pray and fast for the purpose of personal spiritual revival, revival in their church, and for revival in America. (When hundreds of thousands of us, even millions would join together in humiliation, prayer, and fasting on the same day for revival, I am convinced we would see a mighty outpouring of revival in our lives, our churches, and our county.)

(4) On Sunday, November 3, every Southern Baptist pastor, evangelist, and denominational leader preaches in both services on the subject of spiritual revival in our personal lives, our churches, and in our nation calling for God's people to do whatever it takes to see revival in our day. (We must create awareness, need, and an appetite for spiritual revival among God's people.)

I am grateful that in the election of Tom Eliff as President of our Southern Baptist Convention, we have elected a man whose heart and life illustrate these burdens for revival and a return to the Lord.

While the rest of America thinks that the future of our nation is simply in the ballot box, God's people will call upon our God for spiritual revival, knowing this is really our only answer in America. Therefore, this is God's challenge to you. What you do with it has nothing to do with me. I call upon thousands of you to lead in this God-sized effort. This is our only hope in this midnight crisis.

In addition, I ask each state convention paper and editor, Baptist Press, the Associated Baptist Press, SBC Life, and any other periodical that we promote and distribute to embrace these challenges in the spirit of unity immediately. If we cannot agree on revival, we cannot agree on anything nor will we ever see revival. I ask each denominational employee of our national and state conventions to embrace these challenges helping us to get the word out concerning these great days God is calling us to between the days of October 27-November 3, 1996. I ask each pastor, stall member, and lay leader to take this challenge back to your church and spread the work. I ask each Director of Missions to embrace these challenges by doing what everything you can to encourage your churches to participate in these days of humiliation, prayer, and fasting for revival. The decision is now in your hands. Joel 3:14 says, "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision."

There was once a page in the king's court. He did not have many important responsibilities, but one day the king called him into the throne room. The king handed the boy a scroll. On it was written, "in the prison across town there's a man who is going to be hanged today, and I've decided to pardon him. Quickly take this message to the jailor."

The little boy was excited about having something to do that was the important. As he ran through the town he kept thinking about how excited the prisoner would be knowing he was pardoned.

As the boy passed a store, he thought the man might need some new clothes, so he went in and bought some. He went by another little shop and saw food. Once again, he stopped, thinking the man would be hungry. Then he started running toward the prison.

When he arrived, he went to the jailer's office. With a smile, he took out the scroll, handed it across the table and said,



"This is from the king himself. The man who was going to be hanged has been pardoned." The jailer shook his head and cried, "Oh son, we executed that man five minutes ago. He's dead. He's dead!"

Tears welled up in the little boy's eyes as he walked out of the prison. As he headed back to the palace the guards could hear him saying over and over again, "What is the king going to say?" "What is the king going to say?" What is the king going to say?"

Friends, King Jesus is coming soon. God wants to bring a mighty spiritual revival to our churches and to our nation and to us personally before He comes again. If you choose not to fulfill these challenges from God today that you have been issued biblically and practically, you may one day walk away in grief like that little boy, knowing God wanted to do something great, but you were too late to the challenge. Then on your way to stand before God one day for your spiritual life, your church, and your nation, you will all of a sudden come to reality like that young boy and say over and over again on your way to the judgment seat of Christ ... what is the King going to say? What is the King going to say? What is the King going to say?