

Sermon
Catch the Wave
February 3, 2002
Pastor Donald Sheley

I'm going to do something today I very seldom do, but I'd like to set the sermon aside. Just set it aside, and I want to talk to you for a while on something that really is deep in my heart today, and I pray that you'll listen attentively. Would you take your Bibles and turn to 1 Chronicles chapter 12? It's page 285 in your pew Bible. We very seldom get back into this portion of the old Testament.

At the top of verse 23, do you notice it there? My Bible says -- David's army at Hebron -- that's the heading above the verses. And what we have here before us is the history of a moment of transition from the kingship of Saul to the kingship of David. The armies are moving their allegiance from Saul to David.

Verse 23 says, Now these were the numbers of the divisions that were equipped for war, and came to David at Hebron to turn over the kingdom of Saul to him, according to the word of the Lord. So it's a transition time. Now listed below in the various verses are the names of the tribes. You notice the sons of Judah bearing shield and spear. There were 6800 of them ready for war. The sons of Simeon, mighty men of valor, 7100; the sons of Levi, 4600. So we have a listing of all of the tribes and their contribution of strength to David's new army.

Then we come to a very, very fascinating verse. It's verse 32. The sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do. Israel was the children of God. So we could read it: the sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what the children of God ought to do. Their chiefs were 200 and all of their brethren were at their command.

Now dropping down to verse 38 it says, All these men of war, who could keep ranks, came to Hebron with a loyal heart, to make David King over all Israel; and all the rest of Israel were of one mind to make David King. And they were there with David three days, eating and drinking, for their brethren had prepared for them.

Moreover those who were near to them, from as far away as Issachar and Zebulun and Naphtali, were bringing food on donkeys and camels, on mules and oxen -- provisions of flour and cakes of figs and cakes of raisins, wine and oil and oxen and sheep abundantly, for there was true joy in Israel.

So it's transition time. These various tribes with their armies commit themselves to back David loyally 100 percent, and you'll notice at the end of the chapter they have a celebration time and there's great happiness in the camp. But isn't it interesting that David had his own CIA, his own FBI, his own intelligence

agencies. For the sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what they ought to do.

I find that fascinating. Men that wanted to serve because they had an understanding of their times. That's important. I think of that in terms of, they joined David's army, you and I are part of the army of soldiers of God. We used to sing onward Christian soldiers marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before. We don't sing that now much, but we're a part of Christ great army.

And I think it's imperative that we keep on the cutting edge of history and know and understand our times, if we as Christian people as are going to fulfill our Christian ministry in the world around us. It's important for us to know what's going on around us. And as your Pastor I have tried with all my heart to keep on the cutting edge watching history flow and watching the tides as they come and go.

Starting our ministry back in the early '50s, I watched the tides of the '50s, '60s, '70s, '80s, and '90s, and the spiritual tides change. It's amazing. What's important in one generation or one decade isn't important in another. But what's really important is that we as Christians have an understanding of what's going on around us so we don't get caught in patterns that die on our hands, but always afresh and alive, meeting the changing challenges of history.

Old Shakespeare in one of his writings says, there is a tide in the affairs of men. And he pictures history as flowing in tides. And the implied is catch the tide at its highest point, and ride it to the full. I've often gone down here to Pacifica and watched these surfboarders. I've watched them as they paddle out and they wait for the crest to start building. They time it just perfect, so when that crest gets at its highest point they know catch the force of that wave, and if they catch it right, it'll bring them clear in to shore; but you've got to know when to catch the tide to do it.

And I think it's imperative that the Christian church, the body of believers, have an understanding of our times and listen to the sons of Issachar so they can tell us what we ought to do.

With that as my introduction. I picked up a book recently by George Gallup Jr. of the Gallup pollsters. George Jr. is a Christian. He's a son of Issachar in the sense that he wants to know what is the spiritual tide. What is it that's really interesting people in America, and where is the church getting their job done, and where is the church failing. And so he has taken a poll to catch the tide of time, and then to tell us.

He entitles his book: The Next American Spirituality. It was only published a short time ago in a year of 2000, so it's recent in terms of history to us. George didn't

want to defer the polling for a long period of time. He wanted to catch a quick snapshot -- 24 hours. In 24 hours he wanted to find out where we are as a nation spiritually, and what's the church doing about the spirituality of our nation.

So he gathers a number of pollsters and scatters them across the states, and gives them hundreds of telephone numbers, and in a 24 hour period they phone thousands and thousands of people. The result of that was that he wrote this report on that particular effort.

Here is what he comes up with. Some of this information will startle us, because we listen to a liberal press, a media, and they don't want us to know some things about spiritual matter, and so as a result we don't hear much about it. After all of those phone calls, here's what Mr. Gallup found: Spirituality is back with a vengeance, he says. Never in recent memory has spirituality seemed to be so much on people's minds.

I'm wondering if he would have written this after 9/11, another sentence he may have added or a paragraph. He goes on to say, while concern for the soul is out of the closet and very trendy, all that passes for spirituality in our culture will not stand the test of time or authentic practice. Many are finally discovering religion to be a matter of heart not just wrote, but would also show how contemporary spirituality can resemble a grab bag of random experiences that does little more than promise to make our eyes mist up and our heart warm.

We need perspective to separate junk food from the wholesome, and the fatish from the truly transforming. There is a deep concern, Mr. Gallup says, for spirituality across our nation, but there is also a flourishing of the fatish and the unreal. He goes on to say, that in their analysis of the American public, no longer is America really happy about moral relativism. That is, morals that just dangle with the opinions of men. There is a decided urgency in the hearts of many Americans to come back to what's right and what's wrong; something they can anchor their morality to. They're tired of a floating morality base. That's behind us.

And then he goes on to say that not only are they tired of a floating morality base, he said also that within the heart of the American people there is a desire for community. There is a desire for being together. There is a desire for being with people about spiritual matters, for being with our family.

And, you know, after 9/11, where was it that people went? They went home to their families or they went to the church. And what Mr. Gallup found out, when reality hits us smack in the face we do have the capacity to turn to the values that are really real; our families and our faith.

Now in that 24 hour time of polling here are some of the facts they found out. This will amaze you. They asked the question, do you believe in God, or a higher

power, or universal spirit? 96% of the Americans said we do. That's fascinating. Do you believe Jesus Christ is God, or the Son of God? 84% said we believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

You see we don't see this, but these are facts that came from a nationwide poll. Do you believe in heaven? 90% say we do. What's the chance of you going there? About 77%. (Congregation laughs) Do you believe in hell? 73% say we do. Those that think they have an excellent chance of going there, 23%. Now we smile, but what it simply says that out there, there is a belief in heaven and there is a believe in hell.

He went on. How many of them felt that they needed a spiritual experience or spiritual growth? And this is what really thrilled me. 82% of all the Americans that were polled said I want a spiritual experience with God. So below the surface where we don't usually get because they come across as sometimes cold, indifferent, godless. But underneath that crust is a desire to know God -- 82%. 80% say that they have a personal relationship with God.

23% say they believe in astrology. 72% say they believe in angels. But here's a sad point; believe the Bible is the inspired word of God but should not be taken literally, 48%. Nearly half the American people do not believe that the Bible should be taken seriously. Now that's interesting, isn't it? 80% + hunger for God, but the Bible that tells them about God they don't want to take it literally. Confusion isn't it?

How many attended church in the last seven days? And only 43% did. Why did I read that? I say, just a minute. If 80% are hungry for God and only 43% go to church, then the church is missing it. They're hungry, but when they come to the house of God they're not finding what they're looking for. May God help us as a church not to fall into that category.

Now they went on with their survey, and parents this will thrill you if you've got kids. We've been kind of fed the line that all of our kids are on pot and headed for hell, that America is in terrible shambles when it comes to youth. But you know what they found out? 95% of the American teenagers say they believe in God. That's interesting. 93% say that God loves them, and the teens who believe in heaven, 91%. Teens to have a great deal of interest in discussing the existence of God, 64%. So there's hope, folks, that our kids who see our world in shambles around us they want reality, and they want God, and they believe in God, and they believe God loves them. And at least we've got some hope for our kids. Amen?

Then Mr. Gallup went on, he said, 8 in 10 Americans consider themselves to be Christians. 80% of Americans consider themselves to be Christians. According to the most stringent question we have devised to date, because you know every poll is determined by the way you ask the question, so what George says is we

made the question just as stringent and as clear as we could: 6 in 10 completely agree that the only assurance of eternal life is a personal faith in Jesus Christ. Isn't that interesting?

Then he concludes; for the first time in half a century of surveys on Americans' top national concerns it revealed that ethics, morality, and the family are the three things that concern America the most. The son of Issachar has painted for us a picture of the times.

Now he says this, he says the power of tradition has eroded leaving people more and more attempting to fashion their own spirituality. So what he's saying is that if the church misses the tide of spiritual hunger, they're going to satisfy their spirituality some other way and miss the truth. So he says such forming of souls requires diligence and practice. It means the 21st century congregations will have to place priority on prayer and not on program.

The son of Issachar who knows the times says what they're saying out there in the world is, why doesn't the church get back to prayer and quit playing around with all these programs? Now they're telling us. Not only must we get back to prayer, but they want the presence and not just practice. In other words, they're hungry for reality. They want to walk into the church and they want to sense God's presence. That's what we sang today, Lord, Jesus, may that be true here. That when people come they sense the mighty presence of God. The world says that's what we want, just don't talk about it, we want to experience it. And they want authenticity over anything else. Just be real; just be honest; just be open; just be godly. That's what the world is saying.

One other item. He says that Americans long for meaningful spirituality and the task of the church is to ground that desire in the concrete truth of God's eternal word. He said, as the institutional church faces the unfolding of the 21st century it faces a great challenge. In the postmodern world there is a reality for every occasion. The church's message is simply one more voice in the cacophony of created realities to attract the following. He said, the problem is not so much that people do not believe anything, it's that they believe everything, and that's the caution of the church.

Here's what's on my heart, and that's what I want to talk to you about. We are at a tide in the affairs of our nation where the spiritual tide is coming back. Now that ought to make us really jump for joy because we went through some years when liberalism and almost a total ignoring of what was right and wrong, and morality dropped to the lowest ebb. We've gone through that gutter. We don't like it. But God in His infinite grace, I believe, is going to give America another chance for a great spiritual awakening.

George Gallup says it's there. Eight out of 10 people that you talk to down at the job, wherever you are, underneath maybe that coating that might be a little hard

there's a heart that's hungry and reaching out for God. And if we will tenderly, graciously, wisely move into these lives with the witness of Jesus Christ, we could see our families come to Christ; we could see our neighbors. Because if 8 out of 10 say I'm hungry for God, we ought to catch that tide and do something about it in personal evangelism.

We went away as your pastors this week for our annual retreat. When we go away we sit there and we say, God, would You show us as the leaders of the church; we want to keep on the cutting edge of history. We want to be right out there so we don't miss the tide, we don't miss the cresting of the wave, so please help us. If there's some deadwood in terms of programs that don't have any meaning, we're just keeping them alive in the church to maintain them, God give us the grace to discard them. Show us as a church where we can catch this tide - - the spiritual tide in our nation, in our community, and really enjoy the benefits of a great spiritual awakening.

So, I hadn't read this yet (referring to the book), but in praying for our theme for this year was 'growing in Christ'. I realized that's exactly the heartbeat of America. They want to grow spiritually. So what we have done here at the church, as you know, we've got classes every night of the week. We have an array, a banquet table, full of wonderful opportunities for all of us to grow spiritually.

You can study theology on Monday night. You can study evangelism on Tuesday night. Classes on Wednesday. You can study Galatians on Thursday or ethics. We've got classes because I had that feeling that there is a hungry and therefore we as the church must set the banquet table so that the hunger can be met and fed across our congregation. So literally hundreds and hundreds of our people are involved in various programs. I say, dear God this is wonderful.

And I didn't know, but Gallup found out that one of the major issues across America is this whole issue of ethics. So I had decided we were going to have an ethics class on Thursday night and 96 people signed up. What it said is we hit a hot button. It's true! Gallup is right. There is a deep hunger in the lives of America.

What is right? What is wrong? What is godly? What is godless? And let's make some decisions and live by them, and that's what ethics helps us do. We say, dear God, we're going to catch this crest. If there's a hunger, let's spread the table as wide as we can, and make it as broad and as interesting as we can. We have that marvelous opportunity.

But he says something in his book that really got to me too. Let me see if I can find it here. He talks about the fact that people want their faith based in the word of God. And as such, he says you must have more than just programs; you must

have more than theology; you've got to have prayer. And if the world is saying, church, why don't you get back to praying?

You know, I thought back and said, dear God, forgive me for this one. We have prayer in almost every event in our church, but is there a specific thrust, are we going to catch this tide and really launch out in some prayer?

Many years ago, for 25 years I came here to this sanctuary every morning at 5 o'clock for prayer and we had prayer. Wonderful. I had a man walk up to me after the last service and said, Pastor, it was at the 5:00 prayer meeting I gave my life to Jesus. I remember that. I had people walking off the streets at 5 o'clock in the morning looking for God. But I became ill two years ago. I had a number of problems. I had cataracts, operations, and other things, so I had to discontinue that early morning time.

But God said on my heart, catch the tide, start the prayer meetings again. So tomorrow morning at 5:00 and from thence on we're going to have prayer in this church. Come when you want to. Leave when you want to. On your way to work, stay 5 minutes, stay 15 minutes. Whatever you want to do, but this will become a house of prayer every morning at 5:00. We're going to catch the tide. We're going to saturate the theology with prayer and ask God to really pour out His blessing.

We're going to do something else, and I want you here tonight. We decided that we're going to take Sunday night -- we're going to have a specific time for music or worship, a specific time for the word, but we're turning Sunday night into a specific time for prayer in our congregation. So we're going to gather at the end of the service and we're going to pray for one another, and we're going to pray that God helps us to reach our community.

Ladies and gentlemen, with 2000 to 3000 people who come to this church. If all of us said, I'm going to catch this spiritual crest. I now realize I don't have to be ashamed of my faith. I know that 80% of the people, if I start talking about Jesus, if I'll just be gracious they're going to open up their hearts and listen. They're ready.

What a golden moment for the church; what a glorious opportunity for us to reach our community for Christ. I wish I was 35 instead of 70, but I've said dear God I want to catch this crest and we're going to flow with it. And we're going to see God do marvelous things, I believe, in the lives of thousands of people. Just remember the son of Issachar, old George Gallup, he said I'll tell you what the times are -- the times are ripe. The opportunity is golden. The people are ready, and their hearts are open. Go for it. I tell you, that's what's on my heart.

I thank God for this son of Issachar who went out, polled our nation, and said, I'll tell you what the times are, and I'll tell you the meaning of the times, and I'll tell you what to do with it. Feed the hungry soul. Give them an atmosphere where

God is real. Be sincere, and preach the word because they want to hear it, and there's no telling what's going to happen. Do you have the vision? Let's catch the tide.

I want you to stand and clasp the hand of the person next to you. Lord Jesus, we stand here on this beautiful day and we're grateful that Mr. Gallup, by his pollsters, went back and forth across this nation to tell us the meaning of our times; and to tell us that we live amidst a golden moment when the hearts of people are turning to You, and there's a spiritual tide rising in our nation. Now we know. We understand our times. Help us as Christians to realize that now is the golden moment to share our faith.

And as a church, now is the wonderful opportunity of being the place where people will find spiritual food and an experience with God that will fill their lives to overflowing. We accept the challenge, and Lord Jesus we're going to do our part to ride the crest and see You do marvelous things. In Jesus' name, amen . God bless you all. God bless you. (Congregation applauds)

© Copyright 2002 Church of the Highlands

<http://www.churchofthehighlands.org/transcription/sermon/2002/s03402ds.htm>