



Awaken from Slumber

*Spiritual awakenings form the foundation and fabric of
America's religious history!*

by Billy Wilson

The first Christian witness in our land did not begin at Jamestown, nor at Plymouth, but in a remote area of northeastern Florida in the middle of the sixteenth century. Hidden to many but known to God is the story of the Huguenot martyrs of Matanzas Inlet, near present-day St. Augustine. There the Spaniards drew a line in the sand, declaring that if the Huguenots stepped across it, refusing to renounce their Protestant faith, they would die. Two different groups totaling 245 men stepped across the line to their deaths. The Protestant leader, Jean Ribault, was among those martyred that day. But just before his death, history records that he quoted Psalm 132. Part of that Psalm states:

*"I will not enter my house or go to my bed, I will allow no sleep to my eyes, no slumber to my eyelids, till I find a place for the LORD, a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob."
(Ps. 132:3-5)*

In my opinion, the bloodied sands of the Florida coast witnessed the beginning of an awakening covenant for America—the "place," the "dwelling" where fresh generations were coming to live out their love for God and His Word in the freedom of a New World. And ever since the Matanzas massacre, God has sought people in this nation who were fully committed to that kind of spiritual vigilance—men and women who would not let even the threat of torturous death keep them from owning their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But He hasn't always found them. And we're left to wonder if He's finding them today. There have been times along the way when God has chosen a variety of places and people to awaken the nation for Christ: The colonial village of Northampton, Massachusetts, became an epicenter of the First Great Awakening with Jonathan Edwards being used dramatically.

The Kentucky frontier was a launch point for the Second Great Awakening with Barton Stone leading the Cane Ridge Camp Meeting. New York City's bowery district gave birth to the noontime prayer revival of the mid-1800s led by a layman named Jeremiah Lanphier.

The twentieth century began with God using a partially blind, uneducated son of former slaves named William Seymour to trumpet the message of Pentecost from a renovated livery stable on 312 Azusa Street in Los Angeles. Presently, America is in need of a new awakening. Spiritual slumber has overtaken thousands, plunging today's church into what many consider a season of apathy and ineffectiveness. Only 17 percent of Americans attend church on any given Sunday. The United States is now the third largest mission field in the world. The percentage of today's American youth who have a biblical worldview is at record lows, while the church continues to struggle with division, fear, and the public failure of numerous leaders.

The bad news is that the spiritual condition of America is at a critical stage. The good news is that America has been here before, and God has brought revival out of our despair.

First Great Awakening

In the mid-eighteenth century, when Jonathan Edwards went to pastor the church at Northampton, Massachusetts, he found a relatively unconverted congregation. Because of what was called the "halfway covenant," children and grandchildren of those in good standing were allowed full rights in the church despite the fact that they themselves were not converted. Edwards could not abide a church where mere habit and tradition substituted for authentic, believing faith. So he began to call for united, extraordinary prayer, delivering prophetic messages like "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." The prayers of Edwards and many others in Colonial America were heard, and the First Great Awakening shook the continent.

In 1737 Edwards published an account of the beginnings of this awakening called "A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many "Hundred Souls in Northampton."

"The town seemed to be full of the presence of God. It never was so full of love, nor so full of joy and yet as full of distress as it was then. There were remarkable tokens of God's presence in almost every house."

God also used George Whitefield and many others to awaken the church and the culture for Christ during those years. Whitefield preached to more than thirty thousand people at one time and was the most famous American of his day. During that first season of national awakening, one out of every five colonists was converted to Christ. Could it happen again?

Second Great Awakening

Following the Revolutionary War, America entered a season of moral decline. In a population of approximately 5 million, more than 300,000 were confirmed drunkards. Bank robberies were a daily occurrence, women were afraid to go out at night, and in a survey of the student body at Harvard, not one Christian believer was found. Chief Justice John Marshall wrote in a letter that "the church is too far gone ever to be redeemed."

But in 1794, when things seemed at their worst, ministers began to call for extraordinary prayer throughout the United States. Churches were asked to set aside the first Monday of each month to pray. Thousands of Christians answered the call, once again

embracing spiritual vigilance and wakefulness. Conferences for prayer and fasting sprang up. Camp meetings and communions turned into powerful seasons of revival. By the turn of the nineteenth century, a new season of Awakening had begun in America. In 1801, the famous Cane Ridge Camp Meeting took place near Lexington, Kentucky, a city of only 1,800. But during the week of the Cane Ridge Communion and Camp Meeting, more than 25,000 people from across the United States attended. Vanderbilt historian Paul Conkin stated that Cane Ridge was “arguably . . . the most important religious gathering in all of American history.”

One eyewitness report of Cane Ridge recorded the chaotic, holy scene that took place on the Kentucky frontier: *“Sinners dropping down on every hand, shrieking, groaning, crying for mercy, convoluted. Believers praying, agonizing, fainting, falling down in distress for sinners, or in raptures of joy! Some singing, some shouting, clapping their hands, hugging and even kissing, laughing, others talking to the distressed, to one another, or to opposers of the work and all this at once! . . . As to the work in general there can be no question but it is of God. The subjects of it, for the most part, are deeply wounded for their sins, and can give a clear and rational account of their conversion.”* Although the Methodist Church had witnessed a significant decline in membership during the final decade of the eighteenth century, both the Methodists and Baptists doubled their membership in America in the thirty years following Cane Ridge.

A Twenty-first Century Awakening

Each occurrence of nationwide revival has differed in terms of personalities and details—both the First and Second Great Awakening as well as the various others that have deeply impacted the nation. But one common denominator has always been evident: a sense of hungry, prayerful desperation. Each time the extended masses have humbled themselves and sought God’s deliverance, He has never failed to respond in power. That’s why in the midst of obvious spiritual decline across America, we have reason for hope today. The pattern still holds true. The possibilities are sure enough to be claimed with passionate certainty.

God’s Word to Solomon at the dedication of the temple says it the most clearly (and famously): “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 Chron. 7:13-14).

Most scholars agree that the book of Joel was written after the dedication of Solomon’s temple. Joel’s prophecy therefore becomes a delineation of 2 Chronicles 7:14 and reveals insight into what humbling ourselves, praying, seeking His face, and turning from our wicked ways looks like. Joel’s calls for radical action included fasting, weeping, united praying, and alarms for nationwide awakening—each a practical part of revival in the land.

In response to our nation’s present spiritual crisis, several hundred national leaders have united in forming the Awakening America Alliance. In April 2008, an Alliance Leadership Summit was called in Northampton, Massachusetts, to reflect on the First Great Awakening and the potential for a contemporary nationwide transformation. Recognizing

that true awakenings bring visible change, more than seventy-five prominent leaders discussed what a Christ Awakening in today's United States would look like in the church and in the culture. The result was a Summit resolution identifying ten indicators each in these two spheres of need.

These indicators will serve to focus our prayers for God to once again transform America and bring a new generation of Americans to Christ. My prayer is that you will unite your heart with thousands of other Christians across our nation in radical intercession for awakening in today's America. This book is designed to inspire and lead you into targeted prayer so that the indicators of a true Christ Awakening will be realized in our nation once again.

Turning America's spiritual tide will not be easy. It will require sacrifice and courage. But let us remember that "he that keepeth thee will not slumber." We must be ready to fight, but the battle is the Lord's. Now in the spirit of Jean Ribault, let us refuse to slumber while our nation risks the death of its Christian faith and influence as well as the loss of God's blessing. Let us be bold enough in this hour to step across the line together, making spiritual history in this time of desperate need. Our nation is in need. Our God is in heaven. Our awakening awaits.

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