

Chapter One

A Wake-Up Call for Sleepy Christians

At 8:30 a.m., on September 11, I was listening to Alison Krauss in the car on the way to the office. It was a beautiful fall morning in Nashville. The sun was shining. The leaves were turning. Life was good.

A women's Bible study meets at the Otter Creek church on Tuesday mornings. I parked the car among the gathering crowd and made my way into the building. I was looking forward to greeting my sisters in Christ and eating some of the goodies they always set out.

The foyer was stone quiet. Everyone was gathered in the auditorium looking up at the video screens, horror and tears glistening in their eyes. I entered to see reports of the first jet slamming into the World Trade Center and added my disbelieving, stunned

“No!” to the chorus of groans and shouts as the Towers collapsed.

The Pentagon had been hit. The capital had been evacuated. The President was rushed to Louisiana and then Nebraska. We took it all in, each piece of news a fresh body blow. And when we could stand no more, we fell into each others arms and went to our knees and sobbed out our prayers to God.

A Little Background

The smoke and carnage left a mark in New York and Washington. And it left a mark on you and me. This book is a record of that mark on one church in middle America as recorded in the sermons spoken from its pulpit over the next month.

I offer this record to you and your church precisely because we are so much alike. The church I serve is a healthy, growing, suburban family of faith. We've lived on the corner of a Nashville suburb for over 50 years now. We have a rich tradition of harmony and community service. We're not exactly turning the world upside down, but we have a solid track record of good ministries, effective missions, and stable fellowship. In other words, Otter Creek

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is a lot like the church you attend. Good people. Good intentions. Good works.

And I'm probably a lot like you or your pastor/preacher—balding, studious, caring, and (to be honest) a little dull. I try to lead in a loving and measured manner, although few would accuse me of being radical in my ambitions for the kingdom. My preaching is biblical and relatively creative (I use video clips once in a while). On occasion, it's even relevant. Sound familiar?

Things might have bumbled along comfortably for years with our ordinary church and its ordinary pastor . . . if September 11 hadn't happened.

But the events of that awful day have confronted us with a more basic commonality, a shared conspiracy on the part of God's people to live below the radical and exhilarating demands of the gospel. We are all living safely within the limits of a domesticated faith. We have all tamed the wild call of the gospel. We are practicing a too-familiar religion and attempting to worship a house-broken Lord. Our liturgy comforts rather than convicts us. Our theology profits and prospers us rather than calling us to sacrifice and pushing us toward suffering.



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And perhaps that was permissible in a pre-September 11th world. Perhaps comfort and safety and profit and stability were appropriate watchwords in the world we once knew. Perhaps.

But no more. Surely something more, something *other* than those values must move God's people today. It wasn't just the towers that collapsed September 11. It was an entire edifice of religious complacency that fell down as well. What we, the church of Jesus, will erect in its place is still uncertain.

One thing is clear: comfort zones and timidity can no longer be foundational.

Ordinary or Extraordinary?

September 11 was a defining moment for me. I could not ignore what had happened because my church and my community could think of little else.

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The images haunted me. The evil disturbed my sleep. The grief for the victims and their survivors caught me at unexpected times. The nobility of the rescue workers, the outpouring of sympathy and help from the nation, moved me in unique ways.

And I was all over the map emotionally. I felt sorrow and outrage, sympathy and pride. I wanted to hand out water to thirsty workers and vengeance to hard-hearted killers. I prayed for mercy and prayed for retribution. I struggled with what it meant to be Christ-like in the face of such demonic activity. I wasn't sure what Jesus would do. I didn't know how he would react.

The result of that personal struggle is the book you have in your hand—a collection of thoughts first preached as sermons on the Sundays immediately following September 11.

I wish I could say I laid out these sermons neatly, with main texts and carefully defined points, the day after the attacks happened. It didn't work that way. Each sermon was born in the struggle of the week before it was preached. I simply spoke what I believed God wanted my people to hear. To be honest, much of what I said flowed out of my own need to make sense of this horror. I hoped that,

we can be heroes

somewhere in the torrent of words, there might be a word from God for me.

Only after the last sermon did I detect some common threads running through the series. Only then did I begin to see how God might be speaking to his people through this tragedy.

These sermons are for the church—mine and yours. Christ's. They offer comfort, confrontation, encouragement and conviction to those who claim Christ as their Lord. They call Christian people to wake up and reconsider their mission in the glow of September 11's fire. They accuse us of complacency, of spiritual low-living. They invite us to repent and find our first love once more.

These sermons see in the events of September 11 a God-given opportunity for us to examine ourselves, to consider whether we are living up to our high calling, to think about what it means to be God's people in times such as these. These events are certainly a wake up call to our nation. But they also shake the church by the shoulder and arouse us from spiritual slumber.

It is times like these when heroes are needed. Times like these call out for vision and dedication and sacrifice. As God's people, we have a chance to

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look this evil in the eye, to shake off our apathy and materialism, and to get busy with the work God has for us to do.

Whether these words will encourage you to audacious Christian living, I cannot say. I'm not even sure what effect they will have on the Otter Creek church or its faint-hearted preacher—it's too early to tell. But the people of God need something to wake us from our slumber and call us once again to a purpose worthy of Christ's cross and God's people.



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Lord, thy most pointed pleasure take
And stab my spirit broad awake;
Or, Lord, if too obdurate I,
Choose thou, before that spirit die,
A piercing pain, a killing sin,
And to my dead heart run them in.

*"The Celestial Surgeon"
Robert Louis Stevenson*