

National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.
Dawning of a New Day Conference – Dallas, Texas
Keynote Address
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This Conference is ground breaking in so many ways because its intent is one that is recognized as a needed intent by all of us. We all have served God for varying lengths of time, but we seek always to be more effective stewards of the charge and the trust that has been given to us. And this Conference, dedicated to helping us develop and to strengthen our capacity for new day ministries, is a much needed one. And, again, I express appreciation to these practitioners who are leading in something that is not novel territory to them because they themselves participate and share their time in it.

Now, I want to read the text and then ask you to struggle with me as we try to hear. Isaiah, Chapter 55(KJV):

“Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

“Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.

“Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David.”

You will want to read the rest of that chapter.

The passage is ancient, but the promise is still standing. There is a challenge though—a problem in hearing it—and I ask that you struggle with me to try and hear it, because verse one of Chapter 55 begins by saying, “Ho, every one that thirsteth”—and I struggle to give legitimacy to how that text ought to be said. If we were seated in

confidential small gatherings, I could say, “Listen to the folk who are present,” and we would hear. But I get the feeling that the prophet was not talking to a gathering in a circle. And since we don’t do ministry simply in small circles, the question now is, “How do we get the ‘ears’ of persons for whom the words of this text are intended?”

So, I think really we ought not just to say, “Ho,” to everyone who thirsts, but, **“HO!** Attempting to get the attention, the ‘ears,’ of persons is our challenge. How do we get their ears? Whose ears? Metaphor is used here—these are ears of persons who are thirsty and hungry—but not for water nor for filet mignon. Those things are satisfying but they don’t last. The reference and the inference here is that there is a desire for something that is life sustaining as well as tasty. Some things are tasty but you don’t need them.

When I was a boy growing up in Marshall, Texas, there used to be a fellow who would push a cart up and down the streets of Marshall and he would holler real loud: “Ice cream! Soda water! Eskimo pies!” Children from all over the neighborhood would run into their houses looking for nickels from whomever would give them so they could go out and buy some ice cream. Now, we *wanted* that ice cream, but it wasn’t *necessary* for our living. This text references stuff that has to do with the basic fundamental necessities of living, the experience of abundant life.

It is a bold statement--“**Ho, everyone who thirsts!**” To hear this as believers, (and a part of the reason for our gathering here as churches is to hear this), is to have our parochial interests and limitations challenged because too many churches don’t have an “everyone” focus. It’s a “neighborhood” focus or a “like us” focus. Sometimes we cause our own growth to be stunted because we don’t look for everyone. We want a limited circle of persons. Folks like us or folk that we like, but not everyone. No limitations are set in the scripture though: “Ho, *everyone*...” Red, Black, White, male, female, young, old, everyone who has this basic hunger and need is called. And, when you look at it, there is no one outside of everyone because everybody is looking for life.

Some of us think that living has to do simply with the extension of our days, but it is more than just the extension of our days. Everybody is looking for life. And if God is going to hold anything against this church—and this may well be that one of the things we are going to have to answer for—it is that *we have not dealt with life issues and we have not dealt with everyone as a focus*. We have a limited vision, a limited capacity, and no world vision. But to say, “Ho!” to everyone, “Come and buy!” is to reflect a confidence in the efficacy of what we are offering. If you don’t believe in it, then you can’t cry, “Everyone.” If you don’t believe that your product is a good product, you can’t cry out too loudly for a person to come. If you don’t have any confidence at all in what you have to sell, then you are a poor salesman really. We have to be careful when we don’t invite everybody to a meal that is being served because we don’t think we have enough food on the table to feed everybody. That is why we have invitations for selected people sometimes because we ain’t got enough for everybody to come and get. But this *everyone* emphasis in the scripture reflects a belief in the sufficiency and efficacy of what we are offering.

“Ho, everyone who thirsts!” It is frustrating to try to get attention and not get it. Every pastor has that problem. Because people attend doesn’t mean that you have their attention. So pastors struggle with how to get the attention of persons. Those who lead churches and associations, and those who are moderators and presidents know what a struggle it is to get attention. We show up, but we really don’t have the attention of the persons who come.

Why is it so hard to get people’s attention? I have to confess that we may have difficulty getting attention because our efforts are so weak. We say, “Ho,” but not, **“Ho!”** Our efforts are weak and feeble—feeble because we doubt what we are offering. Feeble because perhaps we really haven’t tasted what we are offering. And, if you can’t say, “Oh taste and see that the Lord is good,” you’ve got to take somebody else’s testimony about it, and it’s hard to be convincing on someone else’s testimony.

Sometimes, our invitation is weak. It might be weak because we don't have a passion for what we are doing. We're fulfilling obligations, but we're really not hopeful for any responses. Have you seen that commercial where some parents are trying to go away somewhere and they go by their children's house, knock on the door, and then turn and run before anybody gets a chance to answer? They knock, but they don't want an answer. We go through the hoops, we go through the routine, but we do not really want an answer. We don't want *everybody* coming in here because it is going to tax us, it is going to challenge us, it is going to change the way we have been doing things. We say to ourselves, "I am comfortable the way that I have been doing it and if some new folks show up here, it may make me change how I have been functioning." So, we say, "Ho," but we don't make it too strong.

Sometimes it is difficult getting attention because there are so many competing voices out there that, if you are not loud and clear in what you are saying, you can't break through. And, one thing the Bible and church history ought to teach us is that the Devil is an expert in offering false lures. He will provide stuff and tell people, "This will satisfy your thirst; this will satisfy your taste." There are a whole lot of people out there who are trying to sell religious products, but they're false products that really are not going to provide life. The Devil has long since decided that he can't stop this thing, so what he tries to do is to submarine it. He redefines what it is all about. He'll wrap it up in religious language, he will put in religious structures, but what he offers is false hopes and false doctrines and false messages.

One of the challenges of the National Baptist Convention now is to cry, "**Ho!**" with a loud voice and to utilize those resources that will enable us to reach people that we don't reach in our normal ways. Now we have been saying, "Ho!" and in response people who happen to wander in off the streets into the church may hear something about the church that they like, or like the way the choir sounded or like the way the preacher sounded, and may come and join. But we really haven't reached out to persons who are spiritual and unchurched, because they don't even know where we are and don't come under the sound of our voices. One of the things we are attempting to

do through the Convention is get us to embrace some new means of communication. We must embrace new technologies. One of the brothers assigned to assist me during this conference asked me if I am a “computer person.” I said “No,” but I recognize the value of it. That I have not mastered it does not mean that I don’t believe that those who do master it can use it to reach out, and we have to become more adept at using technology. The Internet provides a means of communication that people all over the world use for research. They go to that thing and search it more than people flip the pages of their Bibles. They are looking for answers and the Convention is not providing them there yet. We need to holler, “**Ho!**” when people are searching and are flipping the pages of the Internet to find a church in their community, to find somebody who is serious about the Bible and the word of God. We need to shout, “**Ho! Here is where we can help you wrestle with your problems!**” On television many false lures and false prophets are out there. These false prophets are teaching people, *if you know God, he’s going to make you rich; and if you ain’t rich then you don’t know God.* And that message is missing what the gospel is all about. We need to utilize the medium of television to deliver the true message of the gospel of Christ.

“**Ho!**” The problem is a serious one. “**Listen!**” He says—you’re dealing with unanswered questions, and you are dealing with that which doesn’t yield too much. Listen to the scripture again: “Why do you spend money for that which is not bread? and your labor for that which satisfieth not?”

There are those who are teaching now that money is bread. So if you have money, then you have life. But how many folks have full pockets and bulging bank accounts, but still have empty lives, and are searching with no deep satisfaction within? There are those who think that money can buy bread. And, so they spend and spend thinking that spending is going to satisfy their thirst. Oh, we buy clothes galore, not because we need them, but because we are trying to satisfy something. And, so there is no such thing as having enough—*just push them over and squeeze something else in.*

We are trying to satisfy something, as if money can **buy** satisfaction. What are we trying to buy? Trying to buy a sense of self? Trying to buy some identity? We think to ourselves,

“What I wear will give me identity. Where I live will give me identity. If I put enough rings on my hands, then I will be somebody. If I put enough gold around my neck, I’ll be somebody. If I wear the right brand I’ll be somebody. If I live in the right neighborhood, then I will be somebody.”

When we think this way, we are trying to buy a sense of self, believing that things will make us somebody.

And if things don’t do it for us, then perhaps the approval of others will. Perhaps we are trying to buy some status in the eyes of others because, if enough people say so, then we must be somebody. Older people spend their energies trying to get the approval of others, and if they don’t get it, then their life is all torn up. Young girls have their lives messed up because they are trying to get their sense of self from some fellow—whom they allow to define them and say who they are—because they want his approval. Then they end up with children that they can’t care for. They end up with burdens on their lives that ought not to be burdens. What ought to be a blessing becomes a burden because they are trying to identify self through the approval of others. Preachers have to be careful that our sense of self doesn’t come from the response to the sermon. If I say it *right* then that makes me a tremendous preacher. Yes, you ought to say it right, but you also ought to say *something*.

The whole church is caught up in this challenge: looking for a sense of self, of community, of connectedness. In our culture we build barriers between people—and that goes against the basic message of what the Lord said in the opening line of the scripture. It is not good to be alone. And so, in an effort to cover our loneliness, we engage in activities to establish connections that don’t last because they are not grounded on anything that is real. We have to be in crowds, but we never establish connections. We have rivalry, but no real inner sense of relationship. And so young people establish their own ties one with another, trying to feel connected and they

connect themselves with all the stuff that is wrong. And just because there is a crowd doesn't mean that it is right. What is missing is a sense of connectedness, of ultimate relationships, of being as one with what really is. The Lord said in the Old Testament, "I am that I am." He is the only one who can say, "I am" and not have to qualify it. All of us can say, *I am*, but we have to qualify it by adding something. I am 50 years. I am 30 years old. But God says, "I am." He doesn't have to put any condition on it because he's everlasting to everlasting. We are aspiring for something, but God already is. And there is in us some desire to connect with that which is absolute being. We recognize that our being is derived from something, and unless we stay connected with that something, our being is in peril. Satan attempts to corrupt our sense of connection so that we end up struggling for that ultimate tie, ultimate relationship with God.

Why do you spend money for that which is not bread? Why do you labor for that which satisfies not? There is a difference between spending and laboring. Laboring means that you put a whole lot into it. You are straining. Why do you labor for that which satisfies not? You work hard at it, and in spite of all of your best efforts, you are still trying to reach some people. Who needs to hear what we have to offer? Why have you strained so at living and it looks as though living is passing you by? Why do you labor for that which satisfies and when you think you have it there is still a hunger inside of you? Why do you labor for that which satisfies others?

There is an implicit rebuke in it, but people don't ask "why?" if they don't have a better option. Why do you ride a bicycle if that is the only thing you have to ride? You don't ask a stupid question like that if all that you have is a bicycle. But if you have a choice between a bicycle and Rolls Royce, you ride the Rolls Royce. Why do you labor for that which satisfies not? There is an implicit rebuke and then there is also the implicit understanding that there is a better option. And, that is what we are all about—a better option. The truth is you can secure what you are looking for if you don't have money. So come and buy it without money. You don't have to have a big bank account; you don't have to have accumulated resources. Come if you don't have

anything and come if you do have something. Come and buy without money, because, what you are looking for, money can't buy.

How can you buy without money? Very simply—Jesus has already bought it. He has already paid the price of what you are looking for and he will give it to you for free. Jesus paid it all, but you can't get it without going around Calvary. But look, it struck me the other day that when you read the gospel – the four of them—each one has an angle and each one of them has a different number of chapters. But all of them focus most on the life of Jesus during the last three years of his public ministry. His whole ministry was on preaching, teaching and healing, but it all adds up and falls out at Calvary. If you don't go by Calvary, you can't get what you are looking for. He is more than just a miracle doer. He is more than just a healer of hurt. He's the one who makes life new all over. He's the one who introduces us into new communities or a new body that He created. He sets us right with the Father, and He does that at Calvary. He was placed there. He gave his life there and then, and after he paid it off, he came back and now you can have it. New creatures in Jesus Christ, members of a new body and new relationships set right with eternal grace. And you can have that without money and without price. **Ho!** There is urgency about this. I need to say it loud because you need to serve. **Ho! Come!**

Just two things before I leave you. There is a sense of urgency here, and that is why He says, "**Ho!**" The scripture didn't say pass the word along, "Ho." No, there is a sense of urgency. Later on in the scripture the reason for the sense of urgency is made clear: "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near..." There is a sense of urgency about this because the opportune moment can come and pass, and all of the regretting in the world won't make up for the missing. You have so much time to make a plane connection, and if you miss your connection, all of your regrets won't bring the plane back to the gate. You missed it. God's law is everlasting, but there are opportune moments and we ought not to let the harvest pass. There is urgency about it.

Another cause for this sense of urgency is that you and I have been entrusted to make this offer known. In the wisdom of God, when Jesus was resurrected, He left the work of proclamation in our hands. Don't ask me why he did it—arguing won't change that. When you get to heaven you can ask him why he didn't work another way, but unless you take the way that He offers, you may very well miss it. So, it has been given to us. Isaiah the prophet had been charged to proclaim and to reach out and there was something in him that made him have a sense of urgency. He had to fulfill what was his calling. So, it ought to be within us an urgent drive that makes us want to carry out the calling that is ours.

I hear the Apostle Paul saying, "Who is under me if I preach not the gospel?" I am not preaching because the crowd is right, I am not preaching because the pay is right. I am not preaching because it is popular now. Woe unto me if I preach not the gospel—and the New Testament does not really describe what woe is. Woe is an indescribable word. The worst thing you can think of isn't as bad as woe is. Woe unto me if I preach not the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is a sense of urgency upon my soul. There is a burning within my heart; there is a weight on my life. Woe unto me. I've got to cry, "Woe!" to everyone who is hurting. I need your ear.

And there is a satisfaction when you fulfill your calling, your responsibility. There is the satisfaction of seeing lives change. And, that ought to be a driver within us, to see persons who are so disheveled put their lives together, see communities change, see powers challenged and corrected. Just the satisfaction of seeing these changes ought to drive us, but the devil has gotten some folk blind. He has made some folk deaf. So it may be that everyone doesn't hear or see your efforts, but everybody doesn't heed the example of Jesus. Take a look at Jesus in the final moment of his life. He said to his father, "Father I have kept everybody you gave me, except one." On the cross while he is dying He says, "It is finished!" not, *I am finished*, but, "It is finished!"

There is a real sense of satisfaction in knowing that you have done your task to the best of your ability. A few minutes ago, we were all involved in singing. There is a song which is part of our heritage, and it is such an inspirational something:

*“If when you give the best of your service,
Telling the world that the Savior is come;
Be not dismayed when men don’t believe you;
He understands; He’ll say, ‘Well done.’”*

The message in this song exposes the false lure of the “success syndrome.” Attending a New Day Conference doesn’t mean that you won’t fall victim to the “success syndrome.” You don’t know when you’ve succeeded anyhow. Sometimes you think you have missed the mark altogether when you really hit the bulls eye. Sometimes you think that your efforts really didn’t get anywhere, but a seed was planted and years later somebody will come by and say, “Do you remember when you were reaching out to me and thought you didn’t get to me? That stuff sank down deep inside me and when I was away from you I couldn’t get away from it and it brought me back.” When you give the best of your service, and even when you try and you fail, and your hands are scarred from the work you have done, run quickly to meet Him. He understands—and the thing that really makes it all worthwhile—He will say, “Well done.” **HO!** That’s what we are trying to get some ears hear: **HO! HO! HO! EVERYONE SAY, “HO!”**

May it be during this conference that our ears will be unstopped, and we can hear afresh so that we can cry out with real power: **HO!**