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Collection Name: The Papers of Rev. Dr. William Augustus Jones, Jr. (Accession #2007-012)

Title of Sermon: An Awful Alternative

Date: 8/18/1984

Original Format: Video

File number(s): C446_a / C446_b

Transcriptionist: Sheana Corbridge

SPEAKER #1: Welcome to the Bethany Experience. One hour of worship recorded at Bethany Baptist Church, 460 Sumner Ave. From Decatur to Madonna in Brooklyn, NY. Dr. William Augustus Jones is pastor. Worship services are held each Lord's day at 8am and 11 am. The Bethany experience is but one of our several outreach ministries. Unapologetically black, and unashamedly Christian, Bethany is a caring church, seeking always to minister to the totality of human need. A warm welcome awaits you within these hallowed portals.

(choir sings)

REV. DR. WILLIAM AUGUSTUS JONES, JR: The Hymn of Consecration is selection 202, "I Know Who Holds Tomorrow," 202.

(choir and congregation sings "I Know Who Holds Tomorrow")

JONES: Amen! Amen! Where there is no vision, the people perish. That line comes out of verse 18 in the 29th chapter of the book of Proverbs. Where there is no vision, the people perish. I want to talk today about an awful alternative. An awful alternative. Where there is no vision, the people perish. That's the King James translation of this passage. Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint. That's the rendition of the passage in the revised standard version of the Bible. Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint. That's the New International version, rendering of the passage—different words in these different translations, but the same dialectic is at work. Different language, but same awful alternative. No vision, the people perish, no prophecy the people cast off restraint, no revelation, the people are destroyed. Where there is no vision, the people perish. Without question, this is one of the best-known lines in all of English literature—it is an utterance marked by great strength of character. It even has a euphonious ring about it. Something there is about these words that causes us to shift our view from the real to the ideal—from actuality to possibility. This is not the language of narrow minds and timid spirits—no, this is lofty language—language that reaches up to where the mountains touched the skies, up there where eagles perch, where the stars sing and where the zephyrs are pure. Where there is no vision, the people perish. The words challenge and indict, but they also invite. Implicit is an invitation to participate in creative, redemptive and therefore eternal concerns. Whose words are these? —are they the result of the efforts of some think-tank, some task force, some commission or some blue-ribbon committee? No, not at all—they come to our ears through a man whose life was a checkered affair. A life of highs and lows, peaks and valleys, dips and curves, but a life never devoid of sensitivity to the pure purposes of God. You know the man's name; his name is Solomon. He's known and applauded for his wisdom, he's often castigated for his weaknesses, but he's never accused of being unmindful of the activity of the almighty. This line which came to us by way of

Solomon's lips, belongs to what is generally regarded and accepted as the second section of Solomon's proverbs. Heir to the throne of his father David, he came to his kingship leaning and depending on the Lord. Before the whole house of Israel, on the day of his investiture, he prayed to God saying Lord, I'm just a child, I know not how to go out nor how to come in, so Lord give me an understanding heart. His wisdom and his wealth were the talk of east. When the queen of Sheba came to see him in all of her black beauty, her commentary was clear, concise, and correct—the health has not been told. This is the man who declared for the ages to hear—where there is no vision, the people perish. My, what an awful alternative. How fitful and how frightful. The alternative to vision is death, destruction, absolute annihilation—devastating defeat. He posits and either-or proposition. There's no compromise, no middle ground, no medium strip, no halfway house. The man absolutizes—no relative ethic is enunciated here. He allows for no shades of gray. As wise as he is, he's bound to know that all of life is tainted by imperfection. Solomon knows full well that perfection within history is impossible and yet he deals in thesis and antithesis in polarity of thought, and he does it in absolute terms.

Pause in recording as cassette tape, side 1 ends.

Recording of cassette tape, side 2 begins.

REV. DR. WILLIAM AUGUSTUS JONES, JR: How can he do it? Will it hold up on the serious scrutiny? Yes, absolutely yes—and you'd better believe it. A compromise, my friends, is a human posture. A middle ground is a purely planetary phenomenon. The moment you move from the finite to the infinite, you take leave from the arena of compromise. Not so much in your dealings with other humans, but in your dealings with God. When you deal directly with God you see clearly his righteous requirements and at the same time you see your own sinful situation. Let me make this live—every day of my life and often several times in the course of a single day, I have to find the prayer channel and tune in to my father's frequency, and the first thing I have to do after acknowledging my recognition of who he is—the first thing I have to do just as soon as I tune in—is ask him to forgive me of my sins, and I don't have to drag my sins all the way up to the meeting with my father, they are already with me because they are always within me, because they are in me—so I simply tell him, Father, forgive me of all my sins. He in his mercy forgives me, and in that moment, I know better than at any other time, how my father views the human condition. In that moment I see as it were the vision splendid. In that moment I think God's thoughts after him. In that moment, the dialectic is crystal clear, for I see at the same time—wretched humanity and blessed divinity—and if I don't rush down from the summit. If I take my time—if I descend slowly—I return to this wicked world with a word from the Lord. A word capable of reversing the perishing process. Where there is no vision, the people perish. Now you've got to go up to get the vision, and I'm talking about vision with a capital 'V,' I'm not talking about some stuff that a sorcerer or a soothsayer or a palm reader would talk about. I'm talking about vision with a capital 'V.' The word in the Hebrew actually means prophecy, and prophecy results from revelation, and revelation you know, is God's self-disclosure—and you can't reason this out.

The scientific analysis and philosophic inquiry can't get up this high. Flesh and blood don't reveal this—the father has to let you see it and my, what a responsibility. This place is on the pulpit and

the pew alike. Without vision, the people perish. They are destroyed. They cast off restraint, that's what causes their destruction. Restraint is cast off. The root word here is para, which means let go. It's a kind of Laissez-faire morality and ethic. If there is no vision, the people let go. They do what's right in their own myopic eyes, they become loose, they become unbridled, unharnessed, undisciplined, uninhibited, unrestrained and this spells destruction and death. Without vision—the people become dealers in their own death, and they do all sorts of sinister things, things like praising the Lord and passing the ammunition. They shout racial slurs—even in church and they lynch in the name of the Lord. They lose sight of the distinction between Christian faith and civil religion. They condemn others without ever confessing their own sins. They make God the custodian of a narrow nationalism and in turn are misled by the false concept of manifest destiny. Without vision, they deify government and sanctify power politics. Without vision, they try to perform a marriage between church and state. Without vision, the preacher and the politician become buddy-buddy—as is sadly revealed presently by the behavior of a certain bible-thumping preacher who perverts the faith almost every time he opens his mouth. He and others have accepted the role of interpreter of the President's nuclear arms policy. I said in a hotel room in Detroit a few days ago and my spirit shivered and shuddered, when I looked at the television screen saw this man and heard him. This man, who claims to speak for the prince of peace—talk proudly and smilingly and smugly about his Pentagon and Presidential briefings on matters of defense. Now if you're an ambassador for Christ, you don't need any governmental briefing. You have access to a higher briefing. You have automatic admittance to the throne room of eternity. The door of divinity's designs sways open to you. For you represent the one of whom it was declared, principalities and powers he disarmed and openly displayed them as his trophies when he triumphed over them in his cross—but without vision, even preachers confuse Caesar with Christ.

Without vision you're silent when you ought to speak, and you speak when you ought to remain silent. I tell you, heavy is the responsibility upon anyone who claims to speak for God. The Septuagint, the Greek old testament, translates the word vision here as 'guide' or 'interpreter.' Where there is no guide, where there is no interpreter, the people perish—and how sad the scenario when death occurs at a preacher's hands. How tragic it is when people experience this awful alternative because of some misguided cleric in a preacher's role. What an abomination when men go to hell because they heard the wrong side—and for this reason the pew bears a heavy responsibility also, I will be very open and direct with you as pew occupants you ought to ask some serious questions from time to time. You ought to ask is, there any word from the Lord? Pew occupants ought to sense in the preacher—the regular restless tension between his preaching and the cultural law. Pew occupants ought to express by their very countenances, a desire to share in the vision splendid. If I were a pew person, if I sat where you sit, I would say by my presence, preacher—I'm serious about life, I take my faith seriously and preacher I come to the Lord's house in search of answers to life's strange paradoxes and life's glaring contradictions—so preacher, since I'm here—don't play with my spirit, don't toy with my soul and for heaven's sake preacher don't simply recite what god did in the long ago. I expect you to be up on what God's doing right now! If I sat where you sit, I would say by my presence, preacher—good history is all right but give me some good news along with the good history. Preacher, I didn't come here to be entertained; I didn't come here for show time. I can find that anywhere. What I need is an encounter with the eternal. Preacher confront me with the word of God, challenge my thinking, penetrate my emotions, walk up and down the avenues of my being. Preacher, I want you to lead me to a collision with reality, a collision so great and so serious that it will injure my pride, wound my egocentrism,

break the bones of my wretchedness and put me in heaven's hospital, where Dr. Jesus will perform surgery and then send me to the recovery room under the therapeutic presence of the holy spirit. If I were a pew occupant, if I sat where you sit, well, that would be my posture—that would be my plea—for where there is no vision, no revelation, no prophecy, no guide and no interpreter—the people are destroyed. The alternative to sight beyond seeing is awful. It's a state of being where summer sun never shines, where the music of the spheres is never heard, where the lament is everlasting—without vision, that's how tragic a state, that's our lot, that's our portion, that's our destiny—without vision, we die before dying. Only a proper vision of the eternal will ensure the abundant life and this all nations need to know. The Kremlin and the White House need this word. The president declares that he does not go to church on Sunday because of security reasons, he does not want to disturb the worshipers. That's a poor excuse. My father is able to take care of his house and his people! Oh, nothing short of the vision splendid will save us. Education won't do it; space shots won't heal us—a nuclear arsenal won't secure us; MX missiles and B-1 bombers won't protect us but thank God I know what will defend.

I know about something that technology can't touch. I know about something that science cannot scrutinize. I know about something that politicians can't program. What is that something? It's what the prophet talked about when he said, “not by might, not by power but by my spirit, saith the lord.” It's what the psalmist expressed what he declared, “accept the lord, watch the city, the watchman watcheth in vain.” Our only security lies in compliance with what God said to Solomon, “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then (then, then and only then! Then!) will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.” Where there is no vision, the people perish. Thank God today for the vision splendid. I hope you caught it somewhere during the days of your years. Thank God for Jesus, who offers life even in the dying order. Thank God for Jesus, his oath, his covenant, his blood support me in the whelming flood; when all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope and stay. Thank God for Jesus, what he gives you nobody can take away from you, what he puts in you will keep you. Yes! Have we got a witness! (congregation cheers) Thank God for the lofty vision. Thank God for the summit sea(??) It gets a little rough sometimes, the airwaves get jammed with a lot of madness these days. There's so much sin sickness, so much moral madness, but thank God there is a height which beckons. I hear the psalmist talking about one day when he was in a pensive mood and worrying about his own situation—something told him to lift his eyes above his pain predicament—and I hear him declare, “I will lift up mine eyes unto the heels from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee, will not slumber. Behold he that keepeth Israel, shall be the slumber nor sleep. The lord is thy keeper, the lord is thy shape upon thy right hand. The son shall not spite thee by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul. The Lord shall preserve by going out and not coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore.” Our only help is in the Lord. Our only hope is in the Lord. If he picks you up, nobody can throw you down. If he delivers you, you're soon delivered. If he holds you up in his hands, it's all right Lord. I know what I'm talking about. Have you ever been way down yonder by yourself couldn't hear nobody pray? Have you ever found yourself between a rock and a hard place and something in your soul said when my heart is overwhelmed just take me by the hand and lead me, lead me, lead me to the rock that's higher than high? Have you found him? Have you discovered him? Do you know that rock he is? Where there is no vision, the people perish but if you've seen him who represents the

vision splendid. you can make it in spite of mean, mad, men, you can make it irrespective of cutbacks. You can make it in spite of disappointments. You can make it even though friends forsake you. You can make it when enemies rise up—for he whom I'm talking about takes care of his own. Yes! Yes! He'll even set your table in the presence of your enemies. Won't he do it? Yes! And now shall my head be lifted up above my enemies round about me, wait on the Lord and do good and he shall strengthen thine heart. Wait! Wait! Wait! I say on the Lord, keep into the Lord like a poor inchworm, Jesus will come by and by. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Keep your eye on the prize. Never lose sight of the vision. The doors of the church are open. Anybody here today, wants to say I see it clearly, I accept Jesus Christ as lord of my life, and I want to follow him, the balance of my days? If you're here with me, you come. If there are persons present that live in this city but without church home and you know Christ—we bid you come and unite with the people of God as we sing hymn number 70, "The Lily of the Valley", let us stand and lift it to the glory of God.

(choir and congregation sing "The Lily of the Valley")

JONES: (speaking over the singing) Who will come today? Jesus is calling!

The creation of this transcript was generously funded by Jennifer Jones Austin.