

I Have Heard Your Prayer

2 CHRONICLES 7:12-14 • PART 1

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****COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE****

It is good to be with you this morning! I hope everybody has the elements for the Lord's Supper (either from home or from the table in the entryway). We'll be partaking of the Supper immediately after today's lesson, and then we plan on singing "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less" before we head outside to do our visiting outside in the fresh air.

As you can see, we are starting with a summary of God's plan for our salvation. God sent his Son to die for our sins, and we respond by believing his word, by turning away from sin, by confessing Jesus as the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. And once again, we have a few examples this morning. The first is Bruce who was baptized several days ago at the Northwest congregation in Fort Worth, Texas. We rejoice with Bruce this morning.

The second comes to us from the Lehman Avenue congregation in Bowling Green, Kentucky. I don't have the man's name, but this was shared a few days ago by Kathy Pollard, whose husband Neal now preaches for the Lehman Avenue congregation.

The last one came in yesterday from the Piedmont Road congregation in Marietta, Georgia, as Heather is baptized by her husband. I love the kids surrounding the baptistery! And we are thankful for these good examples. If you have any questions about God's plan, we would invite you to get in touch, either in person, online, or on the phone (either by call or by text). The church phone number is 608-224-0274.

This morning, I want us to study a passage that many of us have probably seen on social media over the past few months. It's a passage I've never preached on before. It is often taken out of context and misapplied, and yet as I've thought about it over the past few weeks, and as I see this passage popping up in memes, I realize that it is the word of God, and there is some comfort in it. It's a passage that often surfaces during times of national tragedy. We saw it after 9-11, and now we see it again.

We look around us, and we are almost overwhelmed, aren't we? Personally, I don't even know what to pray anymore. This world is a mess. And sometimes, I just want to ask God to "fix it." But I often don't really know

what “it” even is. We have the pandemic. We continue to hear bits and pieces concerning the sex trafficking and basically slavery that’s taking place right now, often involving the rich and powerful and well-known politicians. We have some ongoing civil unrest that sometimes makes no sense whatsoever. Here in Madison, we’ve seen a huge increase in violence over the past few weeks, including a record-breaking series of shots-fired calls here in the city of Madison - a woman shot while driving on John Nolen yesterday, a 9-year old girl shot in the leg while playing croquet in her front yard just a few blocks from here, and several others. We had a murder and an attempted murder practically within sight of our house on the southwest side of Madison a few days ago. We are surrounded by sin, and violence, and chaos. All around us, the world seems to be falling apart, and I don’t know what to pray, other than, “Dear God, please fix it. Please, make things right.”

With this in mind, I would invite you to turn with me to 2 Chronicles 7:12-14. Verse 14 is the verse that’s often quoted, but it is often taken out of context. This morning, I hope we can start to take some principles out of this passage that are repeated in the New Testament. So, before we just yank this verse out of context and try to apply it, we need to look at what’s happening at the time. At the time (in 2 Chronicles 2-4), the people are dedicating the temple constructed by King Solomon. In Chapter 5, the Ark of the Covenant is brought into the temple for the first time, in Chapter 6 King Solomon goes to God in prayer asking for God’s blessing on the nation, and in Chapter 7 the temple is officially dedicated. They offer sacrifices, and fire comes down from heaven. It is an awesome sight as God’s presence fills the temple. Afterwards, God appears to King Solomon at night, and this is where we pick up with 2 Chronicles 7:12-14,

12 Then the Lord appeared to Solomon at night and said to him, “I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for Myself as a house of sacrifice. 13 If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people, 14 and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

In context, then, God is speaking to King Solomon, and he is basically reaffirming the covenant made with the people back in Deuteronomy, and he reminds King Solomon that the covenant is conditional: If the people listen and obey, God will bless the nation; but, if the people are not faithful, God will no longer protect them. We understand this. But the danger is: Sometimes people see verse 14, and they very quickly apply it to the United States of America. So the idea is: If we as God’s people go to God in prayer, God will heal our land, and God will fix the United States of America. There might be some truth to this, but in terms of context, we need to remember that this passage applies primarily to Israel, because God has never had a covenant with our nation today. As a nation, we have never been “God’s chosen people.” So, we need to be careful here, and we need to make sure we are looking at this passage through New Testament eyes.

So, when God refers to “***...My people who are called by My name,***” perhaps we can apply this in some way to us as his people (as Christians), but it’s not really addressing us as a nation. We know from Romans 15:4 that the things written in earlier times were written for our instruction. So, what I’m saying is: This passage might not apply to our nation so much as it applies to us. We are God’s people, and by “we” I am referring to those of us who have obeyed the gospel. As Peter says in 1 Peter 2:9, we are “***...a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.***” So, this passage, if it applies to anybody, it applies to us, not some modern-day nation. 2 Chronicles 7:14 was not first spoken to George Washington, it was spoken to King Solomon. So, when I referred to some of what we are facing as a nation and as a city earlier, there’s not a lot I

can do about some of those things. But there is something I can do about me. And that's what we plan on looking at today. We aren't focusing on the speck in our nation's eye, but we're paying attention primarily to the log in our own eye. It starts with us.

So, with this said, let's look at the REQUIREMENTS this morning and then move along to God's RESPONSE next week, if the Lord wills. Today, though, we are looking at what God calls his people to do. These are the conditions. We are free to choose, but the blessings in this passage are conditional.

I. And we start with HUMILITY.

The first requirement is that we **"humble ourselves."** Remember, as we learned from Adam and Eve a few weeks ago, it's pride that often gets us into sin in the first place. We start feeling confident, we start feeling wise in our own eyes. I know what God says about this, but I know better, so we rationalize, we justify, and we sin. We know what God says, but we have feelings. In my arrogance, I think I know better. I think I can get away with this.

When we humble ourselves, though, we admit that God is God and we are not. We surrender. We acknowledge that God is our Lord, that he has every right to rule over us. We are giving God control of our lives. We are allowing God to take the wheel.

In the New Testament, we know from 1 Peter 5:5 that, **"...God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."** And as Jesus himself says in Matthew 23:12, **"Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."** So, first of all, if we learn anything from 2 Chronicles 7:14, we have the reminder that as God's people we please him by humbling ourselves before him.

II. The next condition given here is that we PRAY.

We might describe prayer as humility in action. When we pray, we acknowledge God as being more powerful than we are. We come to him asking, because we know that he can provide what we are lacking. Most of us are pretty good at asking for things. But there is always room for improvement. As I mentioned earlier, I look at what's going on in the world right now, and I'm at a loss. I don't even know what to be praying for. When I struggle, I try to go back to scripture. We might use the Lord's sample prayer as an outline – praise, thanksgiving for the basics of life, and then asking for forgiveness.

Or, we might even look to Solomon's prayer. If we go back to 2 Chronicles 6:14, in his public prayer King Solomon said, **"...O Lord, the God of Israel, there is no god like You in heaven or on earth, keeping covenant and showing lovingkindness to Your servants who walk before You with all their heart."** This is the praise. He continues with a request (in verses 16-17), **"Now therefore, O Lord, the God of Israel, keep with Your servant David, my father, that which You have promised him, saying, 'You shall not lack a man to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your sons take heed to their way, to walk in My law as you have walked before Me.' Now therefore, O Lord, the God of Israel, let Your word be confirmed which You have spoken to Your servant David."** Solomon, then, prays that God would remember his promises. And so, he's basically praying scripture back to God. What Solomon did, we can do.

In terms of government, Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:1-2, **"First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we**

may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. That's a pretty good prayer, isn't it? We can pray this prayer for presidents, and governors, and mayors. We don't need to agree with somebody before we pray for them. I can pray for an evil king, and I can pray for a good king. Our prayer is that we might ***“lead tranquil and quiet lives in all godliness and dignity.”*** This leads us to the third responsibility...

III. ...because the third requirement or condition is that we **SEEK GOD'S FACE.**

To ***“seek”*** is to look for something eagerly. We had a cell phone go missing in our family this week. It fell out of a pocket on a bike ride. We tore the house apart, we retraced steps, we called and visited places we had been. We then checked our neighborhood group on NextDoor, and sure enough, somebody found it in the grass near a bus stop, she picked it up and posted it, and we were reunited with the phone very quickly. We were seeking that phone.

So also, we are to seek God's face. We are looking for something of great value, the treasure buried in a field, the pearl of great price. We rearrange our schedule and priorities until we find it, and in this case, the one we are looking for is God. We seek his face. And as Jesus promises, when we ask, seek, and knock, we will receive, and find, and the door will be opened. In Psalm 105, we are told to, ***“Seek the Lord and His strength; [to] seek His face continually.”*** Or, as God says in Jeremiah 29:13, ***“You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.”*** In the New Testament, Paul will go on to explain that we were at one time far away from God, ***“But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”*** We seek God's face, and we find him in Jesus. We are brought near to God by his blood. And the more we seek his face, the more we become like him. This is what Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 3:18 when he says, ***“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”*** When we admire the Lord, when we seek his face, we become what we are looking for. We are transformed. We aren't just praying to God, but we are looking for him.

IV. **So, we humble ourselves, we pray, we seek his face, and the last part of this is that we TURN FROM OUR WICKED WAYS.**

And it seems that the order might be significant. We humble ourselves before God. This allows us to come to God in prayer. And as we seek his face, we see our sin for what it is, and we turn away from it. There's a progression here, and it doesn't start with repentance, but it ends with repentance. Knowing God leads to a changed life, not the other way around. We might say that repentance is the result of looking for God.

We humble ourselves, we pray, we seek God's face, and this causes us to see sin in our own lives more clearly. We don't look for sin in others' lives, but we confess our own sins, and we turn away. We turn from our wicked ways. And turning from our wicked ways is a condition for what comes next. We can't hold on to sin in our lives and expect that God will bless us in some way. And so, if we're doing something we know is wrong, we turn away from it. We reject it. We stop. We ask for forgiveness. If we've been working on an intimate relationship outside of marriage, we turn away from it. If we've been slacking off at work whenever we think we can get away with it, we turn away from that. If we've been snapping at people in our own family, we make a decision to change that behavior, and we start reacting with kindness instead. These are choices we make. The closer we get to God, the farther away we get from sin. We ***“lay aside the old self”*** (as Paul says in Ephesians 4:22), and we ***“put on the new self.”***

Conclusion:

We started today by thinking about some of the terrible things that are happening all around us, and we've looked at a passage that is often thrown out as a solution. We hope to look at God's response to all of this next week. But for now, instead of getting overwhelmed, let's look at ourselves. I can't fix the nation. I can't solve the violence in Madison right now. But you know what we CAN do? We can humble ourselves, we can pray, we can seek God's face, and we can turn from our wicked ways. We are the ones who have been called by His name. And as His people, all of these things are doable.

As we close this part of our service, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

We praise you for being the one and only Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth. We look at the world around us, and our hearts are broken when we see death, and disease, and anger, and violence. We might not know exactly what to ask for, but we know that you are wise and you are good. And so we ask that you would intervene in some way. We pray for peace. We pray that we might be able to lead quiet lives in all godliness and dignity.

We pray that we might always seek your face and that we might pray with all humility. You are God, and we are not. We ask for your patience and mercy and we turn away from sin. Sin has a grip on this world, and we are not immune. And so we pray that we might always have the wisdom and courage to find and to take the way of escape.

Thank you for giving us opportunities to help. Thank you for abundant resources. We pray that as we serve, the world might see you through each of us.

We come to you this morning in the name of your Son, Jesus. Lord, come quickly. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com