

Responding to the Times

2 Chron. 7:13-14

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The times we live in are significantly affected by two events in our recent history: (1) 9/11 in 2001 and (2) the economic bust in 2008. The attack on the twin towers on September 11, 2001 changed the culture in America. We went from a more carefree society to a worried society, a careful society, a guarded society. Laws were changed to give the government authority to be much more intrusive in our lives. I'm not saying there was no justification for that; I'm simply making the observation that America is different now. The days of sprinting to the gate and hoping on a plane are over. We are now processed through body scans; our luggage is opened and inspected; and as far as I know our phones track our activities. The economic bust in 2008 has produced a less optimistic, more tentative society. We don't trust the statistics given us because before the 2008 bust the statistics looked good. We were told the prosperity of 2007 would continue on and on and on; and we believed it.

Today most Bible-believing leaders anticipate another hit at some point. Why? Because the response to the first two hits has not been the kind of response that would avert another chastening. Instead of turning to God, the trend is toward more wickedness. When God's judgements came upon Israel, it came in waves. In 732 BC Assyria attacked the Northern Kingdom and took captives from the tribes of Gad, Reuben and the half-tribe of Manasseh to Mesopotamia (2 Kings 15:29). It was ten years later in 722 BC that Samaria fell and the Northern tribe came to an end. The Southern Kingdom (also known as Judah) watched all that but also followed a trend away from Jehovah. They had some periodic revivals along the way, but in the end fell under the same spiritual decline that the Northern Kingdom did. In 605 BC the Babylonians attacked and put Judah under tribute. That was a wave of judgement. Eight years later in 597 BC another wave of judgement hit (Jerm. 52:28).¹ And in another attack the temple was destroyed in 586 BC.² The point of all that, is to say that the hits came in waves. Why would God do that? He did it to give Israel opportunity to repent. The space of time between each event was a chance to get things right and avert the next wave of judgement. Israel did not avail herself of that opportunity.

Where was all that difficulty coming from? It was coming from God Himself, the one who had chosen Israel in the first place. But when the nation was formed God gave them this warning in Deut. 4:25-31 *"When you beget children and grandchildren and have grown old in the land, and act corruptly and make a carved image in the form of anything, and do evil in the sight of the LORD your God to provoke Him to anger, 26 I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you will soon utterly perish from the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess; you will not prolong your days in it, but will be utterly destroyed. 27 And the LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD will*

¹ CAPTIVITY (from Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Copyright (c) 1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers).

² CAPTIVITY (from Fausset's Bible Dictionary, Electronic Database Copyright (c)1998 by BibleSoft).

*drive you. 28 And there you will serve gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell. 29 But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul. 30 When you are in distress, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, when you turn to the LORD your God and obey His voice 31 (for the LORD your God is a merciful God), He will not forsake you nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers which He swore to them.*³

So here eight centuries before it happened, God gave this warning. Forgetting God and going their own way would result in captivity. But with the warning was a promise. Verse 29 *“But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul.”* The grace of God flows in the Old Testament like that. It’s not available in its fullness like it is in the New Testament; but it is clearly there. God is God in both Old and New Testament. His nature does not change. Mal 3:6 *“For I am the LORD, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.”* The terms of the Old Covenant were very different from the New Covenant. The book of Hebrews points that out. But the God behind those covenants is the same.

Now turn with me to the text in 2 Chron. 7:12-14 *“Then the LORD appeared to Solomon by night, and said to him: ‘I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for Myself as a house of sacrifice. When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among My people, 14 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 I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.’”*

The context is shortly after the dedication of the temple. It was the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. At that dedication Israel came before God in humility and gratitude. They worshiped the Lord with sincere hearts and the glory of God came down. I’m not sure if it was that night or one shortly after that in which the Lord appeared to Solomon probably in a dream. The text simply says, *“Then the LORD appeared to Solomon by night...”* In that dream God assured Solomon that He had heard his prayers.

Notice the two actions of God in this passage. On the one hand, He is the one who shuts up heaven and there is not rain, commands the locusts to devour the land, and sends pestilence among who? *“My people”*. On the other hand, He is the one who hears the prayers of His people, forgives their sin, and heals their land. What lies in between those two actions? *“...if My people who are called by My name will...”* This is the key element. It is the same God in both cases.

Why would a God of love send pestilence upon His own people? Why would He shut up the heavens to them? God only does something like that to get His people right with Him. It is an act of love to turn them from destruction. It’s not that He loses His temper and then strikes out in anger. The only real hope for them getting right at that point is for Him to send that kind of pressure.

³ All Scripture quotes are in New King James Version unless indicated otherwise.

My focus today is on the response here that brings relief. God says, “*If My people...*” and then tells us exactly what we are to do under His hand of chastening. Four things are prescribed: (1) Humble themselves (2) Pray (3) Seek God’s Face (4) Turn from wickedness. I want to talk about each of those during the remainder of this message. But first consider with me who this message is for: “*If My people...*” This is the response God wants from His people. If I were to ask who thinks America is experiencing judgement from God, I suspect that most of us would raise our hands. My concern for us is that we might think that the people who need to humble themselves, pray, seek the face of God, and turn from evil is the politicians and the unbelievers in our society that are pushing for ungodly agendas. That is not the people this passage is directed to. God is not saying that if the society around us would humble themselves and start writing godly laws, then everything would be fine. “*If My people...*” The statement is about the people of God. The world around us wouldn’t have a clue as to how to seek God’s face. They don’t know their left hand from the right when it comes to these things. It’s you and me that need to respond in this way.

I find it very comfortable to set up a “them and us” dichotomy in my mind. The “them” is those ungodly people in America who have a political agenda contrary to biblical truth. The “us” is Christians who want a wholesome, God-fearing society. So with that dichotomy, what needs to happen is this. All those ungodly people in the “them” category need to recognize that we are right and they need to do a 180 on their agenda. That is a tempting position to take. It protects my pride and puts me in the winners’ circle.

I think a more appropriate position is this. The “*My people*” in the text applied to our context is you and me. We are the people God is talking about in 2Chron. 7:14. “*If My people will...then I will...*” God is not waiting on the unbelievers of America to get their act together; He is not waiting on the Supreme Court to point the nation in the right direction: He is waiting on the church to rise up and be the light in the darkness that she is called to be.

If we, the people of God, had walked in the fullness of the Spirit; if we had done it all right—America would be saved and we wouldn’t be in this mess. The culture would have been turned, one individual at a time, in the right direction. Before we pull the splinter out of the unbelievers’ eye we must deal with the beam in our own eye. We have a commission to proclaim the good news to every creature. We have a mandate from God to be salt and light. We have to take some responsibility for that not happening the way it should have happened. This thing has gone into the ditch under our watch. As a pastor, I am particularly responsible. Can I take that responsibility and come before the Lord in humility and prayer? Maybe we Christian leaders need to apologize to the world for not being the light we should have been? Maybe a more humble approach would get better results. I just don’t want to be deceived into thinking I can put this all on somebody else.

So I apply to myself, first and foremost.

What are those four actions that God told His people to do in times like these?

1. *Humble themselves.* We talked about that some last week.

Am I willing to get things right with other people? When I bring my gift to the altar, is there somebody that comes to mind—that old uncomfortable feeling that lets me know way down deep that I need to humble myself in that relationship and make peace to the fullest extent possible.

Can I admit it when I'm wrong? Do I try to justify myself? Can I confess my faults, not just to God, but to other people as well? God already knows they are there; it's not too hard to tell Him about it. But it's so tempting to present ourselves a little better than we are to other people. Can I take responsibility for my contribution to the problem or am I shoving all the blame on the other person?

Can I let the other party choose or does it have to be my way? There are a lot of things that are just personal preference. In the big picture either way will work for those. Sometimes there are values that can't be compromised; but even in those cases we can hear the other person out and look for some middle ground.

How do I talk about people when they're not present? Am I building them up or am I tearing them down? Are my words gracious or are they judgmental? Have I elevated myself in the conversation at the expense of somebody else? Pride verses humility. Something we all deal with on a daily basis.

Most of the opportunities to humble ourselves are with other people.

But we also learn to humble ourselves before God. We do that by recognizing our own limitation; by acknowledging His all-sufficiency; by confessing our sins to Him and looking to Him for power to overcome them.

When Daniel learned that it was time according to Scripture for Israel to return to Palestine, he began to pray for that to happen. Turn with me to Daniel 9. I want you to get a sense of what he says in that prayer before God. This is perhaps the godliest man on earth at that time. Yet listen to the way he identifies with others and acknowledges the justness of God's judgments. That is a model prayer for our times.

Dan 9:1-19

In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the lineage of the Medes, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans -- 2 in the first year of his reign I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the LORD through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. 3 Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes. 4 And I prayed to the LORD my God, and made confession, and said, "O Lord, great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and mercy with those who love Him, and with those who keep His commandments, 5 we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments. 6 Neither have we heeded Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings and our princes, to our fathers and all the people of the land. 7 O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face, as it is this day -- to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, those near and those far off in all the countries to which You have driven them, because of the unfaithfulness which they have committed

against You. 8 "O Lord, to us belongs shame of face, to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, because we have sinned against You. 9 To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against Him. 10 We have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God, to walk in His laws, which He set before us by His servants the prophets. 11 Yes, all Israel has transgressed Your law, and has departed so as not to obey Your voice; therefore the curse and the oath written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against Him. 12 And He has confirmed His words, which He spoke against us and against our judges who judged us, by bringing upon us a great disaster; for under the whole heaven such has never been done as what has been done to Jerusalem. 13 "As it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come upon us; yet we have not made our prayer before the LORD our God, that we might turn from our iniquities and understand Your truth. 14 Therefore the LORD has kept the disaster in mind, and brought it upon us; for the LORD our God is righteous in all the works which He does, though we have not obeyed His voice. 15 And now, O Lord our God, who brought Your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and made Yourself a name, as it is this day -- we have sinned, we have done wickedly! 16 "O Lord, according to all Your righteousness, I pray, let Your anger and Your fury be turned away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people are a reproach to all those around us. 17 Now therefore, our God, hear the prayer of Your servant, and his supplications, and for the Lord's sake cause Your face to shine on Your sanctuary, which is desolate. 18 O my God, incline Your ear and hear; open Your eyes and see our desolations, and the city which is called by Your name; for we do not present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies. 19 O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your name."

The second action back in 2Chron 7:14 is to

2. Pray. This is a hard one for us Americans. Most of us have to work at keeping that in a place of priority in our lives. Phil 4:6-7 "*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; 7 and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.*" The promise of peace follows the willingness to pray. The old hymn puts it well: What a Friend We have in Jesus. One verse says, "Oh what peace we often forfeit, Oh what needless pain we bear; All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer."⁴

Are there matters that you're worrying about? Take it to the Lord in prayer. Cast those cares on the Lord. James 5:13 "*Is anyone among you (in trouble) suffering? Let him pray.*" I don't know why I do it, but sometimes I catch myself just tolerating things instead of praying about them.

In Isaiah 56:7 God says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer." As a pastor, I try to honor that statement in our church. One of the first meetings we established was

⁴ *The New Church Hymnal*, Ralph Carmichael, Carl Seal, et al. eds. (Lexicon Music, Inc, 1976) p. 302.

a prayer meeting on Wednesday evening. I have been very encouraged by your response to that invitation. And I know there are lots of other times that you're praying. But we want to encourage each other in making this a house of prayer. I encourage you to pray for one another during the table time. You're not only free to do that but encouraged to do it. We want to be a people of prayer.

Prayer is very closely tied to humility. The more God works into us biblical humility the more we will pray—because genuine humility knows that we can only do it by God's grace. The school of humility teaches us that we can't do it by ourselves, but we have a God that is able to do exceedingly, abundantly above all that we ask or think.

Closely associated with prayer is the third exhortation in our text.

3. *"and seek My face"*

What does that mean? What does it mean to seek the face of God?

It goes beyond simply asking for provision—beyond simply coming to God to get our needs met.

It is the pursuit of a relationship with God. Abraham became a friend of God. Moses followed God in a way that God would speak to him face to face.⁵ Paul's goal was to know Him!⁶ Seeking the face of God is aimed at knowing God.

A wonderful thing happens when we seek His face. The hand of the Lord comes upon us and empowers us for service. In Acts 11 there were Christians going forth to witness. Verse 21 says *"And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord."* We need God's hand on us in that way. We need the power of God in operation to deal with the challenges all around us. But we don't just seek the power; we seek the face of God and He sends the power.

The text tells us to humble ourselves, and pray, and seek My face, and

4. *Turn from their wicked ways.*

In the Garden, the serpent made a subtle suggestion to Eve. Essentially he told her she could have it both ways. She could continue to eat of the Tree of Life and the forbidden fruit at the same time. The result was spiritual death. Jesus said, *"No man can serve two masters."* Turning to the Lord, means turning from things that grieve the Holy Spirit. There is a lot that glitters out there in the world—a lot of things to turn us aside from seeking the face of God. I wish that we could just decide that one time and it's all taken care of. But we continually turn from the spirit of the world to the Spirit of the Lord. We continually say no to those things that would rob us of God's best.

One reason we come together like this is to encourage each other to continue in the right direction. None of us have yet arrived. But we are headed in the right direction. We have not arrived at our destination. But we're on the right plane. By God's grace we will get there.

God's promise in our text is three-fold.

1. *then I will hear from heaven*

⁵ Exodus 33:11; Num. 12:6-8; Deut. 34:10.

⁶ Phil. 3:10.

God is listening. He is such a loving Heavenly Father that His ear is cocked toward us, just waiting to hear our cry and do us good. This is a powerful encouragement toward prayer: God is listening. *“Ask and you shall receive. Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door will open”* (Matt. 7:7-8).

“then I will hear from heaven”: that sets the solution in motion.

2. and will forgive their sin.

God grants that forgiveness on the basis of what Jesus did for us on the cross. Not on the basis of our promises to do better, not on the basis of our self-loathing for having sinned—but on the basis of His great mercy and the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

1 John 1:7-9 *“...if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. 8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”* (NIV).

Notice the order in these promises from the text.

1st God would hear our prayer.

2nd He would forgive our sins. He would remove the sin obstacle so that He could send the blessing. He does not ignore the sin and send the blessing. He deals with the sin so that the blessing falls on good ground.

3. and heal their land.

In this agrarian society, healing the land meant meeting all their needs. If the land was doing well, then they had a good harvest, and therefore all the provisions they need. In a draught, the land was dry and cracked and unfruitful. But an outpouring of rain would change all that. The spiritual application of this is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit which produces abundant fruit (Joel 2:23-29).

My objective this morning is to point out the response God is looking for from His people when they are in circumstances like we have in America. Of course, it only helps to know that if we actually do it. How does God want you to respond to 2Chron 7:14? In what way would He have you humble yourself? Is He speaking anything to you about prayer? Are you stirred in your heart to seek His face? Is there anything you need to turn from as you turn toward God?

Pray