

2 Chronicles 7:13-16

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[0 : 0 0] This morning we were reflecting on the sobering reality that we belong. We live in a nation that has in great measure lost its way. As in the time of the judges, everyone does what is right in his own eyes, with no concern or even any conception of the call to do what is good and right in the eyes of the Lord. Indeed, if we were to suggest that that was important to so many, it would be thought at best quaint and at worst ridiculous that such a challenge would be laid before men and women.

To do what is good and right in the eyes of the Lord. And as we were noting and giving some thought to this morning, symptomatic of this reality, our Parliament in the course of just one week's business has legalized same-sex marriage and begun again to consider legislation that would legalize assisted suicide. And with that as the backdrop to our consideration of what God has to say, this morning we posed two questions. What's going on and what can we do? And in the morning we tried to answer the first question in the light of the description that we are given of Israel in the time of the judges. In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

And this evening we want to try and answer the second question, what can we do? What can we do? And we want to endeavor, try and answer that question in the light of a promise given by God to His people through King Solomon as it is recorded for us in the passage that we read in 2 Chronicles chapter 7.

We read from verse 11 through to the end of the chapter. Our concern this evening will really focus from verse 13 through to verse 16, and very particularly on the promise that we find at the very heart of these verses in verse 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 will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. Before we spend some time considering our text, we need to be clear with regard to who this promise is directed to and, by extension, what is its proper use and application today. The promise is directed by God to His people, the people of Israel. The promise was not directed to other nations. It was not a promise that was made to Egypt or to Moab or to Philistia or indeed any other of the nations that existed at the time that God made this promise and directed this promise to His own people, the people of Israel. And I stress that because as we would seek to draw from this and indeed claim this promise and consider the significance of this promise for us today, we need to have that in mind, what about today? And we need to recognize that this is not a promise that God extends to all the nations. It's not a promise, strictly speaking, that is extended to Scotland as a nation. It is rather a promise, and certainly we can say this, to God's people in Scotland or anywhere else for that matter.

And we can also say this, and we hinted at this in the morning as we drew our thoughts to a close, we can also say that in the measure that we as God's people in Scotland lay hold of the promise, the impact of that will be for the benefit of and may even in God's providence result in the healing and transformation of Scotland. But the promise is directed to God's people. It's directed to the church. It's directed to us. And so, it's very pertinent in answering the question, what can we do? What are we to do in the light of what we see around us and indeed within us today that would concern us and perhaps even disturb us? To take the promise, if I can just continue along this line for one further moment, to take the promise that we have here carelessly and without really considering to whom it is directed and for whom it is intended, and to take the promise as the grounds for a call to national repentance in our own country, in Scotland, that would in turn, we would hope, lead to national healing. Because the language that we have lends to that idea when God promises to heal your land. We think, well, that's what we want. We want our land to be healed. And so, here we have a promise that will result in that healing. But to take this promise and to think that this would be the grounds for this call to national repentance, which, let's face it, most of our fellow citizens would think a very quaint and bizarre call anyway and would pay no attention to such a call. But to take the verse and to use it in that way would, I fear, be both fruitless, for that is not what it is intended for, but perhaps more importantly and more disturbingly, a distraction. That's okay. That's fine. Let's have a chat afterwards.

[6 : 17] Very good. Well, thank you for that concern. Very good. Okay.

Okay. So, to pick up on the thread of what I was saying, it's important for us not to see this promise and to use it in that way, tempting as it might be. And one of the main reasons is that if we are to do that, it would be a distraction from what we are called to do and what we are able to do and what we are required to do by God, and that is to get our own house in order, to put it in that way.

To use the language that we used in the morning, we are not to be principally concerned with fixing Scotland, much as we would like Scotland to be fixed, but laying claim to God's promise that will in turn lead to fixing ourselves or having ourselves as God's people renewed and restored.

I was struck by an image on the news just a few days ago of an elderly woman protesting in Kiev, in the Ukraine. I'm sure you're aware of the troubles that there have been and the protests that there have been over a number of weeks now in the Ukraine. And this elderly woman was part of the protest, and she was holding up a mirror. And the purpose of holding up this mirror was that she was holding it up to the soldiers who had been sent by the authorities to quell and perhaps some would say repress the protesting masses. And you can imagine, perhaps, the idea of holding up a mirror rather than having a stick or a stone. The mirror served as a means of, I imagine, I presume, that the soldiers would reflect on themselves and what they were doing as they would seek to repress the crowds that had gathered. And that image, I think, in some way helps us to understand what this promise is intended to do. This promise, or certainly can do, it can serve as a mirror in which we see ourselves, rather than as a stick with which to beat our sickly and increasingly godless society. Now, before we consider the passage that contains the promise to God's people, it will help to be reminded of who the original audience of the book of Chronicles were. The book of Chronicles was written for those Jews who had returned from

Babylon to Jerusalem following their exile there. And the picture that is painted of that group of returning exiles is really of a group of people who were perhaps, and I imagine when they first returned, full of enthusiasm and excitement and passion for this return to Jerusalem, but very soon discovered that things really weren't as they had hoped. And they became dispirited and disheartened. And even as they began to lay the foundations for the temple, and they realized that really this temple wasn't going to be anything like the one that had been destroyed, what we find is a group of people who are very disheartened, and indeed a people who are experiencing pressure and hostility and opposition from those among whom they are living. And it is to those people that the book is written. And I think to know that is helpful because it's not so different, the circumstances in which those people found themselves to, in some measure, the circumstances and the temptations that face God's people in Scotland today. So, in our passage, God is speaking to His people. He speaks through Solomon, and though Solomon, of course, is intended to take note of the message as the king, very importantly, but the message really is for the people delivered through Solomon. And what is God's message? That is where we need to get to.

[10 : 46] What was it that God had to say to His people in Solomon's day, to the returning exiles, and to us today? I think we can identify three things that God does in these verses from verse 13 through to verse 16. The first thing that God does is that He anticipates the problem that they will face, or the problems that they will face. There in verse 13, He anticipates what will happen, what challenges they will meet, what crisis will confront them in the future. He anticipates the problems. But then what God also does is identify the solution, and that solution is two-pronged or has two elements to it.

It involves what the people must do, and it also involves what God will do in response to what the people do. And then thirdly, God goes on to grant the people an assurance. So, these are the three elements that we want to think about this evening. First of all, then God anticipates the problem.

Verse 13, And then He goes on. What are the problems that God anticipates will afflict and confront God's people?

No rain, plagues, locusts. I guess all of these come under the category of what we would call natural disasters. But we need to look beyond the details or the examples given of trouble or crisis to their cause. What is the root cause of these disasters? Who is the agent responsible for the trials anticipated by God for God's people? Well, the answer is very clear. God Himself. He identifies Himself as the one who will send these things. When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or, implicit, I command locusts to devour the land, or I send a plague among My people. So, God clearly is saying that this is what will happen. This is what I will do in a given set of circumstances.

These natural disasters, as we would call them, would be, in the language of your insurance policies, they would be, quite literally, acts of God. Now, this is not perhaps the answer that we might have expected. Perhaps it is. Certainly not the one we might have hoped for. But it does drive us to the next necessary question. Why? Why would God do this to His people? Why would a God who we know to be from the testimony of Scripture, and indeed from our own experience, a God who is loving and gracious, who loves His people so much more deeply than we love ourselves, why would He do this? Why would He do this? Well, the answer is also clear. And the answer, and we'll see how this is confirmed or reaffirmed in a moment, the answer is that these would be acts of judgment on the part of God. Now, that this is the answer to the question why becomes irrefutably clear when we appreciate that God's message, here in chapter 7, is a response to Solomon's prayer in chapter 6. And we don't have time to go through all of his prayer, but we'll notice one example of this where we can see how God is responding to what Solomon has prayed, and what Solomon prays makes it very clear that these natural disasters, if we want to call them that, are acts of God, and they are acts of judgment upon His people.

[14 : 34] For example, in verse 26 and 27 of Solomon's prayer of dedication, in the way that the chronicler records these, well, the prayer of Solomon and then the Lord appearing to Solomon, it might appear that these events occur almost one after the other. But from the order of events that we can establish, not just on the basis of what we have in Chronicles, but from Kings as well, there would seem to have been several years between Solomon's prayer of dedication and the Lord appearing to Solomon. The reason we know that is because we're told in verse 11 that it was when Solomon had finished the temple of the Lord and the royal palace, and about 13 years passed between the dedication of the temple and the construction of the completion of the palace. So, several years have passed, but the point is that nonetheless, God is responding to this prayer of dedication.

And back to verses 26 and 27 of chapter 6, what do we read? And this is Solomon praying to God, and Solomon prays, when the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and when they pray towards this place and confess your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants.

So, Solomon is contemplating the same circumstances of the heavens being shut up, of there being drought, and Solomon explicitly recognizes that when that happens, it will be because of the sin of the people.

And God responds, well, when that does happen, and so clearly it is in the context of God acting in judgment upon His people. Well, we can easily enough perhaps describe what is understood and what God intends by what He says here in these words directed to Solomon, but perhaps a little bit more difficult to apply that to God's people today. Does God still judge His people today? Does He still judge His people today by the same means, by means of natural disasters? I would suggest that that is not the manner in which He would certainly ordinarily judge His people. Indeed, perhaps it's not a way that He would judge His people at all today. And why would I say that, other than perhaps because that's what I'd like to think was the case? Well, I think one of the reasons why we could suggest, at the very least suggest why God does not judge in this way, is that a natural disaster is not fit for purpose in the matter of judging God's people today, because we are no longer a physical nation contained within physical boundaries. Now, when God's people were a physical nature within physical boundaries, and they disobeyed God, and they rebelled against God, then a natural disaster was an appropriate means of God demonstrating His displeasure with His people. It was targeted to those that He was intending to target, if we can use that language. But today, of course, that's not the case. God's people are not made up of any one given nation, and so this would no longer be an appropriate means by which to exercise judgment upon God's people, which rather then begs the question, well, how then does God judge His people today? Now, we have significant material that would help us answer that question, particularly in the New Testament, given that our concern is with the New Testament age. But I think while we're not going to explore all of that, I think what I can say is that largely, though perhaps not exclusively,

God judges His people through the application of the principle of reaping what we sow, and of God giving us what we want. If we want to sin, then we are left to sin, but we will suffer the consequences, certainly the temporal consequences of our sin. If we refuse to be a light to the world, then we will live in a dark world. If we fail to be salt, then we will have to endure living in a world that is corrupt and rotten. These are the consequences of our sin. If we show little appetite for God, then God will withdraw His presence and blessing from us. And so, in these ways, God does judge us. I'm not saying these are the only ways. I'm not limiting the means that God may choose to judge His people, but I certainly think that these are the ways in which He ordinarily exercises judgment upon His people.

[19:17] I think we can reasonably conclude, and I'm conscious that this is quite a delicate matter to try and get our heads around, and we have to be careful about making bold statements, but I think we can reasonably conclude that we are, to some degree, as God's people under the judgment of God in Scotland today. That doesn't mean that God has wholly withdrawn His presence or blessing amongst us, for that evidently is not the case, and we thank God for that. But I think there are enough indications that would allow us to suggest that this is indeed our situation. So, God anticipates the problem, but then secondly, we also have God identifying the solution in the promise that we have, and the solution involves action required on the part of God's people and action promised on the part of God. What do God's people need to do? And in considering what God's people need to do, what we need to do, we can divide the answer between the what and the how. The answer to the question, what are we to do, is one we can give in one word. We are to repent. The language used by God there in verse 14 is language that richly presents different aspects of heartfelt repentance, where we can identify what we might call the order of events that constitute biblical repentance. The first thing that we can find is that biblical repentance involves recognition. There in verse 14, if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, will humble themselves, and humbling oneself involves recognizing and taking responsibility for our sin and acknowledging our accountability to and dependence on God. If we wander through life, deluding ourselves that all is well and failing to humble ourselves before God, as evidence that we are taking our sin seriously, then we will be failing to do that which God indicates is required. Recognition. Let my people humble themselves. But that recognition is then followed by what we might call approach. We are to approach God. And two words or expressions in the promise capture different aspects of this approach to God. Firstly, we are to pray. If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves by my name will humble themselves and pray, and pray. Having recognized our sin, we don't just lament the fact, but make contact with God. We approach God in prayer and seek

His help. But then also, in this matter of approaching God, we are to seek God's face. If my people seek my face. Where the language of seeking God's face goes beyond the idea of simply requesting help in a given predicament, the plague or flood or drought, to a heartfelt desire to know God and to enjoy the favor of God.

And to seek God's face is language that echoes the language of Aaron's blessing, recorded for us in Numbers in chapter 6. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn His face. Heartfelt repentance involves wanting that blessing and seeking that blessing. It goes beyond only a recognition of our need to be forgiven and to have the slate wiped clean. It includes that, but it goes beyond that to this seeking of God's face, seeking God's presence and God's favor. Recognition approach, but also change. If my people turn from their wicked ways, are turning from our wicked ways, and we are all duty-bound to examine ourselves and identify what those wicked ways are, are turning from them is evidence that we have recognized our sin and that we genuinely desire to experience God's forgiveness and favor. This then is what we are to do, but we also need to very briefly comment on the matter of how. And in posing the question how,

I want simply to note that we are to repent in the manner and by the means established or appointed by God. Our approach to God can only be as He has determined. Let me just explain what I mean by that. Notice in verse 15. And having made the promise, God goes on to say, now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place. So, God is saying to the people, you need to pray to me, you need to humble yourself, you need to pray, you need to seek my face, and these are things that you will do in this place. What's the significance of in this place? Well, if we take what is said there in verse 15 and look at it in the light of what is said in verse 12. The Lord appeared to him at night and said, I have heard your prayer and I've chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices. This place, this place that was the place where the people could approach God and come to God and pray in repentance, this place was a place for sacrifices. In the absence of the God-appointed sacrifices, the people could not approach God, they could not repent. They had to repent God's way. And this takes us right back to

Cain and Abel in the Garden of Eden and the need to approach God in God's way. And so too for us, we too must approach God on the grounds of sacrifice. For us, it is the sacrifice of God's own Son who offered His life as a sacrifice for His people. We can only approach God and we can only repent in the name of Jesus. Not as some formula, but in the name of Jesus as we rest in His perfect sacrifice.

[25 : 29] This then is what we are to do. God identifies the solution. It involves what we are to do, but it also identifies what God promises to do when we do repent. And the promise of God is threefold. 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 will heal their land. God promises to hear us when we approach Him in the manner that He has established.

He will hear us. He will hear us when we pray, trusting in the finished work of His Son, Jesus. He will hear us. He will forgive our sin. If we confess our sin, what are we promised? In 1 John chapter 1 and verse 9, if we confess our sin, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. God will forgive us on the grounds of both His faithfulness and His justice. In the light of what Jesus has already done, it is just that God forgive those who seek forgiveness in the name of Jesus. And then also, God promises to heal our land.

And this, of course, referred to the land of Israel and principally, I suspect, referred to deliverance from the physical plagues that had been sent by God. Is there an application for us today? And the attraction of imagining that this is a promise for our land, as in Scotland, is understandable, but I think the groundless. The promise for us is that God will heal His church. He will renew and revive His own people. He will renew and revive us. Now, by saying that, are we suggesting that God is not interested in Scotland? Are we saying that there is no hope for healing for Scotland? Well, by no means.

What we are saying is that the means that God will ordinarily use to heal and bless Scotland or any nation is through His repentant and restored people. And this, of course, lies at the very heart of God's covenant and of God's covenant purposes, to both bless His people and through His people to bless the nations of the world. So, God identifies the solution. He anticipates the problem. He identifies the solution. It involves what we need to do, and it also involves what God will do in response. But then finally, and much more briefly, God grants an assurance. Now, the promise of verse 14 should be more than enough, as our God is, after all, a promise-keeping God. But He is also a God who knows us, and He knows our frailty and our fears and our often timorous faith. And so, He graciously gives us an assurance, an assurance that will answer and respond to any lingering doubts that we might still have. As we ask the question, or as we ponder in our mind, we might not even want to voice the question, but we think the question, will He really hear? Will He actually heal us? Does a promise given thousands of years ago to Solomon really hold for us today in Scotland? These are questions that we might genuinely have, and lingering doubts that might be within us and in our minds. And here we have this great and gracious assurance for any who have or hold such doubts. What does God say there in verse 15 through to verse 16? Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place. I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my name may be there forever. And then very especially the words that follow, my eyes and my heart will always be there. My eyes and my heart will always be there. Now, we might say, but He's talking about the temple, and the temple is gone. And yes, the physical temple is gone, but today God dwells in the midst of His people. And we have the promise, and we have so many promises in that regard, but we have the promise that where two or three are gathered in His name, He is there. He is there. He is here. His eyes and His heart will always be with and on His people. And so we have this gracious assurance given to us that whatever our circumstances, however bad things might be, however disturbed we might be, however concerned we might be, however afraid we might be, however guilty we might be, we can be sure that the eyes of God and the heart of God is always with His people to heed us and to answer us and to help us. And really, in summing things up, what we can say and what we can conclude is that for us as God's people, as individual believers, but very especially here the promise is directed not to individuals, though we can apply it to our own individual circumstances, but directed to God's people corporately. And what we can conclude is that renewal and restoration is within our grasp. It's not something that we simply might hope for. Well,

I hope that happens. You know, I hope things change. I hope things get better. No, these are things that are within our grasp. What we need to do is take God at His Word, to do what God tells us to do, to do so in the manner that He has prescribed, and to do so trusting in the finished work of Jesus in our place.

[31 : 11] And as we do, then we can be sure that God will do His part. He will be faithful to the promise that He makes us and that we have been thinking about very especially this evening. Well, let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we come to You and we pray that You would help us to recognize the need that we have to repent, to humble ourselves, to pray, to seek Your face, to turn from our wicked ways. We pray that You would help us all to examine ourselves with a measure of urgency and seriousness to identify in what ways we are falling short, in what ways we are sinning against You, in what ways we are acting or thinking wickedly, and that we would turn from them. We thank You that we can approach You and seek Your face and seek Your forgiveness. And we thank You that we can do so in the way that You have established, in the way that You have opened in and through Your Son, Jesus, and His death in our place on the cross. And so, we ask that You would help us to constantly and perseveringly and know what it is to come to You seeking Your face and seeking Your forgiveness and that we would experience the forgiveness and the renewal and the healing that Your Word assures us of. We thank You that You are the God who is ever with Your people, that Your eyes and Your heart are ever in this place amongst Your people. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now, let's sing as we draw our service to a close, and we'll sing Psalm 130 on page 173. Psalm 130, and we'll sing the whole of the psalm to the tune, Belmont.

Lord, from the depths I call to You. Lord, hear me from on high, and give attention to my voice when I, for mercy, cry. Psalm 130, the whole of the psalm. We'll stand to sing.

Lord, from the depths I call to You. Lord, hear me from on high, and give attention to my voice.

[33 : 59] Lord, in Your presence who can stand, if You are sin's re-enacted, But yet forgiveness is with you, that we may fear you, Lord.

I wait my soul always for the Lord.

My hope is in His word. More than the watchman waits for dawn.

My soul waits for the Lord. O Israel, put your hope in God.

For mercy is within. And full redemption from their sins.

[36 : 04] His people will redeem. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always.

Amen.