

Heal Our Land
II Chronicles 7:11-22

“I will heal their land.” That’s what the Lord promised Solomon in verse 14, and can we doubt that our land is in great need of healing? Over Memorial Day weekend, 14 Americans died and 58 others were injured in mass shootings, incidents involving 4 or more people. Over the last twenty years, the number of Americans classified as obese has increased from 30% to over 40%. Around 12% of Americans admit to smoking marijuana. And deaths from overdoses of the synthetic opioid fentanyl have increased 279% in the last five years for which we have data. So, in spite of the great freedoms we enjoy, are we really loving our neighbors? Are we even loving ourselves?

And are we loving our wives and children? You know, as more and more Americans cast off the restraints of marriage, they are the ones who have suffered the most. As far back as 1996, the Brookings Institute, which is not by any means noted for its social conservatism, had to admit that, “Since 1970, out-of-wedlock birth rates have soared. In 1965, 24 percent of black infants and 3.1 percent of white infants were born to single mothers. By 1990 the rates had risen to 64 percent for black infants, 18 percent for whites. Every year about one million more children are born into fatherless families. If we have learned any policy lesson well over the past 25 years, it is that for children living in single-parent homes, the odds of living in poverty are great.” Another quarter of a century later, the CDC reports that 40% of all American births are to unmarried women.

So, what should we expect if our culture continues to careen away from its Biblical moorings? Well, what did the Lord tell Solomon would happen if His Old Testament people turned away from Him, forsaking His commandments and rejecting His perfect law of love for God and for other people? God said He would remove the blessings He had bestowed on His people, casting them out of the land which He had given them, and destroying the Temple where He had promised to dwell with His people forever. And as the wealth and safety we Americans have come to take for granted slips through our fingers, can we doubt that the same sort of thing can happen to us? Can we doubt that our sin, in one way or another, is destroying so much of what we hold dear?

“Heal our land.” For years and years, American Christians have been crying out for the healing that God has promised in today’s passage. But we aren’t the only people who have stood in need of such healing and renewal. Back in 1949, Great Britain was suffering the aftereffects of the Second World War. In one generation they had fallen from being a world-wide empire with the most powerful navy on earth to an impoverished country, having to ration even the most basic of needs. Scotland was much poorer than England, and the people of the tiny Isle of Lewis, off the northwest coast of Scotland, well, they were still depending on fishing, weaving, and subsistence farming to get by.

And these Presbyterians were as poor religiously as they were economically. In 1949, the local Presbytery went so far as to issue a proclamation deploring the “low state of vital religion . . . throughout the land . . . and the present dispensation of Divine displeasure . . . due to growing carelessness toward public worship . . . and the growing influence of the spirit of pleasure which has taken growing hold of the younger generation.” Does any of that sound familiar?

But what could the tiny Presbyterian congregations of postwar Lewis, or of modern Southwest Mississippi for that matter, possibly do about such tremendous religious, cultural and social problems? Well, what did God tell His ancient people to do in verse 14? To humble themselves and pray. And

notice that God isn't talking to those who are outside the church, those who have given themselves over to despair or depression or depravity. No, God specifically tells His people, those who are called by His name to humble themselves and pray.

And that's exactly what one small Presbyterian congregation on that tiny Island of Lewis began to do back in 1949. In fact, it was two sisters – one was 82, and one was 84 and blind at that – who began to pray. And eventually, one of them had a vision of their churches filled with young people. When she told her pastor about her vision, he asked her what they should do about it. And she said, "Give yourself to prayer; give yourself to waiting upon God. Get your elders and deacons together and spend at least two nights a week waiting upon God in prayer. If you will do that at your end of the parish, my sister and I will do it at our end of the parish from ten o'clock at night until two or three o'clock in the morning."

That's what our Scots Presbyterian cousins did when they faced the same kind of social, economic, and cultural problems as ours. They trusted God enough to take His promises seriously: "If my people who are called by name will humble themselves and pray..." Do we really believe those promises? Do we believe enough to pray, to pray for a real revival in this place, and at this time?

But let's be honest: most of the time when we pray for revival, our desire is focused outwardly. Most of the time, what we really want is for other people – you know, "Those people" – to get their lives straight: to quit smoking dope and get a job and support their families, and of course, to start coming to church.

Oh, but the Presbytery on the Isle of Lewis was quite specific about the content of the prayers that were needed in Scotland in 1949. For their proclamation went on: "We call upon every individual as before God to examine his or her life in light of that responsibility which attends to us all and that happily in divine mercy we may be visited with a spirit of repentance and turn again to the Lord whom we have so grieved."

For that's the problem, isn't it? Revival isn't something *they* need: it's something that *we* need. Remember: in verse 14, God told *His* people, who are called by *His* name to seek His face and to turn from our wicked ways. God wasn't talking to the unbelieving foreigners. He was talking to His people. He was talking to us.

And that's why the context of this promise is so important. For as verse 12 explains, this promise is actually God's answer to a prayer that Solomon prayed, a prayer which takes up most of chapter 6, from verse 14 all the way to verse 42. And in that prayer, Solomon was asking God to hear very specific kinds of prayer: those which were offered in the magnificent new Temple that had just been completed. In fact, Solomon asked the Lord to hear His people's prayers wherever they were, if they just directed those prayers toward the Temple of the Lord.

So, what was so significant about the Temple? And why did Solomon want to tie the effectiveness of people's prayers to that particular place? Because he knew that many of their prayers would arise, in one way or another, from the people's need for forgiveness of their sins. Back in chapter six, he presented several different reasons that the people would pray such prayers, some of which God repeats in verse 13 of chapter 7. Yes, the people would pray in times of drought, but those times would often come because the people had sinned against God (6:26). Yes, the people would pray when disease or locusts struck the land (6:28) – but in those times Solomon asked the Lord to forgive the people so that they might fear Him and walk according to God's ways (6:30-31).

And that's exactly why, if the prayers of God's Old Testament people were to be effective, they had to be directed toward the Temple, the only place where sacrifices for sin could be offered. And God confirmed the importance of the Temple in verse 12: "I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for Myself as a house of sacrifice." In fact, God made His selection clear as He sent down fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices offered in the Temple at the beginning of this chapter.

So, what does such a focus on the Old Testament Temple mean for us? Well, we know that the life and ministry of Jesus is the complete fulfillment of all the symbolism found in every part of the Temple and its worship. We know that Jesus is the Bread of Life, given so that we might live abundantly in relationship with the Father. We know that Jesus is the Light of the World, the only reliable source of truth and the only infallible guide for faith and life. Most importantly, we know that it is only the sacrifice of Christ on the cross that can wash away our sins.

And so, just as Solomon's people could only expect to be heard if they offered their prayers in or toward the temple, it is only prayers that are offered in the name of Christ, only prayers that flow from a humble understanding of our own sin, only prayers that rely on His cross alone for forgiveness, only prayers that come from a repentant heart, a heart that turns away from sin and turns to Christ alone, only prayers that seek His face, confessing Him as both Savior and Lord, and intending to follow Him in every aspect of our lives – those are the prayers that we know will be heard and answered.

And so, even if we have prayed for revival in our land, even if our prayers are earnest and sincere, do they come from truly humble and repentant hearts? Simply put, are we willing to give up the same kinds of sins that we condemn in the increasingly godless, wicked world all around us?

Now, I know that we polite Presbyterians would never get involved in a mass shooting. But Jesus told us that anger and hatred are just as bad as murder. So, do we harbor hatred in our hearts, holding on to grudges, refusing to forgive those who have hurt us? Or are we willing to live by Jesus' uncompromising law of love, taking the initiative to pursue reconciliation, reaching out to those whom we have hurt or to those who have hurt us?

And no, we respectable Presbyterians would never do something so self-destructive as to use street drugs. But do we depend on alcohol to get us through the day instead of relying on the Lord? Are we allowing our electronic distractions to pull our time or attention away from the Lord or the needs of others? Do we withdraw into our imaginary worlds, cutting ourselves off from God and from His people?

And of course we Evangelical Presbyterians deplore the cultural chaos that the sexual revolution has unleashed on our society. But are we truly willing to help its victims? How welcoming are we of the mothers who have been abandoned to raise their children on their own? How willing are we to invite fatherless children to share in our own family life?

Oh, sure, we want God to heal our land. But to do we want this just so that everyone else will behave – so that we can keep ignoring them and their problems? Or are we willing to humble ourselves, confessing our own sin, our own need of God's saving grace? Are we willing to cry out to God for those who continue to be blind and deaf to His love and grace? Are we willing to seek Christ's face, to follow Him, to get involved in a self-sacrificial way in the problems of those who have made a mess of their lives, to turn from our self-centered, wicked ways and to walk the way of the cross?

Well, what might happen if earnest prayer for revival were to be combined with such true confession and repentance? We don't have to wonder, for Evangelist Duncan Campbell tells us how

that Presbyterian pastor on the Island of Lewis took seriously the challenge issued by those two octogenarian sisters:

“So, the minister called his leaders together and for several months they waited upon God in a barn among the straw. During this time they plead one promise, ‘For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon dry ground: I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring’ (Isaiah 44:3). This went on for at least three months. Nothing happened. But one night a young deacon rose and began reading from Psalm 24: ‘Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive the blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation’ (Psalm 24:3-5). Closing his Bible, he addressed the minister and other office bearers in words that sound crude in English, but not so crude in our Gaelic language, ‘It seems to me so much humbug. To be waiting as we are waiting, to be praying as we are praying, when we ourselves are not rightly related to God.’ Then, he lifted his hands toward heaven and prayed, ‘O God, are my hands clean? Is my heart pure?’”

That’s the key question for all of us modern Mississippi Christians: not how wicked the world around us may be, but how wicked are our own hearts. And it was in such a moment of humble, repentant prayer that the fire of God began to fall on the Isle of Lewis. And it was not long before hundreds of people came to Christ. Young people left their dances and flocked into the churches, which were unable to contain the huge crowds. In one village, Rev. Campbell reports that even “the most notorious characters in the community were on their faces crying out to God.” And several of those who were saved eventually became evangelists, pastors and mission workers.

That’s what God promised to Solomon. That’s what happened in living memory in a poor, tiny community among a bunch of Presbyterians. And the same God can do the same thing here, today – if His people, those who are called by His name will abandon our arrogant pride and humble ourselves before Him and one another. If we will pray just as earnestly for forgiveness of our own sins as we do for the conversion of the lost. If we will seek God’s face, seeking close communion with Him by walking in His ways, doing the best we can to live holy lives, serving even those we are pretty sure don’t deserve our help. If we will turn from our wicked ways, abandoning our own agendas and desires and embracing God’s will for our lives and our community. That’s when we can be sure, sure that God will hear our prayers to pour out His Spirit upon us, sure that God will forgive us because of the completed work of Jesus Christ. And just as God heals our hearts from our own sin, we can be sure that God will heal our land.