

“If My People...”

II Chronicles 7:11-22

I Timothy 2:1-7

(The Message)

*“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.”*

(II Chronicles 7:14)

Dr. Paul T. Eckel

Now there’s a bit of a surprise. The Apostle Paul is advising a young pastor about matters of first importance.

He says, *“the first thing I want you to do is...”* Well you finish the sentence. What do you think?

The first thing I want you to do is...preach, serve, bear witness, love? No, says Paul, the first thing is *pray*.

Pray for what – your needs, your family, your church? No, pray for the rulers of your government – Mayor and Governor, Congress and President. Pray that they may govern wisely.

This needs to be at the center of our prayers every day. In point of fact, Christians benefit from living in a country that is governed wisely. We are told it is all that

“We may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Perhaps this is why, as tradition has it, that George Washington after taking the constitutional Oath of Office for the first time added the words “So help me God.”

This plea for divine help is optional, though most Presidents have followed the example set out by our First President. We'll see.

Temple

In the comment on our worship theme today, I've suggested we take a non-political look at our national situation. The Bible regularly does this. It talks about God's relationship to his people and the people's relationship to God.

One of the dramatic scenes where this occurs is at the completion of the first Temple constructed by King Solomon.

He poured huge resources into building a magnificent Temple in Jerusalem. Then he consecrated the Holy Place to God through a long and beautiful prayer.

The Scripture we read from II Chronicles picks up the story at the end of Solomon's prayer, and records God's response to the King's prayer.

It's the sort of response we have come to expect. God says if you mean what you say about being faithful in your religion, honoring the Temple and worshipping God alone, then all will be

well. But if you turn away from me, God says, there will be trouble.

It's in this Godly response that we find the words of our text – a truly great word for our day – *this day*. Listen:

*“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.”*

(II Chronicles 7:14)

Repentance

Everything begins with “If...” “If,” God says,

*“If my people...
will humble themselves...
pray...seek my face...
and turn from wickedness.”*

Taken together these spiritual actions describe what we usually mean when we talk about ‘repentance.’

Hope for God's people begins with ‘repentance.’ That word literally means ‘to change your mind.’ You have been tracking down a path in one direction, then you *change your mind* and head off in the opposite way.

Sometimes I like to describe repentance as a square dance. When everyone is ‘do-ce-doing’ and ‘alamanding’ left and right, the caller shouts:

“the other way back,
you’re going wrong,
get on back where you belong.”

That’s repentance!

“*Repentance*” wrote C. S. Lewis, “*is no fun at all. It’s something much harder than eating humble pie. It means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will we have been training ourselves in for years.*”

This willing submission to humiliation – a kind of death – is not something God demands of you before He will take you back and from which He could let you off if He chose.

No, repentance is simply the description of what going back to God is like.”

(*Mere Christianity*, ‘The Perfect Penitent’ ¶ 7-8)

America

A little girl caught this meaning pretty well when she said, ‘Repentance is being sorry enough to quit.’

Whatever distracts you from God, or attracts you away from

God – quit it! Repentance is not only for a nation called Israel. It’s also for a nation called the United States of America.

Times have changed in America. When I was in secondary school the worst we could come up with was talking out of turn, chewing gum, running in the hall, and smoking in the boy’s room. Today educators list drugs, alcohol, pregnancy, suicide, abuse and assault.

Religion too. Years ago lots of us woke up to a society that mocked those who were serious about their faith. It began to feel like America’s only acceptable form of bigotry was religious bigotry. Today bigotry seems more narrowly focused on Christianity.

We sense a full-court press to remove *God* from public life. Attempts are being made to rewrite American history to exclude the influence of God and religion.

The latest sport seems to be banishing the symbols of faith that give comfort and support to those who grieve.

God is a gentleman. If asked to leave, God will leave. As we expel God from our public life, and in His place celebrate atheism

as our nation's most recent spiritual fad, ask yourself how we are doing in our schools and our communities, our marriages and homes...and our government!

Promises

Our text urges repentance – a complete turn-around! Returning to God calls for ‘humility and prayer, together with a passionate seeking of God and deliverance from evil. “If” we do this, “then” God promises:

*“I will hear from heaven
and will forgive your sin
and will heal your land.”*

This sounds like ‘good news’ to me. ‘Gospel’ is the glory-side of repentance.

We’re told in Scripture, that Jesus came into Galilee preaching *“Repent and believe the gospel!”* (Mark 1:14). When God re-enters it’s like flooding the dark side of the moon with light!

God promises to hear our prayers, because God is *The Listener*, the real Listener. He listens not for ritual, but for what is honest and earnest in our prayers.

When what’s coming from our hearts is an authentic personal

yearning, God is listening. We are assured of this by John the apostle,

*“If we know God is listening
when we talk to him
and make our requests,
then we can be sure
God will answer us.”*
(1 John 5:15 *Living Bible*)

Not only will God hear us, *“God will forgive our sin.”* However hard it is for *us* to forgive the failings of others, God forgives absolutely. One of the best ways to understand forgiveness of sin is this:

Sin is separation from God.
Forgiveness is bridging the gap.

We know how bitter words and unfaithful behavior can separate us from those we love and those who love us. However hard forgiveness may be, it’s the only way to reestablish the bond.

Forgiveness is no less costly for God. That’s what the cross was all about. *“Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins.”* (Hebrews 9:22). *“Christ died for our sins”* (1 Cor 15:3).

Sickness

And having *“forgiven our sin,”* – it says astonishingly! – *“God will heal our land.”* Can ‘land’ itself be sick? Not usually.

The sickness is not in our “amber waves of grain” that feed our people, or in our soil. It’s in ourselves. Sickness is treasuring our freedom, but squandering our heritage.

In most families strong effort is made to provide for the children, the next generation of Americans. In this land the dream has always been that with hard work, discipline and honesty, our children can reach out and reach up toward a higher standard than even their parents enjoyed.

Now, that dream is evaporating as we saddle our children and grand-children with an enormous un-repayable national debt. As of this morning every household in America owes over \$140,000 to liquidate that debt!

In the end, though, it’s not about money it’s about spirit. It’s about what’s in the heart of God’s people.

The Prophet Jeremiah was given the assignment of calling the nation back to God during Israel’s final years of national collapse. He grieved over the moral blindness and spiritual sickness of the people. Listen to the passion in Jeremiah’s voice:

*Is God no longer in Zion?
For my dear broken people,
I’m heartbroken.
I weep, seized by grief.
Is there no healing balm
in Gilead?*

*Isn’t there a doctor in the house?
Why can’t something be done
to heal and save my dear people?*
(Jeremiah 8:18-22 *The Message*)

Healing

God tells us there is a way to heal the Land and cure the sickness. He has diagnosed our illness and prescribed the needed treatment. The treatment is God Himself! “I,” says God, “*I will heal your land.*”

And suddenly I found myself drawn back to the beginning of our passage, back to the way the condition was initially stated. You remember it: “If *my* people who are called by *my* name...”

“*My* people...*my* name” and the little word ‘*my*’ leaped off the page. The condition laid down is not that everyone across the nation must suddenly repent. The challenge is directed to you and me and other ‘*people* of God who bear the *name* of Christ.’

God is relying on those who already know Him and trust Him.

We and others like us are the ones God is counting on to humbly pray for the healing of the nations.

Healing a nation is beyond my pay-grade and yours too. Healing a nation is a God-sized job.

But God has included us as essential partners. He has called us to lift our voices in urgent and passionate prayer. God wants us to pray that by His almighty power our nation will return to Him... *and be healed.*