

The Life of Solomon, Part 5 5-12-19

If My People

We continue today in our study of the life of Solomon which is recorded in the books of I Kings and II Chronicles. Last time we read from II Chronicles 6 and Solomon's prayer when he dedicated the temple unto the Lord. And do you remember what Solomon asked God to do in his prayer? Essentially he asked God to hear the prayers of his people when they prayed in or toward the temple. And now in chapter 7 we get the response of God to Solomon's request. **1** *Now when Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the house.* Now that is the kind of response we like to see to our prayers - quick and dramatic. **2-4** *The priests could not enter into the house of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled the LORD'S house.* ³*All the sons of Israel, seeing the fire come down and the glory of the LORD upon the house, bowed down on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave praise to the LORD, saying, "Truly He is good, truly His lovingkindness is everlasting."* ⁴*Then the king and all the people offered sacrifice before the LORD.* In this way they dedicated their new temple. In addition to the sacrifice and worship there was also a feast for the people in Jerusalem. **8-10** *So Solomon observed the feast at that time for seven days, and all Israel with him, a very great assembly who came from the entrance of Hamath to the brook of Egypt.* ⁹*On the eighth day they held a solemn assembly, for the dedication of the altar they observed seven days and the feast seven days.* ¹⁰*Then on the twenty-third day of the seventh month he sent the people to their tents, rejoicing and happy of heart because of the goodness that the LORD had shown to David and to Solomon and to His people Israel.* Let me just note for us in passing that festivals and holidays and celebrations are biblical things to do. Most of you I expect have never questioned that but maybe you sometimes wonder if it is legitimate to spend time and money for parties and celebrations and the like. The answer to that is "yes." Our wealthy culture may indulge too much in this kind of thing. So many Americans simply live to party and have very little restraint at all; and, as usually happens, abuse of a practice makes some oppose the practice but that we must not do. God's people ought to have times of celebration and feasting. That is good and holy and pure, but typically our times of celebration are also going to be special times of worship. The people of God historically have known how to party and do it God's way which means you go home and get back to normal life like these people did, rejoicing and happy of heart rather than worn to a frazzle and hungover.

Now we get to our primary passage for this morning **11-14** *Thus Solomon finished the house of the LORD and the king's palace, and successfully completed all that he had planned on doing in the house of the LORD and in his palace.* 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."* This is God's response to the prayer of Solomon from the previous chapter. Look with me at God's response under the following three headings: the predicament, the prayers, and the promise. First the predicament which is set forth in verse **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.* Three situations are described here: drought, destruction of crops by locusts, and plague. These are the three dreaded possibilities that would lead to economic ruin, misery and death for many thousands. It is presented as the context for the prayers of verse 14 but it is significant for us itself in that it tells us something about the character of God. According to the verse we read where do these natural disasters come from? Are they just the works of a fickle "Mother Nature?" Are they the intrigues of a sadistic devil? From whence do these disasters arise? God says, "If **I** shut up the heavens, if **I** command the locust, if **I** send pestilence." Now I ask you, would God do such a thing? Drought, famine, plague - would God do that? For many the answer would be, "Never, not **my** god. My god is loving and kind and good. He only sends good things." Well, if your personal god doesn't send these things then he must be a very puny god and he also must not be the god who spoke to Solomon. This God suggests that He has and He will send some nasty things to the earth. In some corners of the church we hear that these are from the devil. It's the devil who sent those locusts. It's the devil who sent that disease. Now, I don't know about you - the whole problem of sin and suffering is a tough one, but to tell me that the devil is out there controlling the weather and the viruses, and poor God, as loving as he is, can't do anything about it, well that is pretty frightening if you ask me. I may not understand why God does what He does but I prefer the Scriptural portrait of God as a Sovereign Lord, who reigns with complete control over His creation. And that is the Scriptural view. Just read the book and you'll read many times about God sending various judgments upon men. The Bible says famines, plagues and even invading armies come from God. Isaiah 45:**6c-7** *I am the LORD, and there is no*

other, ⁷*The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these.* Do you see that? God makes very plain here that He is a cause, not only of your prosperity but also of your calamity. God is willing to take the blame. Quit trying to defend him with weak theology. In the book of Job the whole question under scrutiny is "why would God do such awful things to righteous Job." And when God responds to that question He does not say, "Oh, it wasn't me who hurt Job, that was Satan." No, God admits that He is sovereign. Satan can only act as God allows. And God is willing to face your questions if you are willing to face His.

So, understand this; a holy God does punish sin. He punishes it eternally and he often punishes it temporally with the problems listed in verse 13. In the book of Deuteronomy, in fact, God promises to His people that if they fail to obey Him He would send these disasters upon them. He doesn't promise that to anyone else. It was possible for the Egyptians to worship the sun and still prosper. It was possible for the Syrians to murder and steal and still prosper for a season but not for Israel. God will not let His people enjoy their sin. He is a father. Bad fathers let their kids get away with sin, but not the good ones. Have you learned that Christian? Have you learned that God makes you miserable when you refuse to listen to Him? Your neighbor may be able to enjoy his waywardness but you won't. You have a father on the throne of the universe. There is only one way for you to be happy and that is His way. The sooner we learn that the better off we'll be. But we are slow to learn and the problems of life mount up. We find ourselves in predicaments like we see in verse 13. When we get there, as individuals or as a church what do we do? The answer is in verse 14. **14** *If 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.* The solution to our mess is found in our praying. "If my people" and when God talks about his people He is speaking of those called by His name. In those days it was the nation of Israel, the people of Yahweh. In our day it would be anyone who takes to himself the name of Christ, who calls himself a Christian. And the prescription of God for our ills is to pray and to pray in three ways. First to pray with humility. God says to humble ourselves. And what is the context of this humility? This is a humility that arises out of hard times, it arises out of discipline. The drought, famine and plague are the divine equivalent of a good spanking. What does it mean to humble yourself under discipline? Think about a child. Most of you have found yourselves on one side or the other of an instrument of discipline. You have seen the various responses. There are

those children who respond to discipline with sweetness and a swift change of behavior but there are also children for whom discipline simply makes them angry and more self-willed. They get disciplined, they feel the pain but they are far from humble. Any sensitive parent can tell where the child is. Has he been softened by the discipline or hardened? Has he humbled himself or just proven his arrogance? The child may even do what is required on the outside. He will offer a begrudging apology but the inner spirit may be thoroughly rebellious. The child has been humbled but he has not humbled himself. And the same thing happens with adults. Many times when God disciplines us thru various means the response he sees is far from humility. Adults will pretend things are just fine when they are very wrong. They will blame other people for the problems; they will make excuses for their sin. And all these are the exact opposite of humility. To humble yourself is to admit your guilt, to say "it was my fault", to agree with God that whatever calamity has come your way is well deserved. By his fatherly grace God himself acts to humble us. But there is a great difference between being humbled and humbling yourself. The first time I heard someone say that we were discussing a man whose prosperous Christian ministry had been devastated. God had taken him through some very tough times, he was being humbled for sure but that doesn't mean he had humbled himself. In the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein was humiliated, he was humbled, but I never saw him humble himself. God says we must respond to our humiliations or our troubles by humbling ourselves. We admit our guilt, our failures. We say "yes, it's my fault." And then we go on to say, "not only am I to blame for the problem but what's more, I can't do anything on my own to solve it." You say that thru your prayers. There is a great connection between humility and prayer. Prayer may be the greatest sign of humility I know because it admits our weakness; it admits our need. So many Christians have such weak prayer lives and when I talk with folks about this the usual line is that *I don't pray like I should because I'm lazy*. Laziness is a sin we often excuse, but even those who recognize laziness as a sin will use it as their preferred reason for prayerlessness because it sounds so much better than the truth. Laziness is bad enough but there are other reasons we don't pray. We don't pray because we don't love others. Few will to admit that. But maybe the greatest reason we don't pray is pride. Pride, arrogance, self-sufficiency. You don't pray because you don't need to pray, you don't need God! Or so you think. I do believe you can tell how desperate we are for God's help by our praying. Ravenhill says that the prayer meeting is the engine room of the church, it's the powerhouse that either moves us or leaves us stranded. I've heard the story of Charles Spurgeon that when some men came to his great church in London and

asked him what made his church so strong Spurgeon told them it was the heating system down in the basement; and then he took the men down to see it - a basement prayer meeting where a crowd had gathered to called on God to give power to their preacher's words. I believe God responds when His people know they need him and when they call on Him with humble hearts. Brothers and Sisters, will we be this kind of people?

If so we must pray first with humility. Secondly, we see that God invites us to seek His face in prayer. That is a strange terminology to us. We don't speak that way and few Bible-readers will know what is meant by this. Simply put, to seek the face of God is to seek the favor of God, to seek His blessing. The understanding of the Old Testament Hebrew was that blessedness comes from having the face of God look or shine upon you. If God hid his face you were in trouble, but if God looked at you or smiled at you then you were in great shape. That is why in the benediction of Numbers 6 the priests would say 6:**24-26** *The LORD bless you, and keep you; ²⁵the LORD make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; ²⁶the LORD lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace.* You read this kind of thing throughout the Psalms. 4:**6** says *Lift up the light of thy countenance upon us, O Lord.* Psalm 27:**8-9a** *When You said, "Seek My face," my heart said to You, "Your face, O LORD, I shall seek." ⁹Do not hide Your face from me.* Psalm 31:**16** *Make Thy face to shine upon Thy servant.* 67:**1** *God be gracious to us and bless us. And cause His face to shine upon us.* 80:**3** *O God, restore us and cause Thy face to shine upon us, and we will be saved.* In Psalm 105:4 we are admonished to **4** *Seek the Lord and His strength; seek his face continually.* You see there that to seek the Lord is to call on Him to mightily act on your behalf.

Thirdly, we see from verse 14 of our text that we should pray or seek God's face not only with humility but with repentance. God says my people must turn from their wicked ways. It is a frequent theme of Scripture that the quality of one's life and character will determine the impact of one's prayers. I thought of Isaiah 1:15 where God says thru his prophet, **15** *When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you, yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood.* If you think, and many do, that you can live in neglect of the commandments of God and then come and expect him to jump when you say jump you are badly deceived. God says you can pray fervently and you can pray often but your sin has closed his ears. Ponder what that means for you. Psalm 66:**18** *If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear.* i.e. if you go to speak with God while you are still living with sins that you refuse to lay down then God is deaf to you. Is that relevant for you today?

In his book about prayer, John Lavender retells a story about Norman Vincent Peale. When Peale was a boy, he found a cigar, slipped into an alley, and lit up. It didn't taste good, but it made him feel very grown up -- until he saw his father coming. Quickly he put the cigar behind his back and tried to be casual. Desperate to divert his father's attention, Norman pointed to a billboard advertising the circus. "Can I go, Dad? Please let's go when it comes to town." His father's reply taught Norman a lesson he never forgot. "Son," he answered quietly but firmly, "never make a petition while at the same time trying to hide a smoldering disobedience." My heavenly Father has said that to me quite often. Prayer is effective when it comes in the context of repentance. The way to the Father is described as a narrow gate and you cannot enter with your arms full of worldly baggage. You must lay them down, turn from them and then come to seek God's face. How 'bout it? How 'bout you? Are you willing to give up some carnal pleasure or lay down your cherished sins to seek the face of God? God will hear, God will pardon, God will heal but you must turn from your wicked ways.

That then is the type of praying God responds to - praying marked by humility and by a seeking of His face and by a turning from sin, for that prayer God makes enormous promises. He says to Solomon here "then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land." That is the promise of God. Its meaning to Solomon when given is clear enough. Its meaning to us is not. Someone asked me once if I interpret this passage like Jerry Falwell. They refer to the tendency among many American Christians to act as if God has promised to heal America if the Christians pray. Such an approach equates America with "their land" which is not entirely legitimate. God made many promises to national Israel that do not apply to the United States. Believers may indeed find here a formula to promote national peace and prosperity but I would draw short of calling it a promise to do so. What in our day parallels the land of Israel is not the US, nor is it the land of Israel, instead it is the church. We are God's people now, we are God's dwelling place. And does it make sense to talk about God healing the church? You bet it does. The church is certainly ill. The church has been devastated by the locusts of humanism and materialism. The church, at least in our land, in these last few decades has experienced little reviving, little rain from heaven. There is so much apathy; there is so much ignorance; there is so much compromise. In many ways ours is a sick church being disciplined by God and II Chronicles.7:14 does indeed point the way to restoration and revival. There are many people out there writing about what the church must do. Many strategies for church development and growth and renewal and these are fine as far

as they go but they can often miss the point. Nothing I know, no strategy, no sermon, no dynamic program has the capacity to heal the church. We need a revival sent from heaven. We need for God to rend the heavens and come down.

Will you look with me at one of the most tremendous words in all the Bible, Isaiah 62:**1ab** *For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet.* Now when I read those terms Zion and Jerusalem I think of the city of God, really the people of God which is the church. **1-5** *For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet, until her righteousness goes forth like brightness, and her salvation like a torch that is burning.* ²*The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; and you will be called by a new name which the mouth of the LORD will designate.* ³*You will also be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.* ⁴*It will no longer be said to you, "Forsaken", nor to your land will it any longer be said, "Desolate", but you will be called, "My delight is in her", and your land, "Married"; for the LORD delights in you, and to Him your land will be married.* ⁵*For as a young man marries a virgin, so your sons will marry you; and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you.* Every time I read that it takes my breath away. Do you see what the church is to be? Can you see her glory as the bride of Christ and the delight of her God. She is called a crown of beauty and a royal diadem. When I read that I feel like a young girl in love all giddy from the love songs of her beau. God says this is what we are to be to him. But the point is in verse **1** *For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet, until her righteousness goes forth like brightness, and her salvation like a torch that is burning.* Not silent, not quiet but speaking to whom? To the church? That must be done but what is envisioned here is not preaching but prayer. **6** *On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have appointed watchmen; all day and all night they will never keep silent. You who remind the LORD, take no rest for yourselves.* It is the Lord that these watchmen address. **6c-7** *You who remind the LORD, take no rest for yourselves and give Him no rest until He establishes and makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth.* Every time I read that I groan. My spirit deep within me cries out an "amen" while my flesh, which hates to pray, screams against it. But I read again what God will do when His people pray. I read about healing the land and making us gorgeous, making us world changers, making us pure worshippers and I sign up to join the watchmen. How about you? Can you make verse 1 your own? Can you say, **1ab** *For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet.* Can you agree to cut back on Netflix or sleeping late in

order to join those valiant ones who cry out to God to make His church a praise in all the earth? Will you join the watchmen who care enough about the Lord's people to seek God's face and pester Him, as it were, to visit us with sanctifying power? This means praying on your own. This means joining with fellow believers to pray. Will you humble yourself and pray and seek His face and turn from your wicked ways? God has agreed in advance to respond to that kind of praying with forgiveness and healing. If my people....will you?