

The Root of Revival

2 Chronicles 7:11-22

September 11, 2011

This is Rally Day when we organize and start up the Sunday School program for another year, graduate the kids into their classes, and look to the upcoming events of the Fall. This year our emphasis is on the work God has been doing in us as a church and which we want Him to expand. He is beginning to revitalize us as a congregation, to raise up in us new life. For the first time in many years we are not shrinking. We have changed our focus to be less centered on ourselves and more directed toward ministering to the community around us. We have been through difficult times, but we can see that the worst is behind us, our direction is good because it is led by the Holy Spirit, our hearts are growing in grace, and there is a desire among us to reach out more and in different ways. These are all good. It has led to a desire to focus this morning on revival and the continuing work of renewal God is doing in us.

With this in view, we look forward to the future of this congregation with the knowledge that God is still working in us and He is not done with us yet. This gives us hope because we know that what **God** sets out to do, He accomplishes. Our prayer is that He revitalizes us and renews us in the process so that we can be the people He wants us to be and useful tools in His hands.

Of course it is not our work, though we most certainly need to cooperate with it. What do we need to do in order to help the process along? If we want to be renewed in our lives as the First Baptist Church of Salem

(or even as individuals) and filled afresh with the power of God in the Holy Spirit, what, if anything can we do?

For this we look back to the times in the past that God has filled His people and moved in and among them. As we looked into the past at the times God has shown His faithfulness, and into the pages of scripture where He lays before us the principles of our lives with Him, we come to the dedication of the first temple in Jerusalem as recorded by the author of Chronicles. It is the passage we just read, and at which we are going to look closely because it gives us a glimpse into God's desire for us and His expectations of us.

We need to note, first, that God's message to Solomon began after Solomon had completed all he set out to do in building the temple and dedicating it. Solomon had prepared himself and a place in which he and the people could worship God. He had seen to it that it was dedicated and prepared for God's presence. God had moved in and set up His residence there by filling the place with smoke and accepting the incredible amount of sacrifices that had been offered. After all of this had been done, the Lord appeared to him at night.

The first thing we have to do is make up our **minds** that we want to be used by God. Too often we come to Him with reservations about what we are willing to do. Listening to people talk about serving God sometimes reminds me of the song by Sonlight called, "On One Condition." In that song they make fun of the way we tell God we will serve Him and do whatever He wants as long as we can be comfortable and enjoy doing it. As soon as it starts to cost us something, or He requires us to go to a place we would rather not be,

we often back off from our commitment. Solomon's preparation of the temple, and the vast amounts of money he spent to dedicate it remind us that we have to be prepared, and be willing to be prepared by God, if we are to be renewed and used by Him. We have to do what He sets us out to do.

Of course, it is not the preparation that we do that is primary. We have to work to prepare ourselves, but even there the primary work is God's. God prepares those He intends to use. Isaiah recognized his own sinfulness, so God cleansed him before He used him. God spent several years adjusting Paul to the new covenant before Paul began his ministry to the Gentiles. Even Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness fasting and praying before He started His ministry. We need to do what we can to prepare, but we also need to recognize that what we do is only part of God's work of preparing us.

I am also reminded that this morning's passage is in response to the dedication of a temple that no longer stands. It is no longer the place where God chooses to be met—where He has placed His name. There is a new temple. It is here, in this room. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *“Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.”* (1 Corinthians 3:16,17) And to the Ephesians, *“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief*

cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:19-21)

If we are in Christ then we are the new temple of the Holy Spirit, both individually and corporately. That means that we are each a temple of the Holy Spirit in that He has recreated us, taken up residence in our hearts and is seeking to transform us into the likeness of Jesus Christ. God also inhabits us as the body of believers when we gather together. He inhabits the praise of His people. He is present whenever two or more are gathered together in His name. God's temple is where He meets with His people. After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, God's temple is wherever His people get together to praise and worship Him. As unlikely as it may seem it is here, with us, that God has chosen make His presence known.

So, we begin by preparing ourselves, deciding that no cost is so great and no command so difficult that we cannot commit ourselves to what God wants to do and wants us to do. God notices when these decisions are made. God said to Solomon, *“I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices.”* (v.12) Solomon's prayer was back in chapter six and was full of his wonder of God and saturated in Solomon's trust in God's faithfulness. He praised God for what God had done in the past, and he expressed his faith that God would continue to lead His people with justice and mercy. God hears the prayers of His people. When His people cry out to Him in

recognition of who He is and seek His justice and mercy, God hears and He will respond. Let's look at the response He made to Solomon.

First the situation: *"When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, . . ."* (v.13) This is a conditional statement. It describes a time of stress and distress. God says what follows takes place when things are not going well and the people remember how frail, weak, and needy they are. God suggests times of drought and famine will come. When things are going well we forget our need for God. It is easy to depend on ourselves. The question is what do we do when we are faced with a problem we cannot fix and a situation which we do not have the resources to handle? What if there is no water? No food? What if our houses and towns are flooding and the rain keeps coming? What if the fire rages across the countryside and through our homes? What happens when we are attacked by our enemies and thousands perish? These are situations that are beyond our ability to control, but they are not beyond God's ability.

This is why God's promise in verse 14 has had such an impact through the ages. Look at it with me. Completing the sentence began in verse 13, God says, *". . . 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."* (v.14) Here God gives the second condition. We have to be His **people**, called by His name. This promise is not for those who do not belong to God. It is not for those who

are not in Christ. This is not some arrogant position of the church. It is not a needless claim on our part to exclude others. It is what God said. This is for His people, who are called by His name. So that is the first condition we must meet. We must make sure we have given ourselves to Him. We must seek out His mercy, forgiveness, and guidance.

After identifying the recipients of this promise as His people, there are **four** things God calls on His people to do when they find themselves in situations they cannot handle and circumstances beyond their control. The first is **humble** themselves. We must go to God humbly. We must be humble with each other. The truth is we are not all that. We do not have all the answers. We do not have all the things we need to make it through life, let alone to really enjoy ourselves. We all sin. We all make mistakes. We all mess up in more ways than we can count. If we are God's people then He has cleaned us up. He has given us a new heart and created a new spirit within us. We are still human, however, and we still have human limitations. Those limitations are amplified and twisted by sin, but sin is not the cause of them. From the first we are creatures, not the Creator, and so we have limited understanding, limited resources, and limited power. Just like Adam of whom God said, *"It is not good for the man to be alone,"* (Genesis 2:18) we need God and we need each other. It does no good to stand in the face of the storm, shake our fist at the wind and declare ourselves the masters of our own fate. We must bow down and recognize our humble position.

The second thing God calls on His people to do is **pray**. We have been hearing a lot about prayer as Bob

has been using the children's message time to teach the kids about it. It has been good for them, and a good review for those of us who are adults. Prayer is always essential. Too often we run to it as a last resort when everything else fails. Yet we are to be in a continual attitude of prayer always aware of God's presence and always offering ourselves and our circumstances to Him. Especially when things get beyond us, however, we need to humble ourselves and get on our knees before our Maker. We need to proclaim His glory and majesty. We need to thank Him for His faithfulness. We need to humbly ask Him to be faithful to us again. God delights in keeping His promises. He also delights in spending time with His people. We need to humble ourselves and we need to pray.

The third thing God calls on His people to do is **seek** His face. We are to seek out God's presence. We are to spend time before Him. We don't just realize that the situation is beyond us and so fire a couple of prayers in God's direction hoping He catches them. We seek to immerse ourselves in God's holiness and love. Seeking God's face also has an element of holiness for us. That which is unclean cannot come into the presence of God. He cannot look on sin or evil. To seek His face means that we repent of our sin and allow the Holy Spirit to wash us clean again.

The fourth thing God calls on His people to do is **turn** from their wicked ways. If seeking God's face involves repentance, this is repentance. This is setting aside the actions and attitudes that get in the way of our relationships with God and each other and deciding that we will live by the truth. It means refusing to believe the

lies and being guided by God's truth. It means seeing our sin for what it is and deciding that we will stop doing it. We need to search God's word for what He says about our thoughts and our behavior and we need to stop doing the things that are sinful. We don't lie. We don't cheat. We don't have sex with people to whom we are not married. We don't think of ourselves more highly than we ought. We stay sober. We pray for one another. We trust God. Those of us who are husbands love our wives, have eyes for them alone, and give ourselves up for them as Jesus gave His life for us. Those of us who are wives respect our husbands and submit to them as to the Lord. The list goes on. These are not the path to salvation, but they are the path to blessing by God, fulfillment in life, and the unhindered relationships with God and each other that come from repentance.

These four things God listed really are two. Humbling ourselves and prayer go together. We cannot truly pray without humble spirits and hearts that recognize our need for God and His mercy and grace. Likewise, seeking God's face and turning from our wicked ways go together. The author of Hebrews wrote, *"Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."* (Hebrews 12:14) We cannot be in good relationships with each other and God without holiness, and holiness begins with repentance. In all of life, but especially when things get bad, God calls on His people to humbly pray to Him and seek His face through repentance.

What does God promise for those who answer this call? First, that He will hear their prayer. David wrote, *"You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;*

you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” (Psalm 51:16,17) Through the prophet Isaiah God says, *“This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.”* (Isaiah 66:2) To come to God in humble prayer and repentance is to **delight** Him. As we recognize our place before Him, He lifts us up and gives us a new place. If we answer His call, He will hear us because He takes delight in us.

Not only does God promise to hear us, but He promises to act as well. The first thing God does is **forgive** our sin. We often quote the apostle John, because it bears repeating, that, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”* (1 John 1:9) When we agree with God about our sin and need for Him (that’s what confession is) then He forgives us and washes us clean from all impurity and stain. He is more patient and forgiving than we are. Every time we sin, repent, and confess He forgives. We do not get to play games. We must never allow ourselves to think that our sin does not matter. It most certainly does. It required that Jesus, God the Son, be nailed to the cross in order to get it removed. God hates sin. He wants us to hate our sin as much as He does. As we do, as we confess and repent, He washes us and restores us. He forgives our sin.

As He does that, He also **heals** the land on behalf of His people. In our day and situation, this is a little more difficult. Our nation is not a theocracy as Israel was. We have not, as a people, decided that God’s word

will be our law. We have not, as a nation, declared our allegiance to Him. Evangelicals in our nation keep hoping that we can get God to apply the blessing for His people to our country. God may decide to bless this nation on behalf of His people who are in here, but we must understand that this is for God’s people, not our country, as great as it is.

The church *is* the people of God. We are the people called to pray and seek God’s face. As we do, God will heal our fellowship here in this congregation. He will bring the refreshing rain of His blessings and the purifying fire of His Holy Spirit and He will heal us, strengthen us, set us apart for His service, and send us out to do it. We are already seeing this process beginning. We are already seeing evidence, as He told Solomon, that His eyes are open and His ears are attentive to the prayers offered in this place. He knows us. He loves those to whom He has given His name.

Before we go, we just need to briefly review the rest of the passage. God laid out before Solomon what He had also laid out before the people as He prepared to bring them into the promised land. If they would continue to obey Him and do what He commanded. If they continued in humility, prayer, seeking His presence, and repentance, then they would know God’s blessing and His favor forever. If, however, they turned away from God and back toward sin, if they neglected prayer, if they did not seek God but instead sought the things of the world, if they were not humble but exalted themselves, then God would bring them down and humiliate them before a watching world. He would remove His blessing and their situation would go from

bad to worse. People would walk past the things they had created for God's glory, but which they had corrupted and God had destroyed, and ask why God would do such a thing to His own people. The answer would come back, "*Because they have forsaken the LORD, the God of their fathers, who brought them out of Egypt, and have embraced other gods, worshiping and serving them—that is why he brought all this disaster on them.*" (v.22) God has promised His blessing on His people and that His church will prevail, but He has not promised this for any specific local congregation. God has not guaranteed that First Baptist Church will still be here in five years. He will bless us as long as we are useful to Him and committed to His ministry. If we forget Whose we are and what we are to do God will actively seek to bring us back. If we will not return, He will remove us.

We have **hope** because we are God's people and we have heard the call to pray and repent. Before us lies the opportunity to answer that call and see what God will do in and through us. We have already begun to answer it and we are already seeing the benefits of God's activity in our midst. Let us hold fast to the course set before us. Let us not waver or falter. Let us move into ever greater faithfulness to God and the mission He has given us. Let us follow His call and see His faithfulness!