

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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ANOTHER LOOK AT “IF MY PEOPLE”

2 Chronicles 7:11-15

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INTRODUCTION: On this Sunday before Independence Day, I am thinking about the Christian’s role in American society. Regardless of what the history revisionists say, it is true that this country was founded on Christian principles.

It’s important for Christians to guard the freedoms of our country. There is a lot of public discourse today about separation of church and state. However, it normally goes in the direction of the church having no say-so in American policy. As a pastor, I’ve been told it’s my job to preach and that sharing my opinions about politics, government, or the direction of our country is not what a preacher should do.

Did you know the principle of separation of church and state was championed by a Baptist preacher? Early in our nation’s history, there was a lot of discussion about having a government and church that were separated. All the founders had ever known were religion-run states. William McGloughlin, a historian who wrote about all this, said that Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, was too much of a perfectionist about religious purity while Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were too indifferent. Had any of them gotten their way entirely, the country might be very different today. But a Baptist preacher named Isaac Backus had strong views about the free exercise of religion and those became incorporated in the First Amendment.

It’s important for preachers to know their lanes. It’s important for us to be wise. Last week, a preacher in Knoxville, who is also a detective for Knox County (or at least he was), made the news due to statements that gays should be arrested by the police and put to death. I found his sermon online and listened to it. He must have slept through his high school history class because having a church-run state has

happened before and it's been disastrous. And we know those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

As a pastor and a Christian, I know that I am just a pilgrim passing through. I know that my final citizenship is in heaven, and my time here is only temporary. As a responsible pastor and Christian, it is important for me to be and stay informed. It is important for me to preach the truth of the Bible to you, and I certainly hope your faith influences your vote!

I am not sure how many times I've preached from 2 Chronicles 7, but I've used this text in more sermons than any other during my time here. In fact, I believe I'll use these verses annually from now on... on the Sunday before July 4.

It just fits so well on a patriotic Sunday. Why? Because all of us want America to be all she can be, right? And I clearly believe the further this country gets away from God, the more of a mess she'll become. If we don't learn from our history, we are doomed to repeat it. A fading Christian influence will lead to nothing but chaos. Because a solid reverence for God establishes order.

SCRIPTURE: 2 Chronicles 7:11-15

When Solomon had finished the temple of the LORD and the royal palace, and had succeeded in carrying out all he had in mind to do in the temple of the LORD and in his own palace, ¹² the LORD appeared to him at night and said:

"I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices.

¹³ *"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, 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 I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. ¹⁵ Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.*

EXPLANATION: Some have said, and rightfully so, that these words were spoken by God directly to the Israelites, not to American citizens. I agree, to a point, but let's consider the words as they were spoken to the people to whom they were spoken, and then let's evaluate their merit today.

THE WORD “IF” REQUIRED ACTION FROM THE ISRAELITES

If you haven't already circled the word *if* in this scripture from previous requests of mine, please do it now. *If* established the condition. It is the action word that required the Israelites to choose. They could not be faced with *if* and do nothing. God himself is the author of the *if* in these verses.

Life is all about choices. I've taught that to my children. The word *if* has a lot to do with choices. *If* requires action. In the case of God's response to Solomon's prayer, he started his instruction with *if*. Only two measly letters in the English language but what a huge weight they carry.

If requires a response. It requires a choice. It requires action. *If* does not include delay or indecisiveness.

Think about it:

- If the Old Testament people had never rebelled, God wouldn't have even had to set up the conditions of his blessings.
- If the people had simply obeyed all along, they would already be experiencing God's blessings.

ILLUSTRATION: How many of us have said, “*If* I had only...”

- If I had only paid more attention in school...
- If only I had not said that dumb thing...
- If I had only told mom and dad I loved them...
- If I had only saved earlier in life...
- If I had only planned better for retirement...
- If I had only been more careful...

Hey, I'm not trying to project guilt because I'm in the same boat with you. The reason we have regrets and “if onlies” is because, early on, most of us didn't know what was on the other side of the “ifs”. Most of us were just bebopping through life not really thinking of the future. Wouldn't it be great if when we were born, we had a checklist of what to do so that we would be prepared for everything? Wouldn't it be great if at every phase of life, we had a new checklist to help us along?

EXPLANATION: In this scripture, God told Solomon the formula for success, but it hinged on one word: *if*. It clearly indicated there were so many things on the front side of the *if* that there would be no hope without an intervention from God to allow for a reboot. God is the God of start-overs, isn't he?

The first requirement of the checklist was for them to humble themselves. Since the Israelites were at peace and prospering during this particular time under Solomon's reign, it seems like God's word to them was out of sync. Times were good, so why would they have to humble themselves? They had a leader who was sought after by other leaders for his wisdom. They had a fantastic place of worship. It was beautiful and ornate with gold. But God wasn't interested in opulence. The temple was to be a place of sacrifices and forgiveness of sin. It was to be a place of humility.

APPLICATION: We should be humble in good times and bad, whether prosperous or poor.

Proverbs 3:34 says, *God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.* This is repeated in James, chapter four: *Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up.* ⁷ *Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.* ⁸ *Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.* ⁹ *Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.* ¹⁰ *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.* The scripture means "you humble yourselves." Don't wait for God to do it.

The second requirement was to pray. *"If my people who are called by my name will humbles themselves and pray..."*

EXPLANATION: Humility in prayer is what gets God's attention. I've heard so many prayers in my life and don't want to judge anyone else's prayers, so I'll judge my own. Many of my prayers have not been made in humility. Many of my prayers have been about what I want instead of humbly asking what God wants. Many of my prayers have been about what I want God to do in the lives of others instead of humbly making requests that God change me to be more accepting. Many of my prayers have been about how I want God to change my circumstances rather than

humbly asking God what it is he wants me to learn or humbly asking him to let me be his vessel despite my circumstances.

When we go to the Lord in prayer, let us rid our minds of personal agenda. If we don't, our prayers are worthless words and will not be heard. James 5:16 - *The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*

I told some of you recently, I heard Erwin Lutzer the pastor at Moody Church in Chicago say something like this, "To some of us, prayer is nothing more than trying to get a seemingly reluctant God to do something for you." Prayer needs to be more than that.

The next requirement was to seek God's face. "*If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face...*" Following the sequence is important: humility, prayer, seeking God's face. Too many times we get that out of order, don't we, and we leave out the humility part. We make an important decision without seeking God's will and then we pray God will bless the prayerless decision we made.

Let me ask, "What does it mean to seek God's face?" It means to seek his will. Sometimes it may be clear what God's will is and other times it may not be.

ILLUSTRATION: A minister from another state called me about six months ago. He said he planned to divorce his wife. He went through his justification of it all. He'd been through over twenty years of a living nightmare. I had known him from years ago, and I knew about some of the problems he told me about. It was obvious he had already made up his mind. Then he said to me, "Well it sounds like you are OK with it." Truthfully, I had not said much. I told him it would be his decision, but I was not telling him I thought the divorce was OK, nor was I saying God was OK with the divorce. I didn't hear from him and figured they would get divorced. Time passed and he later told me after a lot of prayer, he believed God wanted him to work it out. Turns out, something had happened. He had been humbled by a health condition that was out of his control. He humbled himself, he prayed, and he sought God's face.

EXPLANATION: We can learn about seeking God’s face from Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Before the crucifixion he prayed, *“If it is possible let this cup pass from me, however, not my will but your will be done.”*

Seeking God’s face isn’t easy, but it is what you must do if you are going to grow as a follower of Jesus. Seeking God’s face is the complete opposite of saying a rote prayer.

I hope you appreciate how brutally honest I am with you. I’m so down-to-earth that sometimes I think *I can’t believe I said that*. Here’s one of my down-to-earth Brother-Paul-isms: The more I grow as a Christian, the less I understand seeking God’s face and prayer. “I can’t believe the preacher said that!” Well, I did. I mean think about it – some of the things we say in prayer are just things we’ve heard other people say. We think it sounds good, and spur-chul, so we plagiarize others’ prayers. We use prayer like a zipper that opens and closes meetings.

But prayer in humility that helps us seek God’s face is different than those types of prayers. I believe growing in your prayer life means letting go of trying to manipulate God to do what you want him to do. It means abandoning your position of trying to get a seemingly reluctant God to do something for you. It means your willingness to follow his leading in your life.

The next requirement was to turn from wicked ways. *“If my people, who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways...”*

No one likes to hear sermons about sin, unless it’s sins other people commit. Most don’t want to be convicted of sin, and frankly most of us don’t want to repent of sin. Sin is all around us. Sin has inundated every person and every society since the beginning of time.

When we sin, we should confess our sin. I John 1: 9 *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

Back to the word *if* – God’s promise was *if* the people did the things he required, then he would act on their behalf: he would hear them, forgive their sin, and heal

their land.

In today's scripture, the *if* required action by the Israelites. *If* is then connected to *then*.

THE *THEN* PART OF GOD'S PROMISE REQUIRED ACTION ON HIS PART.

Followed by the *if*, which requires action on our part, comes the *then*, in which God obligated himself to act on his part. "¹⁴...*then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*"

APPLICATION: Now, let's go back to my earlier statement about this scripture being for the Israelite people and not for Americans. No, there was no United States of America when God spoke this. But if you look at the formula God has laid out... I believe you'll agree that *if* **any** people, of **any** time, of **any** land will obey it, *then* God will hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land. That is the answer for every nation on this earth. God will always carry out his promises.

In your mind, think of the worst countries in the world right now. I believe the scripture is just as real for them as it is for us. It's just as real for us as it was during Solomon's time.

Let's look at verse fifteen. ¹⁵ *Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.* God's word to Solomon was clear and *if* the people did not do what he required, *then* his eyes and ears would be closed to the prayers of the people.

CONCLUSION: The United States of America, my home, the place that I love. Will you join me in the *if* part of this scripture? Will you join me in fulfilling the *if* requirements that God has set in place?

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Sincerely, Paul Gunn
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