

Title: *The Cure for What Ails Us*

Text: II Chronicles 7:11-22

I've noticed that there are a lot of similarities between Ozarkers and people in West Virginia, where I was born and my family is originally from. Maybe you have a relative – a grandmother or a great aunt somewhere who would tout her home remedies and say, “This is good for what ails you.” If you want to remove it from hillbilly culture, you could talk about a Jewish mother pushing chicken soup which is also known as the Jewish penicillin and saying, “This is good for what ails you.”

There is no question that if you look at our great and beloved nation this morning, we would say there is a lot that is ailing us as a nation. I would maintain that what is ailing us this morning is not so much political, or economic, or social as much as it is moral and spiritual.

Time magazine asked the question back in March, *Are America's Best Days Behind Us?* That might be an interesting question for you to ponder over lunch this afternoon.

Pollster Scott Rasmussen released a survey about a week and a half ago in which (46%) of voters think America's best days are in the past. Thirty-seven percent (37%) feel the country's best days are in the future. Sixteen percent (16%) are not sure.

20 years ago, sociologist Robert Bellah asked the question.

Why, then representing only 5 percent of the world's population, do we consume more than 50 percent of the world's drugs? Why do we spend \$160 billion a year on entertainment, an industry of which television is a major element, which diverts but on the whole does not challenge? It would seem that the way we live creates so much anxiety that we spend enormous amounts of money and time, often at great expense to body and spirit, to drown out that anxiety, rather than focusing on the activities that allow us to be the active, happy, responsible people we really want to be?

Bellah wrote that 20 years ago but do any of us really believe that things have gotten better since Bellah wrote that book?

In II Chronicles 7, we read about the cure for what ails us. Let me set the context and then let me deal with some questions that have to be addressed whenever we start talking about this text.

The context is the dedication of the temple. David had had it in his heart to want to build a temple for His God but because he was a man of blood, God told him that he was not the one to build the temple. That honor would go to his son, Solomon. God promised that David that rather than allowing David to build a house for Him, God would build a house for David.

Part of that house-building would mean that his family would reign over God's people and the honor of building the temple would fall to his son, Solomon. In chapters 3 through 6, we read about the construction of the temple – all of the materials that were used in building it and all of the tools and furnishings that would go in it for the worship of God.

Chapter 7 is a high water mark for the nation of Israel. It was the fulfillment of their

national longing for their God to be present with them. There was never a higher moment or a greater celebration of God's relationship with His people than we see in the dedication of the temple.

In 6:40 and following we read the conclusion of Solomon's prayer of dedication of the temple. "Now, my God, may your eyes be open and your ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.⁴¹ "Now arise, O LORD God, and come to your resting place, you and the ark of your might. May your priests, O LORD God, be clothed with salvation, may your saints rejoice in your goodness.⁴² O LORD God, do not reject your anointed one. Remember the great love promised to David your servant." When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple."

It just doesn't get any better than that. They offered burn offerings and celebrated a week-long festival, then Solomon goes back home after a good day at church. I'm always tired on Sunday afternoon after preaching twice on Sunday morning and usually going out to eat with the family. There are those Sundays though when God has shown up that the tiredness is all worthwhile. Solomon couldn't have had a better day at church.

That night, the Lord appeared to him and we get the text for this morning's sermon. He basically said, "I've heard your prayers. No one could deny that the temple is a visible manifestation of God's presence with His people and His desire to answer their prayers." He tells Solomon what we all know and have experienced.

You can't live on the mountaintop forever. There will come a time that life settles back into more normal patterns and because we are fallen creatures, our normal patterns sometimes include turning our back on God or if we don't turn our back on God completely, we have a way of just kind of drifting away from him. When we turn our back on God, our disobedience and our rebellion has to be dealt with.

There may be seasons of leanness and seasons of abundance as well and after a season of abundance, God may send a season of leanness our way. That happens, among other reasons, to teach us that we need to keep our dependence upon God and return to him with all of our hearts.

There are some important questions that have to be answered though in interpreting this passage and applying it to us today. There is a full range of interpretations that people have offered in trying to understand what to make of this promise that God gives to Solomon and to apply it to us today.

This is the week after July 4th, obviously. Maybe you've seen pictures or posters of an American flag, and a Bible or a picture of a country church with the words superimposed on the poster, "If my people . . ."

There are a lot of different ways of understanding who is being referred to in that phrase, "If my people. . ." Some people say this was a promise to Israel and only to Israel. After all, this was the dedication of the temple. The temple showed the Israelites that they were God's people and God said, "My ears will be attentive to the prayers offered in this place." Emphasis on this

place. There are some who would want to be very literal and very precise and say, "This was a promise that God made to Israel and it only applies to Israel."

There are folks at the other end of the spectrum who say, "Yes, this promise was made to Israel and God is now through with Israel. We live in a new dispensation so these promises that God made to Israel back then are interesting and they show us something about the nature and the character of God but that was then and this is today."

There are still others who seem to want to rip this verse right out of any historical context and automatically apply it to America. We are a Christian nation, we are God's people and this is a promise for us and if Christians in America would just do what this verse says, "God would heal our country."

I would say, "Yes. I understand that the temple is very significant in what is going on here with Solomon." I do recognize that there is a historical context and that God appears within the context of the Temple and that has a special place in his plan.

I don't believe that we are God's people just by virtue of the fact that we are Americans. God has richly blessed America. He's given us great blessing and great prosperity. America is unique among all the nations of the Earth because more than any other, we were founded upon an idea. "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men (and women) are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, chief among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." As wonderful as that is, that doesn't give us as Americans any unique claim on the blessings of God. We would have to ask why then are there places in the world this morning where the growth of the church and what we might call God's blessing upon the church is putting the American church to shame.

You look at a lot of statistical trends and polling data from people like George Barna and Lifeway Research, and it's not a real encouraging picture unless God chooses to send another Great Awakening our way.

Whether this promise is exclusively for Ancient Israel, or if it has application for all believers in all times, shouldn't we be praying and seeking God's face for renewal and revival for our nation? Isn't there ample evidence to indicate that God is a God who answers prayer. It is sobering to hold this verse over against Ezekiel 14 which says, " ¹² The word of the LORD came to me: ¹³ "Son of man, if a country sins against me by being unfaithful and I stretch out my hand against it to cut off its food supply and send famine upon it and kill its men and their animals, ¹⁴ even if these three men--Noah, Daniel and Job--were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign LORD.

That just underscores that II Chronicles 7:14 is not an ironclad promise for us. God has his own purposes and his own ways and there is no guarantee that we can continually go off in our own direction and get off without consequence. God did make the promise to Israel because they were his people in a unique and special way. Remember that Temple no longer exists, partly because in the plan of God, there is no longer any need for sacrifices and His temple is within us. It no longer exists because when push came to shove, God's people didn't humble themselves

before Him and seek His face.

God promises Solomon that if his people meet the conditions, he will hear their prayer, forgive their sins, and heal their land. I've already dealt somewhat with the phrase, "If my people who are called by my name." That would be anyone who professes faith in Jesus Christ and calls themselves Christ-follower. So that includes you and me if claim to name the name of Jesus Christ.

What are we to do then? First is humble ourselves. Maybe we need ultimately to get over the notion that we have any exclusive claim on God. It wasn't God's lucky day when we signed up to play on his team. Quite the opposite. It's only by his grace that we are anything and could ever hope to be anything. We're not all so wonderful that we couldn't be replaced if we don't get our act together before God. It's like a definition of humility I saw recently which simply says we know our place. Our place is in subservience before God. We are His servants; He isn't ours.

Then he says pray. If you know your place, you'll recognize that you don't really have a whole lot of power when it comes to healing a nation and getting it back on the right track. Let me emphasize that I'm not talking about right track/wrong track in a political sense. I'm talking about in a moral and spiritual sense. If we are concerned about the state of affairs in our nation, we'll recognize that this is a God-sized problem and it's something that we'll have to trust in Him to take care of. That means we try to get His mind. We try to see things as he sees them and the best tool we have to keep reminded of our place and our utter and complete dependence upon Him is prayer. It is fellowship and communion with Him and it's the kind of prayer that forces us to recognize that what He may want is so much bigger and greater and more significant than our own little puny agenda that we need to seek his face so that we are just in relationship with Him.

That's why he says "Seek my face." To seek the hand of God is to give God his marching orders in the morning and read off your list of all the things that you need Him to do for you that day. Don't get me wrong. When you're burdened about people and situations and you don't know which other way to turn, you ought to pray, but understand God may have other and different and greater things in mind that I can't even conceive of. That's why I need to seek His face.

When I recognize who He is, I'll get the real view of who I am and there's nothing left for me to do but repent. Say, "God. I am so sorry. I don't even come close to meeting your holy standard. I fall so far short in every area of my life." That's what the theologians call total depravity – not that I'm as bad as I can possibly be at every point, but at no point am I as good as I ought to be. It's that brokenness that causes us not only to feel bad about our sin, but to take the necessary actions to turn away from our sin.

There is a story from the Middle Ages about a young woman who was expelled from heaven and told that she would be readmitted if she would bring back the one gift God valued the most. She brought back drops of blood from a dying patriot. She collected coins given by a destitute widow for the poor. She brought back a remnant of a Bible used by an eminent preacher. She even brought back the dust from the shoes of missionaries who served many years

in a distant land. Although she brought back these things and more, she was turned back repeatedly.

One day as she watched a small boy playing by a fountain, she saw a man ride up on horseback and dismount to take a drink. When he saw the boy playing, he thought of his own childhood innocence. But he looked into the water of the fountain and saw a reflection of his hardened face. He was overcome by the sin in his life, and in that moment, he wept tears of repentance. The young woman took one of those tears back to heaven, where she was received with joy.

The Lord told Solomon then, "I will hear from Heaven. I will forgive their sin. I will heal their land." This promise was originally meant for Israel. What does it mean for America? We can hope that God would send a spirit of prayer among his people and we would have another great awakening and we might once more become great as God defines greatness. One thing I do know, though is that if we don't humble ourselves, and pray, and seek God's face, and turn from our wicked ways, it won't happen.

Preached at Salem Avenue. July 10, 2011 a.m.