

If My People...

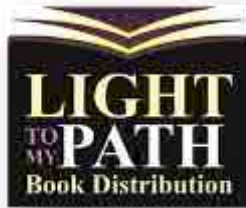
*God's Plan for Renewal
and the Healing of our Land*



EL WAYNE MAC LEOD

If My People...

God's Plan for Renewal and Healing
of our Land



F. Wayne Mac Leod

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If My People ...

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PREFACE

This is a simple study of 2 Chronicles 7:13-14. There is nothing new in this commentary. I don't write to expose any hidden secrets of Scripture. The truth of these two verses is an old and simple one but one we need to hear again in our day.

In an age where we are looking for new programmes and techniques to maintain interest and cause our churches to grow, it is easy to miss the simplicity of what God tells His people in these verses. The health of our churches and spiritual lives does not depend on new techniques or programmes, but in looking back to the simple teaching of God's Word. 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 is a key to spiritual health and fruitfulness.

In these verses lie God's answer to Solomon's prayer for forgiveness and renewed blessing on His people. In answer to Solomon's prayer, God shares His requirements for that forgiveness and healing to take place. God's purpose has not changed. If you want to know what God requires for renewing and refreshing in your spiritual life, these two verses are the key.

Take your time going through this commentary. You will need to reflect on what you have read. The questions at

that end of each chapter are designed to help you in that reflection. Ask the Spirit of God to open your mind to what He wants to teach you through the simple truths of these verses.

My prayer is that God would be pleased to use His Word to bring the renewing and refreshing we all long to see, not only in our personal lives but in our society as well. May the Lord be pleased to bless you as you take the time to work through this study.

F. Wayne MacLeod

INTRODUCTION

It was the lifelong dream of King David to construct a temple where the Lord God could be worshiped. He was never to see the fulfillment of this dream, but his son, Solomon, would bring it to pass. When Solomon constructed the temple, he spared no expense. Seven thousand men were hired as carriers to transport material to the construction site. Eight thousand stone cutters worked in the hills cutting the stones required. Solomon also hired 3,600 foremen to supervise the work (see 2 Chronicles 2:1-2). 1 Kings 6:1 tells us that even with this large work force it took 7 years to build this magnificent structure. The temple was made from the finest materials available and would become one of the greatest architectural achievements of its time.

It is important to note that the temple was not designed just to impress. It had a very particular purpose. David's desire was for Israel to have a place where God was remembered and worshiped. Here in the house of the Lord, people would find forgiveness through the sacrifices offered on their behalf. Here they could express their thanksgiving and gratitude to the Lord their God through the thank offerings they would bring to Him.

The temple also represented the hope of Israel in the coming Messiah. Each piece of furniture taught them something about the work of their coming Priest and King. The altar reminded them that He would be a sacrifice for their sin. The lamp stand showed them that He would be the Light of the World (see John 1:4-9). The Bread on the table in the Holy Place looked forward to the Lord Jesus, who would declare Himself to be the Bread of Life (see John 6:25-59). By His death, Jesus would rip the curtain that separated them from their God (see Matthew 27:50-51). The temple was a symbol of the faith of Israel and represented their relationship with the Lord their God.

Solomon took the construction of the temple very seriously. When it was completed, he gathered the people of Israel, and, standing in front of the altar, he lifted his hands and prayed. His prayer in 2 Chronicles 6:12-42 reflects Solomon's understanding of the significance of the work that had just been completed. The temple was a visible symbol to the world of Israel's faith. This placed Israel under a great obligation. To declare themselves as worshipers of God by constructing this building, yet continue to live in sin, was to misrepresent the God they declared. It was to blaspheme His name before the nations. This was a serious matter, one that God would not take lightly.

It is interesting to note, that as Solomon prayed in 2 Chronicles 6:12-42, his prayer was that the people of God would be forgiven when they misrepresented the God they were publicly declaring that day by the construction of the temple. The phrase "hear and forgive" is repeated four times in Solomon's prayer (see 2 Chronicles 6:21; 25; 27; 30). Solomon also asked God to "hear and act" (2 Chronicles 6:22) and to "hear and uphold" (2 Chronicles 2:39), all in the context of Israel's need for God's intervention because of her sin or misrepresentation of the God she declared.

As Solomon dedicated the temple, he understood that it was not just about recognizing the completion of a great architectural project: It was about God's people walking in a way that was worthy of the name they publicly confessed that day. Given human nature, Solomon knew that he and his people would fall. He pleaded with God to forgive them for falling away and misrepresenting His name. He called on the God of compassion to show mercy on them because they were not equal to the task of representing Him in the world.

2 Chronicles 7:13-14 is God's answer to Solomon's prayer. God promised in these verses that He would forgive and heal His people and their land. This would only happen, however, if they met certain conditions. The healing of their land and the restoration of their relationship with God would not be just a matter of praying a prayer. In order for true healing and restoration to take place, certain conditions needed to be met. In the course of the following chapters we will take the time to examine God's answer to Solomon's prayer and the conditions that are required for forgiveness and healing. My prayer is that the Spirit of God would be pleased to use this passage again to restore and bring healing to His people.

F. Wayne MacLeod

1

WHEN I SHUT UP THE HEAVENS

*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, (2 Chronicles 7:13)*

As we saw in the introduction, the context of 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 is the prayer of Solomon after the construction of the temple. The temple was a symbol of Israel's faith. It was a public statement to the world about the God she worshiped. In the outer court sacrifices were made for the forgiveness of sin. The presence of God rested in the Most Holy Place.

Israel held a privileged position as the people of God, chosen above all other nations. God came to live among them and blessed them above all other peoples. With this privilege, however, came tremendous responsibility. They were to make God known to the nations. They did not always do this well, often falling into sin and misrepresenting His name.

Notice as we begin in verse 13, that there were consequences to disobedience and the misrepresentation of God's name. In this case the consequences to disobedience came in three forms.

1. The heavens were shut so there was no rain.
2. The land was devoured by locusts.
3. The people were hurt by plagues.

God made it clear to Solomon that He would punish sin and rebellion. Notice that this punishment would affect the heavens, the land and the people. It is important that we understand the devastating consequences of sin not only in our lives but on the earth as well.

When Adam and Eve sinned against God back in the Garden of Eden, several things happened. First, there were spiritual consequences. Their sin caused a separation between them and God—for the first time they hid from His presence (Genesis 3:8). Second, there were emotional consequences—they experienced shame for the first time. The shame, in this case, was in their nakedness (Genesis 3:10). Third, there were physical consequences on the earth—the land and livestock was cursed and death came to all creatures (Genesis 3:17-19).

Sin has widespread consequences. No one can say: "I'm hurting no one but myself." The presence of sin in this world affects all of creation. Listen to what the Lord God said to the people of Hosea's day:

There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away, the

beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying. (Hosea 4:2-3)

Throughout the Old Testament there is a strong connection between disobedience and the removal of God's blessing from the land. Here in Hosea 4 we see how the sin of Israel affected the land, the animals and the fish of the sea. The animals, birds and fish were dying because God's people were sinning. The sin of God's people didn't hurt them alone; it destroyed their land as well.

We all remember the story of Achan in Joshua 7. He was the man who took articles from the city of Jericho in direct violation of the command of God in Joshua 7:1. The result was that the presence of God was no longer with the nation of Israel to give them victory in their battles. Thirty-six men were killed in the battle for the city of Ai as a direct result of Achan's sin (Joshua 7:4-5). Only when Achan confessed his sin, and was put to death, was the blessing of God restored. The prosperity of the nation of Israel depended not on her military skill but on her obedience to the Word of God. The consequences for disobedience, in this case, had military repercussions and many lives were lost.

We could speak at great length about the consequences of sin, but suffice it to say that it is the number one enemy of the human race. Its presence destroys our land and separates us from God and the fullness of His blessings. Entire nations have been destroyed by sin. People groups have been wiped off the surface of the earth as a result of its influence. Countless souls have been lost because they were never released from its deadly grip. It is to our shame that we do not understand the terrible nature of sin and its consequences in our land.

Notice from 2 Chronicles 7:13 the use of the phrase “when I shut up the heavens.” The word “when” is significant. It tells us that it is going to happen. God knows the human heart and its sinful tendencies. Imagine raising your children with the misguided belief that they would never need to be disciplined because they would always do what was right. All children struggle to obey. God knows He will often need to discipline us to bring us back to the path of truth and righteousness.

God’s discipline is for our good. He disciplines us because He loves us and wants us to walk in the path He has prepared. The writer to the Hebrews makes this clear in when he says:

My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons, for what son is not disciplined by his father. (Hebrews 12:5-7)

Discipline and punishment are necessary if we are to grow and mature. They are safeguards to keep us from wandering further into sin. Speaking to the rebellious nation of Israel in the days of Hosea, the Lord said:

Their mother has been unfaithful and has conceived them in disgrace. She said, “I will go after my lovers, who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink.” Therefore I will block her path with thorn bushes; I will wall her in so that she cannot find her way. She will chase after her lovers but not catch them. She will look for them but not find them. Then she will say, “I will go

back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off then now.”

Notice what God is saying here. He was going to block Israel's path with thorn bushes and wall her in so that she could not chase after her lovers. Ultimately, He was trying to get her attention so that she would return to Him. He would deliberately make her way difficult and fruitless so that she would be restored to her true Husband and find her joy and comfort in Him.

In 2 Chronicles 7:13 God tells His people that there would be consequences for sin and rebellion. If they opened the door to this dreadful enemy, they would feel its chilling effects in their lives and on their land.

If God's people opened the door to sin and turned from Him, He would shut up the heavens so there would be no rain. Without rain their crops would fail. There would be no food to eat. Their children would be hungry. Their economy would fail and poverty would spread across the land. Eventually, they would begin to die a slow and cruel death. The verse makes it clear that *God* would do this as a direct consequence of sin and rebellion in the land.

Not only would He shut up the heavens so it would not rain but He also told Solomon that He would command the locusts to devour the land. What was not killed from lack of water would be eaten by locusts. These locusts would strip the land of anything that could be eaten, leaving nothing for the people of God.

Everything Israel had would disappear; what they had accumulated would dwindle to nothing. Their lives would become more and more difficult. The prophet Haggai speaks

about this when he describes what was happening in his day:

Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways, you have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it. (Haggai 1:5-6)

In Haggai's day the harvest was small and God's people did not have enough to eat. They had clothes but were always cold. They made money but couldn't seem to pay for the basics necessities of life. What they did have seemed to be eaten up so that they were always in need.

God also told Solomon in this verse that He would send a plague among His people when they lived in sin and misrepresented His name. While we are not told the nature of this plague, we know that there is great sickness and loss of lives in any plague. Notice the phrase "among my people." The people referred to here are not unbelievers but the people of God. It is the people of God who would suffer in this way. All this is because of sin in their lives.

Sin cannot be taken lightly. You cannot reflect on this verse for too long before you see the intense hatred of God for sin and what it does to His creation. His hatred of sin is so intense that he shuts up the heavens, devours the land and ravages those affected by it with deadly plague.

Solomon knew that God would punish all who walked in the path of sin. He prayed particularly about this, asking God to show mercy on Israel in His wrath against sin. Listen to Solomon's prayer in 2 Chronicles 6:26-30:

(26) When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and when they pray toward this place and confess your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them, (6:27) then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel. Teach them the right way to live, and send rain on the land you gave your people for an inheritance. (6:28) "When famine or plague comes to the land, or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers, or when enemies besiege them in any of their cities, whatever disaster or disease may come, (6:29) and when a prayer or plea is made by any of your people Israel-each one aware of his afflictions and pains, and spreading out his hands toward this temple- (6:30) then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive, and deal with each man according to all he does, since you know his heart (for you alone know the hearts of men), (6:31) so that they will fear you and walk in your ways all the time they live in the land you gave our fathers.

2 Chronicles 7:13-14 is God's answer to Solomon's prayer in the preceding chapter. In this first verse, God confirmed to Solomon that He would discipline and punish His people for sin. Blessing would be stripped from them. Sin and rebellion against God would have implications on the spiritual, emotional and physical lives of His people. It would destroy their economy, their agriculture and the military. All aspects of life would be affected by sin and rebellion against God. This was the promise of God.

The consequences of sin are horrible. Satan does not want us to understand this truth. He wants us to believe that we can sin and God takes no note of it. He doesn't want us to see the impact our sin is having on ourselves or our land.

2 Chronicles 7:13 challenges this. It shows us that God is a holy God who will judge sin and rebellion. He will withdraw His blessing when it is necessary and will discipline and punish those who resist His purpose. That discipline will, at times, be severe.

If we are going to experience healing and restoration in our land, the first step is to see sin as God sees it. We cannot be healed if we do not recognize that we are in need of healing. We need to come face to face with the startling reality of what sin is doing to ourselves, our friends and our land. We need to understand the intensity of God's hatred of sin. It is, by far, our greatest enemy. It strips us of everything that is good and separates us from all God intends for us as individuals and as the body of Christ.

We spend much time and money seeking to find ways to help our churches grow and experience deeper blessing from God. The key to blessing and maturity is not more conferences or programs but deeper obedience. God's blessing falls on those who love Him and walk in obedience to His purpose. In 2 Chronicles 7:13 God promises to shut up the heavens and withhold blessing if we do not deal with sin. The great need of our day is for a deeper awareness of sin and its consequences.

For Consideration:

- What effect does sin have on our land? What affect does it have on us personally? Is there evidence of this today? Explain.

- What would happen if He did not withhold His blessings or punish sin? What confidence could we have in this life?
- What has Satan been doing to hide the consequences of sin from us today? How have we been deceived by him in this regard?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is a holy God whose ways are perfect and righteous.
- Ask the Lord to give you a better understanding of sin and its consequences in your nation and church.
- Ask the Lord to reveal any sin in you that keeps you from experiencing the fullness of His blessing in your life today.
- Take a moment to confess your sin and ask God to show you how you can have victory over it.

2

MY PEOPLE

If my people... (2 Chronicles 7:14, NIV)

2 Chronicles 7:13-14 was written to and about God's people. This is quite clear in the phrase "if *my* people." There is great evil in this world. Many people have rejected the Lord Jesus and the salvation He offers. This is cause for great concern but it is not the primary focus of this verse.

God is speaking to Solomon about His people. It is the people of God who have fallen into sin and need to humble themselves. They are the ones who have wandered and need to turn from their evil ways to seek God's face once more.

In Ezekiel 9 the Lord prepares to bring His judgement on the land of Israel. As He prepared, He called for two angels. He told the first angel to go through the land and put a mark on all who grieved over the detestable things that were happening (Ezekiel 9:4). He then commanded a second angel to follow the first, killing without compassion, the remainder of the people in the land. Listen to the words of the Lord to this second angel in Ezekiel 9:6:

Slaughter old men, young men and maidens, women and children, but do not touch anyone who has the mark. Begin at my sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were in front of the temple.

God told the angel to begin judgement at the sanctuary. He obeyed and started with the "elders who were in front of the temple." God's judgement began with His own people. As parents, we are concerned for the well-being of all children. Of first concern, however, are our own children. God is no different. As children of God, we represent Him in the world. We are His ambassadors (see 2 Corinthians 5:20). The primary concern of any government or king is that those who represent them do so with integrity. When an ambassador misrepresents his or her government there is cause for immediate action.

Let's return for a moment to the prophet Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 8 the prophet was sitting with the elders of the land when the Lord spoke powerfully to him in a vision. In this vision the Lord brought him to the north gate of the temple. There he saw a great pagan altar that aroused the anger of the Lord (verses 5-6). The Lord then took the prophet into the entrance of the court of the temple where he saw a hole in the wall. He was asked to dig into that hole, and when he did, Ezekiel saw a door. God asked him to go through the door. When Ezekiel obeyed, the Lord showed him things that were unseen to the natural human eye. As Ezekiel looked at the walls of the temple he saw pictures of unclean animals and idols. The elders were standing in front of those images with censors in hand worshipping these abominable images. God then spoke to Ezekiel and said:

"Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at

the shrine of his own idol? They say, 'The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.'"

What a sad picture this paints of the religious leaders of the day. God showed Ezekiel what was not visible to the human eye. He showed him the hearts and attitudes of those who led the people of God. What is painted on the walls of our minds? What idols have risen up in our hearts? God sees what others do not see. He sees the secret passions of our heart and mind.

Of all the people in the New Testament, Jesus criticized the Pharisees the most. They were a religious people who put up a good front, but their hearts were not right with God. Listen to what the Lord says about them in Matthew 23:27-28:

(27) "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. (28) In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

The Pharisees were "whitewashed tombs." They looked nice and clean on the outside but inside were filled with rotteness and death. Jesus saw them as enemies to the purpose of God.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are. (Matthew 23:15)

God called the leaders of His people, “sons of hell.” They hindered the expansion of God’s kingdom on the earth. It was, in part, because of them and others like them that God withdrew His blessings from the land.

The apostle Peter makes it clear that judgement will begin with the people of God.

For it is time for judgement to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Peter 4:17)

We, who belong to God, are His greatest concern. He desires that we represent Him well on this world. If we are to be effective as lights in this dark world we must first examine ourselves to see if there is anything that hinders our testimony.

The apostle Peter told husbands that if they want to know the blessing of God, they were to treat their wives with respect.

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers. (1 Peter 3:7)

A man, who did not honor his wife, sacrificed the blessing of God in His own life. Consider this for a moment. The prayers of the husband are hindered because of the husband’s lack of consideration for his wife. If this principle is true in marriage, it is certainly true in other areas of life as

well. We can, by our disobedience, selfishness or laziness, hinder the blessing of God in our land.

When God created man, He put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Genesis 2:15). If this garden was filled with weeds and thorns would the responsibility for this not lie squarely on the one who had been given the responsibility to care for it? God has placed us on the earth to work and care for it. If this world is filled with the weeds and thorns of sin, we need to look first to those who have been given the task of caring for it. We need to ask ourselves why our witness is not being effective. Why is the blessing of God not more evident in our midst? Why is the power of God's Spirit not being demonstrated in its fullness? It is easy to look at the condition of the world and forget that we are the ones God has put here to care for it. We are the instruments through which God wants His blessings to flow. When God's people are not right with Him, the blessing He intends to pour through them will be kept from the nations. The healing of our land must begin with its caretakers.

For Consideration:

- Why is it important that we examine ourselves in light of the condition of this world today?
- What is God's purpose for us in this world? How does His blessing come to the world through us?
- How has God called you to be a channel of His blessing to others? How do your spiritual gifts and burdens release God's blessing to others?

- What particular sins keep the blessing of God from your society and church?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to give you a better understanding of the role He has for you in bringing His blessing to the world.
- Ask the Lord to forgive us for being so quick in blaming others for the condition of this world.
- Ask God to move in our midst to bring a deeper awareness of our responsibility to be His instruments in caring for this world.
- Ask God to reveal any sins that hinder His blessing in you and through you to the world.

3

CALLED BY HIS NAME

"Who are called by my name" (2 Chronicles 7:14)

In the previous chapter we saw that 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 was written to believers. In the next part of the verse the Lord describes His people as being "called by His name." What does it mean to be called by God's name? Let's take a look at three ways believers are called by God's name.

A SPECIAL MINISTRY

The first way the believer is called by God's name is through His specific gifting and purpose. Throughout Scripture the Lord God anointed His people and set them aside for a particular cause. The Holy Spirit set apart Paul and Barnabas as missionaries in Acts 13:2:

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

The apostle Paul had a clear sense of God's call on his life when he wrote in Romans 1:1:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.

Listen to what the apostle Peter had to say in 1 Peter 2:9

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

According to Peter, we are all called by God to be a royal priesthood and holy nation.

Paul reminded his readers in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, that God had a specific claim on their lives:

(6:19) Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; (6:20) you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

Believers belong to God. His Holy Spirit lives in us. We are His servants and He has chosen to use us as His instruments to bring blessing and light to the nations. Our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. It belongs to God who has chosen to use it for His glory.

Paul told the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 5:20 that they were Christ's ambassadors. This was not a call for a select few but for every believer. Paul makes this clear when he says:

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

Every believer has been chosen by God to be His representative on this earth. With this special call comes serious obligation. We must represent Him faithfully. We must shine as lights in this world. God has a role for each of us to play. He has equipped us and gifted us for a particular task. It is a wonderful privilege to be called by His name and to go in His authority.

SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

There is a second sense in which believers are called by God's name. When my wife and I were married she gave up her maiden name and took my name. She did so for a special reason. She wanted to be identified with me. She took my name so that everyone would know that we were husband and wife. In a similar way, when our children were born, they were given our family name. This showed that they belonged to us and bore our name. We were proud to give each of our children our family name. A similar thing happens when we become a child of God. God is proud to give us His name. From the moment we come to Christ, we take on His name.

In Acts 15 the Jewish community was struggling with the fact that Gentiles (non-Jews) were coming to faith in the Lord Jesus. As they debated whether a Gentile could be a Christian, James stood up and quoted a passage from Amos 9:11-12:

(15:16) "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild and I will restore it,
(15:17) that the remnant of men may seek the Lord,

and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' (Acts 15:16-17)

The prophet Amos predicted that there would be a day coming when God would rebuild the nation of Israel. In those days, Gentiles would bear the name of the Lord. In other words, He would be proud to call them His children.

God is not ashamed to call us by His name.

I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty. (2 Corinthians 6:18)

God calls us by His name in the sense that He identifies with us and draws us into a special relationship with Himself. We are His children and He pours out His love and blessings on us as His children. With this wonderful privilege comes an awesome responsibility. The apostle John captures this in 1 John 3:1-3 when he says:

(3:1) How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. (3:2) Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (3:3) Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.

Notice that those who are called children of God need to keep themselves pure. Those who have entered this spe-

cial relationship with God need to honor Him as their Father. As we take on His name we must bear that name with purity and integrity.

SPECIAL WORK OF GOD IN US

There is one more way in which believers are called by God's name. This relates to the work of God in our lives.

When I went to school my parents would buy me a notebook. One of the first things I would do with that notebook was to write my name on it. That name not only told everyone that the book belonged to me but it also showed my teachers that the work I did in that notebook was mine.

God does a similar thing. He writes His name on us and calls us by His name. He does this so the world will see that we are His handiwork. If we are open to what God is doing, we will see many ways in which He is shaping and transforming us into His image. Paul reminded the Philippian believers that the God who began a work in them would complete that work (see Philippians 1:5). God is in the business of transforming His people. We are still being shaped and moulded through the work of His Holy Spirit in us. He calls us by His name because we are the work of His hands.

It is important that we understand here that the God who calls us by His name invests much in us. He continues each day to protect and transform us. He has put His Holy Spirit in us to guide and shape us into His image.

In Bible times names had special significance. Often they were prophetic in nature and reflected what a child would accomplish in his or her lifetime. Sometimes they looked

back in time to something that defined them as a person. At times, names would be changed because the individual's life had taken a new course. We have an example of this in Genesis 32:28:

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

Jacob was the man who wrestled with the angel of the Lord. He would become known by the name Israel which literally means "struggles with God." That name would be passed on to the nation as a prophetic statement about them as a people.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of a day when Israel's name would again be changed. We read in Isaiah 62:1-2:

(62:1) For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. (2) The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.

Notice that this new name would come about as a result of the work of God in the life of the nation. Her righteousness would shine forth like the dawn and her salvation like a blazing torch. No longer would she be seen as Israel (the one who struggled with God) for God would bring an end to that struggle. Instead, she would be called by a new name that more accurately reflected the work God was doing in her.

In Revelation 3:12 we read that those who overcome will receive a new name.

Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.

God would write His new name on the conqueror. This new name represented the work that God had done in that individual in giving him grace and protection to overcome.

The phrase “called by His name” is an important one. It shows us that God set His people apart and was pleased to call them His own (even though they did not always honor Him). It also shows us that they were God’s work in progress. He was investing much into them. He was shaping them through the circumstances of life and transforming them into a people of holiness and honor.

It is in this context that we can understand what God is telling Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:13-14. It was those who had been called by God’s name who had sinned and turned from God. God had chosen them to be instruments through which His blessing would reach the far corners of the earth. They were a special people who lived with all the privilege that came from being a child of God. God was investing His resources in them. He was shaping them through circumstances and through His Word. He was devoted to helping them reach their fullest potential.

God speaks here to a people of tremendous potential and privilege. The people to whom He addresses these verses are not only His people but they have been called for a

very special purpose. With that calling came the power and authority of God. With that name came the protection and blessing of the Almighty One.

Are you a child of God today? Has he placed His name on you? Has He called you by His name and set you apart for His glory? Do you realize the privilege that is yours in this calling? Do you recognize the incredible potential? We are God's children. He calls us by His name. That name is our strength, protection against evil and hope in the darkest of nights.

It is this people, called, equipped and blessed with a special relationship with God who had fallen. They had, in their God, all they needed but turned away from it. They were the children of God but fell into disobedience. They were not using the resources at their disposal. They had fallen far short of God's purpose. They were called by His name but they did not live as His children. These words speak not only to Israel of that day but certainly to the church of our day as well.

For Consideration:

- What spiritual gifts or talents has God given you? What is His calling on your life?
- Have you been using your spiritual gifts for the Lord? Have you been faithful to what God has called you to do?
- What obligations do you have now that God has called you to be His child and given you His name? Are you living as a child of God? What difference

should there be in your life now that you belong to God?

- What particular work has the Lord God been doing in your life recently? What encouragement do you find in the fact that God continues to work in you transforming you more and more into His image?
- What is the result when believers do not take seriously the fact that they are called by God's name?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to show you your role in His kingdom. Thank Him that He does have a purpose for you.
- Thank the Lord that He willingly made you His child. Thank Him that He is pleased and proud to be your heavenly Father.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be more willing to learn the lessons He wants to teach you. Ask Him to open your heart more fully to Him so that you can become all He wants you to become.
- Ask God to give you grace to live as one who is called by His name.

4

HUMBLE YOURSELVES AND PRAY

If my people, who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray (2 Chronicles 7:14, NIV)

So far in our study we have examined the context of 2 Chronicles 7:13-14. Solomon has been praying for God's people. He knew they would fall short of the standard God had set for them. He also knew that their sin would block the flow of God's blessing through them to the world. He prayed for God's mercy and compassion on Israel when they fell. In His response, God told Solomon that even though the people fell into sin, their blessing could be restored if they did four things. These four requirements are listed in verse 14 as follows:

1. Humble themselves
2. Pray
3. Seek God's face
4. Turn from their wicked ways

This verse has often been taken out of context. Maybe you have heard people say that if we want God's blessing all we have to do is pray. This interpretation misses the central point of the verse. Prayer is only one of the four requirements of God here. If we are to expect the blessing of God to be restored to our land we must meet all four requirements.

For our purpose in this commentary we will divide these four requirements into two parts. I believe they are best understood in this light. In this chapter we will examine what it means to humble ourselves and pray.

HUMILITY

True Humility Accepts Guilt

As we begin, we need to ask ourselves what it meant for the people of God to humble themselves. In the context of this passage, God is answering Solomon's prayer for mercy on a sinful people. Sin is the focus of this verse. The humility God is asking His people to demonstrate relates to a confession of sin and recognition of their guilt.

2 Chronicles 33:22-23 describes King Amon as a man who refused to humble himself before God.

(22) He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, as his father Manasseh had done. Amon worshipped and offered sacrifices to all the idols Manasseh had made. (23) But unlike his father Manasseh, he did not humble himself before the LORD; Amon increased his guilt.

For King Amon, to humble himself would have meant turning from his idols and confessing his sin. This is something he refused to do. Notice that it is possible to refuse to be humbled. Maybe you have met individuals who have refused to confess their sin or admit they were wrong. They may refuse to be reconciled with a brother or sister. God does not force us to admit our guilt. Some believers die with sins on their heart they have refused to confess. This was the case for Zedekiah in 2 Chronicles 36:11-12:

(11) Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. (12) He did evil in the eyes of the LORD his God and did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke the word of the LORD.

No doubt Jeremiah challenged the king with regard to his sin. Despite the fact that the Lord had spoken to him through the prophet, King Zedekiah remained hardened to the word of God and would not submit. 2 Chronicles 36:12 tell us that "he did not humble himself." True humility accepts guilt.

True Humility Recognizes Need

Humbling ourselves not only implies confession of guilt but also a recognition of our inability to do and be all that God requires. When Ezra was called of God to return with his people to Israel to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and restore its worship, he felt inadequate for the task. Listen to what he said in Ezra 8:21:

There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions.

As Ezra embarked on this great adventure, he cast aside every form of self-reliance and pride. He came to God pleading with Him for mercy, strength, wisdom and guidance. He knew that human strength and wisdom would not win the victory and so he chose to trust in the Lord and His strength alone. He would walk as the Lord directed him. He would trust in the Lord's provision.

The Psalmist reminded his readers that the Lord teaches those who are humble. Writing in Psalm 25:9 he says:

He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.

This is not the case for the proud person. The proud person believes he is able to do the work the Lord has called him to do. He does not trust the Lord's strength but serves in his human ability. He does not wait on the Lord's leading but depends on his own plans and schedules. This person is not open to be taught.

The humble person is one who makes a conscious decision to listen to the Lord. He will wait on the Lord's timing and follow the leading of His Spirit. The Lord delights to lead this type of person. If we are to humble ourselves as God requires, we must put aside our own ideas. We must stop relying on our own strength and wisdom. We must come to God with a heart and mind that is ready to listen to what He has to say. When He rebukes us we must be willing to accept His rebuke. When He asks us to surrender what we have been holding on to, we must be willing to submit. True humility recognizes and trusts in God's ability and leading more than its own wisdom and strength.

True Humility is Demonstrated in Acts of Compassion

True humility expresses itself in acts of tenderness and compassion. Listen to what the Lord told His people in Isaiah 58:4-7:

(58:4) Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. (58:5) Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? (58:6) "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? (58:7) Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

God rebukes those who put on a show of humility in Isaiah 58:4-7. He tells them that the test of true humility was in compassion and concern for those who are in need. The truly humble person is not focused on himself. He sacrifices his time and energy for those around him. He sees their need and is willing to do all he could to minister to them in their pain. He considers their needs as being more important than his own (see Philippians 2:3).

PRAYER

The Lord told Solomon that His people were to humble themselves and pray. We must see the prayer required here in the context of humbling ourselves. The prayer God

desires is a prayer of confession, recognition of need and true compassion.

In Luke 18:10-14 Jesus told the story of two men who went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee was the first to pray. In his prayer he reminded God of all the good things he had done. He thanked God that he was not like other men who were lost in their sin. His prayer was a proud prayer. In it he failed to recognize his own sinfulness and need of God.

The second man was a tax collector. Tax collectors were despised in the culture of their day. They often made their money by charging extra and putting heavy burdens on those they collected from. This man came to God recognizing his guilt. He told God that he was a sinner. He grieved over the fact that he had offended and sinned against God and His people.

Jesus told His listeners that God heard the prayer of this tax collector and concluded with the following challenge:

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled,
and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke
18:14)

God is asking His people to humble themselves and pray. If we are to pray the prayer God demands here it must be in the context of what we have learned about humility.

The type of prayer God is asking for is not the prayer of the Pharisee who stands boldly in the temple looking down on the sinners outside. It is not the prayer of one who blames the condition of the world on other people, but of

him who begs God to forgive the hypocrisy and failings of his own heart.

The prayer God requires is a prayer of the believer who knows that the lack of blessing is, in part, the result of his own sin and shortcomings. It is the prayer of the Christian who has come to understand that he has failed God and has not walked fully in His ways. He has not used His gifts to bring the blessing God desires to the world around him. He has not always been an example of Christ and a light in the darkness. He has often wasted his resources and buried his talents, showing little fruit for the Master's investment in his life.

The prayer God requires is a cry for help. It is not the proud prayer of one who believes he has everything under control. It is rather the prayer of Ezra who recognizes that without God's guidance and support he would never be able to accomplish God's purpose.

Finally, this prayer is also a prayer for compassion and mercy. This is a bold request from one who has failed his Master. This is the humble cry of one who knows that God forgives and restores blessings to those who repent and return to Him. It is the cry of the heart that longs once again to be the instrument of God's blessing and healing for the nations.

Notice that it is those who are called by His name who are to humble himself and pray. How easy it is to look at the unbeliever and see them as the reason why God withholds His blessings. This verse, however, points the finger directly at the children of God. They are the ones who are to humble themselves and cry out to God. You see, the

blessing of God flows through us to the world. If that blessing is hindered, there is a good chance that we are the problem.

If we want to see the renewal of our land, we will never see it in the prayer of the Pharisee: "Lord I thank you that I am not like the tax collectors." Yet how many of our prayers for revival and renewal focus on the sins of others? Instead, the prayer God desires is the prayer of the tax collector, who, humbly recognizing his need and daring not to even lift up his eyes to God cried: "Be merciful to me a sinner." The heart of God is stirred by the humble prayer of His repentant child recognizing his failures and crying out for mercy. How this prayer touches His heart and moves Him to bless.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn about humility in this chapter? What do we learn here about the characteristics of a humble person?
- What is the connection between humility and prayer in this verse? Do all prayers come from a humble heart?
- How is the prayer of the Pharisee in Luke 18:10-14 different from the prayer of the tax collector? Have you ever been guilty of praying the prayer of the Pharisee?
- What do we learn in this chapter about the compassion of God toward those who humble themselves and come to Him?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to see your guilt and need of Him in a greater way. Ask Him to forgive you for any blindness to your own need.
- Take a moment to confess your failures and sin to God. Ask Him to forgive you and restore you to deeper fellowship with Him.
- Ask God to show you how He wants to use you. Ask Him for deeper faith and confidence in His purpose for your life.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you have not been a faithful channel of His blessing to others.

5

SEEKING GOD'S FACE

If my people, who are called by my name ... seek my face and turn from their wicked ways. (2 Chronicles 7:14)

How do we distinguish one person from another? Is it not by their face? Each person has a unique face. This sets us apart from all other people. The face is much more than a means of identifying people, however. It also represents a person's character. When we see the face of a loved one, we think immediately of what that person means to us. If we see the face of an enemy, we remember how much they have hurt us. If we were to see the face of someone in authority, we recognize his or her position and respond accordingly.

In Exodus 33 when Moses asked God to show him His glory, God told him that no one could see His face and live. Notice the connection between the face of God and the attribute of glory.

(18) Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."
(19) And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.
(20) But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." (Exodus 33:18-20)

When God told Moses that no one could see His face and live, He was telling him something about His character. He was telling Moses that this face belonged to a glorious and holy God. His majesty is more than our eyes can behold. His holiness would destroy us as sinful beings. To seek the face of God is not something to take lightly.

Jacob understood this when God spoke to him in Genesis 32:30. He was shocked that he could hear the voice of God and alive to tell the story:

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

The apostle John tells us what the response of the people on the earth will be when the Lord returns in the last days:

(15) Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. (16) They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! (17) For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Revelation 6:15-17)

Notice particularly that the unbelievers cry to the rocks to hide them from “the face of Him who sits on the throne.” God is a holy God. He will judge sin and expose hypocrisy. If you ask Him to shine the light of His face on you or your church you had better be ready for what that light of holiness will expose. Many great men and women of God before us have fallen broken before the light of His face. Sins were exposed they never knew existed. Attitudes were unearthed they felt were long dead. Standing in the light of His face, we see ourselves for who we are and we are ashamed and humbled. Let’s take a moment now to consider what Scripture teaches us about the face of God.

SEEKING GOD’S FACE REQUIRES TURNING FROM SIN

One of the clearest teachings of Scripture with regard to the face of God is that God hides His face from those who persist in sin. Listen to what the Lord said in Leviticus 17:10:

Any Israelite or any alien living among them who eats any blood – I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from his people.

It was a sin for an Israelite to eat the blood of an animal. God declared that He would set His face against any person who defiled their body in this way.

The prophet Micah expresses a similar thought when he wrote in Micah 3:4:

Then they will cry out to the LORD, but he will not answer them. At that time he will hide his face from them because of the evil they have done.

Notice the reason God hid His face. It was because of the evil His people had committed.

Speaking to His people in Deuteronomy 32:20 God said:

“I will hide my face from them,” he said, “and see what their end will be; for they are a perverse generation, children who are unfaithful.”

The perversity and unfaithfulness of God’s children caused Him to hide His face. Sin and evil separate us from God’s face. If we are to seek the face of God, we must first deal with sin. The Lord told His people in Hosea 5:15 that He would withdraw His presence until they admitted their guilt and sought His face.

Then I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt. And they will seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me.”

Notice the connection between admitting guilt and seeking the face of God. We cannot expect the face of God to shine upon us until the barrier of sin has been removed.

Throughout the history of the church, men and women of faith have sought the Lord in many different ways. They have sought the Lord’s face through worship, prayer, service and sacrifice. These things are important but none of them can ultimately reveal the face of God to us unless we first deal with sin. Jesus told the man who brought his offering to the temple in Matthew 5:23 to first go and be reconciled with his brother. He could not seek God’s face in worship until he had dealt with his sin toward his brother. God told the husband who did not treat his wife with respect in 1 Peter 3:7 that he would only hinder his prayers

by the way he treated his wife. If he wanted to see God's face in prayer, he first needed to respect his wife. To Saul, who offered his sacrifice of sheep on the altar, the Lord said: "to obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Samuel 15:22). Saul could not find the face of God in his sacrifice because he had sin in his life.

If you are experiencing dryness in your spiritual life or if it seems that the face of the Lord is hidden from your church, then the first thing you need to do is to consider what it is that keeps His face from shining on you. The first place to look is your own heart.

TO SEEK GOD'S FACE MEANS LONGING FOR HIS PRESENCE AND BLESSING

It is quite clear in Scripture that when God hides His face there is evidence of this in our midst. Notice what the Lord said in Deuteronomy 31:17-18:

On that day I will become angry with them and forsake them; I will hide my face from them, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and difficulties will come upon them, and on that day they will ask, 'Have not these disasters come upon us because our God is not with us?' (18) And I will certainly hide my face on that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods.

Speaking in Jeremiah 33:5 the Lord says:

They will be filled with the dead bodies of the men I will slay in my anger and wrath. I will hide my face from this city because of all its wickedness.

When the Lord turns His face from us, we see it in our land. The land mourns. Sin and evil abounds. In our churches, discord and lack of blessing is evident. The fruit of God's Spirit is missing. To seek God's face is to cry out for a renewal of that blessing. It is to recognize our condition without God. It is to see how lost and hopeless we are without His life flowing through us. Those who seek His face, long for His presence to be revealed. They are not content to live without clear evidence of His blessing. Like Moses they cry out: "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here" (Exodus 33:15). They cannot bear the thought of living without the blessing of God on their lives and ministries. They cannot imagine a life without His presence. They have the attitude of the Psalmist in Psalm 42:1-3 when he writes:

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. (2) My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? (3) My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"

Listen to what the Lord had to say to the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:20:

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

The Lord's presence was not with the church of Laodicea. They were not seeking His face. In fact, they didn't even seem to recognize that He was not in their midst. The Lord, who should have been the center of their attention, was outside knocking on the door longing to come in. How often has this happened in our lives today? We become so focused on our activities that we fail to see that the Lord is

not present. To seek God's face is to invite Him into our churches and into our daily life. Does it surprise you that I say this? Isn't the Lord supposed to be always in our midst? Scripture teaches us here that this is not always the case. While He does not abandon us, He is often left out of our meetings and celebrations. At times His presence is driven out of our churches. He is often ignored and His ways disregarded. Our churches and our land suffer greatly as a result.

The good news is that God is willing to restore His presence if we turn to Him and seek His face. Listen to His promise in Ezekiel 39:29:

I will no longer hide my face from them, for I will pour out my Spirit on the house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD.

What a glorious day that would be. God would no longer hide His face from His people. The day was coming when He would pour out His Spirit on the nation of Israel and they would again know His wonderful presence and blessing. It is His delight to pour out refreshing and renewal on His children. It is His desire to make His presence known to all who seek His face. Is this our desire today? Do we grieve because His presence is not in our midst? Do we cry out like Moses: "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here" (Exodus 33:15)?

Sometimes, if we are honest with ourselves, we are content with things the way they are. We like being in control of our own lives. We don't want anything to change. Jesus knocks on the door, but we are not ready to open to let Him in. When He came into the temple in John 2:13-16, Jesus made a whip and drove out the money changers and the animal merchants. When you seek the presence of God

and His blessing, don't be surprised if He drives out a few things from your midst. There may be people leave your church. Sin may be exposed in your life. He may change the direction of your church and make people uncomfortable. When you seek the face of the Lord and invite His presence and blessing, you must be prepared to let Him take control.

TO SEEK GOD'S FACE IS TO SEEK HIS HELP AND GUIDANCE

In Psalm 69:17-18 the psalmist makes a connection between God hiding His face and his need to be rescued from his enemies.

(17) Do not hide your face from your servant; answer me quickly, for I am in trouble. (18) Come near and rescue me; redeem me because of my foes.

The psalmist realized that as long as God hid His face, he would be in serious trouble. His enemies would overcome him if God was not present to save him.

Later on the Psalmist wrote:

(7) Answer me quickly, O LORD; my spirit fails. Do not hide your face from me or I will be like those who go down to the pit. (8) Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul. (Psalm 143:7-8)

For the Psalmist, seeking God's face implied recognition of his own weakness and inability. He confessed his need for strength and wisdom. He asks God to bring him word

of His unfailing love. The psalmist comes to God as a little child recognizing that if God does not show His face, he would surely perish. Admittedly, it is a fearful thing to seek the face of a God we have offended but the psalmist knew that this was his only hope. He had come to the end of himself. He had no more confidence in his own flesh and wisdom. He pleads now with God to show him the way to go and commits himself to following that path. There was no other comfort, no other wisdom, no other strength that would satisfy. God alone was the answer.

You can't seek God's face if you are seeking other things at the same time. If you seek God's face for wisdom, you need to turn from your own way of thinking. If you seek God's face for strength, you have to stop trusting in your flesh. All these things only compete with God in our lives. To seek God's face is to recognize our need and commit ourselves to listening and following Him alone.

TO SEEK GOD'S FACE IS TO WALK IN OBEDIENCE

This brings us to one final point we need to make about seeking the face of the Lord. To seek the face of God is to walk in obedience. The psalmist captured this when he said in Psalm 119:57-59:

(57) You are my portion, O LORD; I have promised to obey your words. (58) I have sought your face with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise. (59) I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes.

The psalmist tells us that he sought the face of the Lord. What is important to note is how this statement about seeking God's face is sandwiched between two verses

that speak of walking in obedience. In verse 57 the psalmist promised to obey God's words. In verse 59 he says that he considered his ways and turned his steps to God's statutes. For the psalmist, seeking God's face implied obedience to His Word.

To seek the face of the Lord involves a commitment. No one can seek the face of God without this commitment. To seek God's face is to commit ourselves to walk in obedience. This will require "considering our ways" and "turning our steps" (Psalm 119:59). This is not a temporary measure in a moment of crisis but a lifelong commitment to fellowship and obedience.

Seeking God's face is not just a matter of praying and watching God fill our life with good things. Seeking His face demands drastic changes. Some of these changes will hurt. Some of us will be humbled. Sins will be exposed. Commitments will need to be made. Sinful alliances will need to be broken. This is where the fourth requirement of God comes into play.

God told Solomon that day that not only did His people need to seek His face but they also needed to turn from their sinful ways. As we have already seen, you cannot seek God's face in any other way. If you set your heart to seek God's face you will need to deal with your sin. This requires a change of life and attitude. Sin is an obstacle to the renewal and healing in our land. This sin ravages our minds and hearts and causes God to hide His face from us.

If we want to see renewal and revival it is the face of God we need. Those who are serious about revival and healing will humble themselves and recognize that they have fallen short of God's standard. They will cry out to God for mercy

and compassion. They will turn from their sin and evil and seek His face for they know that it is face alone that will bring the healing and renewal they need.

For Consideration:

- Is seeking the Lord's face simply a matter of letting the Lord bless us? What needs to happen before this is possible?
- What happens when the Lord shines His face on us? What does the light of His face reveal?
- What needs to be the commitment of those who seek the face of the Lord?
- What is the connection between turning from our wicked ways and seeking the face of the Lord? Can we seek the face of the Lord without first turning from our wicked ways?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to expose those things in your life that you need to address in order for His face to shine more fully on you.
- Thank the Lord that He wants to reveal Himself to us in a deeper way.
- Ask the Lord to make you more willing to see sin as He sees it.
- Ask God to lead you in the way He wants you to go. Ask Him to forgive you for being content to live without the fullness of His face shining upon you.

6

THEN I WILL HEAR FROM HEAVEN

Then will I hear from heaven (2 Chronicles 7:14, NIV)

Let's take a moment to consider what we have seen so far in this study of 2 Chronicles 7:13-14. Verse 13 reveals a problem.

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,

The blessings of God had been withheld because of sin, and His people were no longer experiencing God's presence and refreshing. Their land was being destroyed by lack of rain, locusts and plague.

As we move into 2 Chronicles 7:14a we see God's solution to this problem:

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways...

If God's people wanted to see a restoration of blessing and healing they needed to humble themselves and pray. They also needed to seek God's face and turn from all their wicked ways.

The second half of 2 Chronicles 7:14 speaks about God's response when the people followed His solution. It is important that we note that the first and second part of verse 14 are connected by the words "if" and "then." If God's people followed His solution to the problem, then they would know His favorable response. The connection between the words "if" and "then" is very significant and teaches us a very important lesson in our Christian life.

The word "if" imposes a responsibility on God's people. In this case, they were to humble themselves, pray, seek God's face and turn from their wicked ways. As we have seen, this required a significant effort. The word "then", however, shows us that there would be a reward for this effort. The blessing of God's people, in this case, depended on their willingness to follow the solution God proposed. If they were willing to obey God and agree to His solution, then they could be assured that God would respond and bring the renewing and refreshing they needed.

The challenge we have as believers is to understand the balance between grace and responsibility. As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ we understand that our salvation is a matter of grace. In other words, we do not deserve to be forgiven of our sins. We could never merit the salvation God offers. Salvation is a free gift given to unworthy sinners.

As I look at the ways the Lord has been changing me over the years, I see His hand in it all. He has stripped away negative attitudes in me. He has changed my character over the years so that I respond in a more godly way to people and circumstances. I cannot doubt the work of God in my life and the way He has been graciously shaping me more into the image of Christ.

I am also aware of how God uses the most unworthy people to accomplish His purpose. Jonah ran away from God yet was used to bring city-wide repentance in Nineveh. The Samaritan woman was living a sinful lifestyle but was used by God to bring many Samaritans to Christ (see John 4:4-42). Peter denied the Lord three times but was God's chosen instrument to establish His church. All these examples are illustrations of God's wonderful grace. He often uses us despite our failures.

Having said this, I am also aware that I have a direct responsibility toward God and that my attitude or willingness to obey will have an impact on my character and fruitfulness in ministry. I believe that there are levels we cannot attain in our spiritual lives without this obedience and effort. There is a wonderful example of this in Luke 24:13-32. Here we have the story of Jesus walking on the road to Emmaus with some of His disciples. These disciples did not recognize Him as they spoke about the recent crucifixion of their Lord. They shared openly their confusion and Jesus encouraged them with the Word of God. Something strange happened when these disciples arrived at their destination. Listen to Luke 24:28:

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is

nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.

Notice that the Lord Jesus “acted as if he were going farther.” This leads us to believe that if it were not for the effort of the disciples who “urged him strongly” to stay with them, He would have moved on and left them to return home by themselves.

The result of their strong urging, however, was that they came to see Christ for who He was. It was only after they had brought Him into their home, that Jesus revealed His true identity to these disciples. Their questions about the crucifixion were answered when they recognized Him as the Lord Jesus who had come to life again.

All too many times we are content with too little in our spiritual lives. While the blessing of God falls on even the ungodly (see Matthew 5:45) there are some blessings that can only be ours through perseverance and unyielding obedience to God.

The New Testament teaches us that we will be rewarded according to our faithfulness. Speaking through the apostle John, the Lord Jesus said:

Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. (Revelation 22:12)

The book of Revelation tells us about the crowns that those who persevere will receive for their faithfulness (see Revelation 2:10; 3:11). This indicates that while the Lord, in His grace, may certainly bless even those who do not

deserve His blessing, there is also a level of blessing that only comes through hard work and perseverance.

Probably the passage that speaks the most clearly about this is found in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15:

(10) By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. (11) For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. (12) If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, (13) his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. (14) If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. (15) If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Paul compares the Christian life to building a house. Notice that the foundation has already been laid for us (1 Corinthians 3:11). That foundation is the gracious work of Christ. Notice also that there is now a requirement to build on that foundation. We can build with various types of material. Some material will not withstand the Day of Judgment. Other material will withstand the fire that tests the quality of our work (1 Corinthians 3:12). 1 Corinthians 3:14 makes it quite clear that if what we build survives the fire of God's judgment, we will receive our reward. If it does not, while we will be saved, it will be only "as one escaping through flames." In other words, we will have nothing to bring to God for a life lived on this earth. We will stand naked and ashamed before our heavenly Father and receive no reward.

Our response to God will impact the shape and color of our spiritual lives. We can be faithful in the use of our spiritual gifts and see the blessing of God or we can hide those gifts and never see that blessing. We can step out into God's call for our lives or we can choose to disobey and never experience the fullness that God intended. We can stand firm or we can retreat. God will not always force us to obey. While He will not abandon us, He may allow us to go our own way for a period of time. There are believers who will die in rebellion against God. Others will choose their own path and reject His purpose.

What we need to understand is that 2 Chronicles 7:14 is telling us that there is a conscious choice that God's people needed to make. Their decision would have an impact on the shape of their lives. They could refuse God's blessing or they could submit to His solution and experience His forgiveness and healing.

We have in 2 Chronicles 7:14 a promise from God. Here He told His people that He would hear them. It is important to note that we hear sounds with our physical ears. God does not hear in the same way. It is true that God hears the sound of our words but we miss the point if this is how we interpret this verse. The context indicates that God hears much more than words. He hears our attitudes when we humble ourselves and seek His face with all our heart. He hears our actions when we turn from our wicked ways. God's hearing is not limited to sounds from our lips. He hears in a way we do not hear. In fact, some of the most powerful prayers are not even made with words. Sometimes words are inadequate to express the fullness of what is in the heart. God hears that brokenness of our heart. He hears our acts of repentance. He hears the longings our heart cannot express in words. God is not interested in words only. He is interested in attitudes and actions. This

is what God will hear, and when He hears a broken heart crying out in humility and action, He promises to respond.

There is one more detail we need to see in this part of verse 14. Notice that the Lord says that He would hear from heaven. This is important. There are different ways we could understand this. First, God hears from heaven because that this is where He dwells. While this is, in part, what the verse is saying, there is a deeper sense to the phrase “from heaven.”

The ways of heaven cannot be challenged. When the verse tells us that God hears from heaven, it is telling us that our prayer has reached the highest court. It is now in the hands of one who has absolute authority. He has heard our prayers and promises to take action. Nothing can stand in His way. There is no higher court. There is no greater authority. The enemy must be silent. Miracles can happen because the God of all authority and power now rises from His throne in heaven and comes to our aid.

The phrase “from heaven” not only gives authority to our request but it also tells us something about the nature of the blessing that is the result of our prayers. The response to our requests will come from heaven. The answer to our need is a heavenly answer and not an earthly one. This means that it may look very different from what we expect. Listen to what the Lord spoke through Isaiah in Isaiah 55:8-9:

- (8) “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.
- (9) “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Heavenly blessings have a different priority. God's desire is for our spiritual well-being and our intimacy with Him. Sometimes these blessings may appear to us as trials. The death of the Lord Jesus on the cross did not seem to be a blessing at the moment, but the seeds planted that day became the foundation for the work of the kingdom of God in all ages. The blessing God promises is from heaven. It is true that wonderful things may happen on this earth as a result of a heavenly blessing, but we should never limit these blessings to physical prosperity, comfort or ease. To do so minimizes the much greater blessing that God wants to give.

In Isaiah 64:1-4 the prophet called on God to open the heavens and come down. Listen to his prayer:

(64:1) Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! (64:2) As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! (64:3) For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. (64:4) Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

Consider the nature of the blessing Isaiah was calling down from heaven in Isaiah 64. This blessing would cause the mountains to tremble. It is described as a fire that sets twigs ablaze or causes water to boil. It was like a great earthquake that made the enemy nations tremble. Is this the kind of blessing you would ask for today? This blessing has a powerful cleansing effect on the earth. The sinner

trembles and fears the wrath of God. The believer falls on his knees broken and humbled. God moves in ways we cannot explain. His kingdom is established and sin and rebellion is forcibly defeated. We can only imagine the effect this kind of blessing would have on the churches of our day. Hypocrisy would be exposed and removed. God's people would be humbled and equipped for greater service. Relationships would have to be mended. God's heavenly blessing is not just about living a more comfortable life. If anything, we may find our comfort challenged. We may find ourselves involved in a battle that involves great sacrifice. We may be compelled to give all we have. When heavenly blessing is poured out earthly blessings are surrendered.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn about the conditional nature of God's blessings in this passage? Are there blessings we will only receive if we meet certain requirements?
- Have you been missing out on some of the blessing God longs to give? Why?
- What is the difference between the blessings we receive as a result of God's wonderful grace and the blessings we receive as a reward for faithful service and obedience?
- What is the difference between heavenly blessings and earthly blessings? Have we been guilty of only seeking earthly blessings?
- Is the church of our day ready to receive blessings from heaven? What do you think this blessing

would look like? What impact would it have on believers?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is a God of grace who blesses us even when we do not deserve that blessing.
- Thank the Lord that there are blessings in store for those who walk in obedience and surrender to Him. Ask Him to give you grace to walk in obedience so that you may experience these blessings as well.
- Ask the Lord to prepare His people for the blessing He wants to pour out on them. Ask Him to deliver us from our love of this world so that we can experience the greater heavenly blessing He wants to give us.

FORGIVENESS AND HEALING

*... and will forgive their sin and will heal their land
(2 Chronicles 7:14)*

We have been examining the response of God to the prayer of Solomon in 2 Chronicles 6. Solomon's request was that when God's people fell into sin, God would hear their prayers, forgive their sin and restore them to fellowship and blessing (see 2 Chronicles 6:21, 23, 25, 27, 30, 39). God was willing to do this, but required that His people first humble themselves, pray, seek His face and turn from their wicked ways. In this final chapter we will look at the promise of God when these conditions were met.

FORGIVENESS

God promises to do two things for His people in the last part of verse 14. The first of these two promises is forgiveness. This was the great need of God's people. They had sinned against a holy God. Their sin separated them not only from fellowship with God but also from His blessings.

In Matthew 6 the Lord Jesus was teaching His disciples how to pray. He told that when they prayed for forgiveness God would forgive them as they had forgiven others. If they did not forgive others their heavenly Father would not forgive them.

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. (15) But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Remember that the Lord Jesus was teaching His disciples when He made this statement. The understanding was that those who prayed to God and sought His face would need to be forgiven because they had failed to live up to His standard.

Writing in 1 John 1:8-10, the apostle makes it quite clear that even believers will need to be forgiven.

(8) If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. (9) If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (10) If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

These verses leave us with an important question. If Jesus came to pay for our sins and bring us into a relationship with the Father, how can there still be sin in our lives that needs to be forgiven? There is a beautiful passage in John 13 that is very helpful in this regard. In John 13 the Lord Jesus was eating His last Passover meal with the disciples. During that evening meal, the Lord Jesus got up from the meal and, taking a towel, He proceeded to wash the

disciple's feet. Peter had a problem with Jesus washing his feet. "You shall never wash my feet," he told Jesus that day (John 13:8). Jesus explained that unless He washed Peter, he could have no part of Him. When Peter heard this, he responded:

"Then Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hand and my head as well!" (John 13:9)

Peter wanted the Lord to wash him from head to toe. Jesus' answer to Peter that day is significant:

Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you."

Imagine you lived in Jerusalem in the days of Jesus. Your friend invites you for an evening meal. In preparation for that meal, you have a bath. Putting on your best clothes you go out the door and walk down the dusty streets of Jerusalem to your friend's home. Arriving at his door you notice that the dust of the road has dirtied your feet. Upon arrival, you are greeted by a servant with a basin of water. As you sit, this servant kneels down and washes the dust off your feet and once again you are completely clean. You do not need to take a bath for the sake of your dirty feet. All you need to do is wash off the dust and you are clean again.

John 13 has some important things to teach us as believers. The Lord Jesus has cleansed us by His death on the cross. The legal price has been paid for our debt. Sin will no longer separate us from God because of the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross. We have been bathed in His blood and cleansed of the stain of sin on our lives.

While we have been cleansed by the blood of the Lord Jesus, we still walk on the dusty and dirty streets of this sinful world. As we walk in this world, we are affected by its filth. Our eyes see things that cause us to sin. Our ears hear things that anger us and cause us to respond in an ungodly way. Our tongues speak things that hurt our brothers or sisters. Who among us has not had their feet dirtied by the sin of this world? Who among us has not given in to the natural impulses of the flesh? As we live in this flesh, we find ourselves tempted. Just as no one could walk the dusty streets of Jerusalem without getting his or her feet dirty, so none of us will be able to live in this world without being dirtied by sin and its temptations.

While we have been cleansed in the blood of Christ, we will still have to come often to the Lord for a "spiritual foot washing." We will still have to confess our failures. While these sins will not cause us to lose our salvation, they will affect our fellowship and blessing. In fact, sin must never be taken lightly. It can have devastating consequences on our lives and the lives of those around us. Families have been torn apart. Ministries have been destroyed. Spiritual gifts have been wasted. Lives have been ruined. Communities have ravaged. All this is because of sin. Sin continues to infect our churches, societies and personal lives. We have watched it take our children. We see it wreak havoc in our marriages. Yes, sin is still an issue in our day and its effects are felt on a daily basis.

The wonderful promise in 2 Chronicles 7:14 is that there is forgiveness. This sin does not need to stand between us and our God. Those who humble themselves and pray, seek His face and turn from our evil way can be cleansed of all impurities. God is willing to pardon all who will come to Him.

HEALING

The second thing God promised to do for His people in the last part of verse 14 was to heal their land. Notice the connection between forgiveness and healing. Sin brings sickness and death. Forgiveness removes this curse to bring wholeness and health.

I believe that God wants us to experience the fullness of His blessing more than we want to experience it. It was His delight to send His Son so that we could become His children. It is His desire to shower us with good gifts. Jesus made this clear in Matthew 7:11 when He said:

If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him?

The delight of the Father is to bless His children. It grieves Him when His children are not walking in the fullness of these blessings. The apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 2:9:

However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, nor ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

We have yet to see the blessings God has for us. Our ears have never heard of such incredible fullness and joy. Even in our wildest imagination, we could never conceive of the richness God has in store for those who love Him. Such is the heart of God for His children.

What is it that keeps us weak, sick and dying? 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 tells us that it is sin. If our church or our land is to be healthy again, it must be forgiven and the offense of sin removed.

Some time ago I found myself in a spiritual battle with the enemy. I knew that the Lord God had called me to a ministry of writing and teaching His Word. I had spent the morning working on a passage of Scripture and was returning home from the coffee shop where I had been working. As I walked home, I heard the enemy speaking into my mind saying: "What do you think you are doing? What good is it to write these Bible commentaries?" While I knew this was from Satan, those words stuck to my mind and for the rest of the day I was troubled by them.

The next day, when I returned to the coffee shop, the Lord spoke to my heart through a passage of Scripture so powerfully that it broke the effect of those words from Satan. He reminded me that morning that there were problems in our society that science, politics or medicine could never fix. These problems could only be solved by the Word of God. God reminded me that day that if our societies would walk in obedience to His word they could be transformed.

Imagine what would happen to our nations if they confessed their sin and committed themselves to seeking God and walking according to His principles? What would this world be like if each person recognized that they had sinned and confessing that sin committed themselves to seeking God alone? What would your churches be like if this was the attitude? Our governments would be changed. The needy would be fed. Our economy would be transformed. Nations would cease to war. The sickness of our land would be healed and the blessing of God showered upon us.

Ultimately, the problems in our land have to do with sin. Greed, pride, selfishness, lust and other such sins have caused this land of ours to groan in sickness. This is true not only in our land but also in our churches and personal lives. The great need of our day is for a healing from the effects of sin.

It is not political reformation that will bring about this change. It is not better medicine or advances in scientific knowledge that will restore health to our land. The sickness of our land is a spiritual sickness that can only be cured through the forgiveness of sin.

The solution to the sickness of our church, community and world is found in these simple words of God to Solomon. We need to humble ourselves and pray, seek God's face and turn from our wicked ways. Only then will God hear from heaven, forgive our sins and heal our land. We can look all we want for another solution but the answer is right here before us in these verses. It is so simple we often miss it. I fear that even after reading this study many will still miss the point. Sin is the problem. Humbling ourselves, turning from that sin and seeking God is the solution. There is no other solution. Will we recognize this and cast ourselves on the mercy of God today? For all who do, God promises wonderful forgiveness and healing. The question is whether we will take these verses seriously and go on to experience the reality of what they teach.

For Consideration:

- Do Christians need to be forgiven? How does sin affect our fellowship with God and the fullness of His life in us?
- Are there personal sins you need to address in your life today? What are they? What affect have these sins had on you, your family or your community?
- What are some of the ways we have sought to deal with the lack of blessing and sickness in our churches and land? How does Satan seek to keep us from understanding the connection between sin and this need for healing of our lives and land?
- How much has sin affected our lives and society? How much of the dysfunction and sickness in our land is the result of sin? What is the cure?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you grace to examine yourself in light of His Word. Ask Him to reveal any sin that would keep you from His fullness.
- Thank the Lord that He died so that the penalty for our sin was paid.
- Thank the Lord that when we come to Him for cleansing on a daily basis, He extends His forgiveness to us.
- Ask God to move in your life and in your community to bring a spirit of repentance and confession.
- Thank the Lord that His great desire is to bless His children and to bless the nations through them. Ask Him to move powerfully among us to bring repentance, forgiveness and healing to our land.

Light To My Path Book Distribution

Light To My Path (LTMP) is a book writing and distribution ministry reaching out to needy Christian workers in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Many Christian workers in developing countries do not have the resources necessary to pay for Bible training or purchase Bible study materials for their ministries and personal encouragement. F. Wayne MacLeod is a member of Action International Ministries and has been writing these books with a goal to distribute them to these Christian workers around the world.

To date tens of thousands of books are being used in preaching, teaching, evangelism and encouragement of local believers in over sixty countries. Books have now been translated into a number of languages. The goal is to make them available to as many believers as possible.

The ministry of LTMP is a faith based ministry and we trust the Lord for the resources necessary to distribute the books for the encouragement and strengthening of believers around the world. Would you pray that the Lord would open doors for the translation and further distribution of these books?

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