

BACK TO GOD

"If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." II Chronicles 7:14.

As we approach the time for a series of revival services, this seems to me to be the most timely passage for our consideration.

Last Sunday we studied about David's concern for a temple for the Lord. We noted that God commended David for the desire which he cherished in his heart. God accepted the desire of his heart, but committed the building of His house to David's son, Solomon. When the structure was completed, Solomon, who knew its meaning in the heart desire of his father and in the hand accomplishment of himself, dedicated it to the Lord in an impressive prayer. Solomon also asked God for the assurance of His blessing upon the children of Israel. He knew that the brightness of the future depended on whether or not the people -- leaders and followers alike -- remained humble before God, giving obedience to His will and heart loyalty to His righteous purposes. He understood full well that if they broke their vows to obey God, wandered off after strange gods and exalted the creature above the Creator, they would be judged for their sins and chastened for their follies.

The first great truth which our text makes plain is that God has a people. His expression "My people" implies that He is a keeping God. He is not forgetful of His people. Divine truth shows Him as the keeper of His people. God is a keeping person and His children are a kept people. This does not mean that the way before them will always be bright and the weather will always be fair, but it does mean that when the way becomes dark and the weather stormy God's people will be kept by Him. He has said, "I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people" (Hebrews 8:10). That means they will be a possessed and kept people.

"Called by my name" is an expression which implies a judging God and a judged people. God will not permit His name to be treated lightly. He is concerned with it and with those who bear it. He will judge those who are called by His name. Not only will they be judged by Him whose name they bear, but by world too. The world's judgment of them becomes its judgment of God. The world may not read God's Word, but it does read the lives of those who are called by His name. Too often they read Him thus as a small God and short of power.

In Solomon's prayer there was a distinct recognition and acknowledgment of the fact that all of God's people sin, and that divine chastisement for purposes of correction will certainly follow their sins. There is no doubt whatever about that. Solomon also made it known that God has made adequate provision for the forgiveness of the sins of His children. God has made it clear that they may be spared this chastisement if they will meet certain conditions.

It should not be difficult to recognize that our woes today are the results of our sinful ways. Millions in our country are worshipping the wealth that God has given them instead of worshipping Him. This is not only true of rich people, but also of the middle classes and the poor. People can and do worship money without possessing much of it. Multitudes of church members have turned from the God of the Bible to a god of their own making. Instead of worshipping the God of the Bible, they are worshipping gods of their own notions. In the place of the God of power, they have substituted a god who is impotent. The worship of a god made out of one's own notions is just as

hateful in God's sight as the worship of idols of gold and silver.

Many church members today are so worldly that one can see very little difference between their lives and those who do not make any profession of faith. Many of them gossip, drink, gamble, swear, indulge in immorality, and covet those things which are not theirs, just as unbelievers do. When the name of somebody is mentioned who happens to receive a good salary, they manifest jealousy and say bitter things. They regard those who are richer than they as criminals and seemingly act as if they think their property ought to be confiscated by the state and given to them. But a mere recognition of these evil ways is not sufficient of itself to bring relief from our current distresses.

As certainly as the Israelites needed to come back to God, so do the people of our country. So many of our people have ignored God and thought they could get along without Him. Now conditions are developing which are most undesirable, but human wisdom is unable to remedy them. The fact is we just can't get along as we should without God. God's children need to come back to Him and live in accordance with His expressed will. What a pity that spiritual zest and enthusiasm have gone out of the lives of so many! When they are asked to accept some responsible place of service in the church, they beg to be excused. They are too anemic spiritually to accept an office, to teach a class or to win a soul for Christ. Dr. Vance Havner described their conduct in these words: "They go to a ball game and yell like a Comanche Indian and come to church and sit like a wooden Indian."

I. The Prescription.

1. Humility before God.

"If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves." That is the last thing that men want to do. Human nature likes to strut and brag and boast. With a spirit of self-sufficiency and self-importance men strut and disregard the truth which is stated in the Bible, "Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted" (Matthew 23:12).

Time and again the children of Israel, in times of prosperity, forgot the Source of their blessings and considered them to be the work of their own hands. Only as they were humiliated by adversity, and as they recognized their own inability to cope with the problems facing them, were they in a position to entreat the Lord for mercy. Micah said that one of the requirements of our Lord is that we walk humbly with Him.

Humility includes freedom from arrogance, a modest estimate of one's own worth and self-abasement. Humility is a personal modesty that very few possess and a Christian grace which exceedingly few understand. Humility has not been one of the observable characteristics of present-day Christians. Most Christians are proud and self-sufficient, entirely forgetting that "God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble."

Humility is the realization that you are a very dependent creature, able, to be sure, to do some things for yourself, but at best extremely limited in your knowledge and your powers, and having therefore to recognize that your life hangs upon the living God

Who was here before you arrived and will be here after you are gone.

It is very easy for people who have been blessed so wonderfully as we have been to become proud and to forget the source of their blessings. It is easy for the people who have been given the blessings of God in a high heritage of faithful Christian pioneers to forget the faith of their fathers and to treat lightly the Christian name which they wear. It is easy for God's people to become proud and forget Him and trust in human strength even when danger looms and defeat threatens. If any people would have God's help and enjoy His blessings, they must humble themselves before Him, both individually and collectively.

It is impossible for one to come to God in such a way that He can bless, unless he recognizes his own undone condition and the Lord as the source of all blessings. Of course, this attitude is the very opposite of the spirit that prevails in this age. Without humility before God it is impossible to please Him. God's Word says, "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up" (James 4:10).

We should never expect to have a revival as long as we are filled with pride and self-sufficiency. God's people experience a revival only when they are willing to turn back to God in humility and bring their emptiness to the Fountain to be filled.

2. Believing prayer.

"If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray." God's children are not only to humble themselves, but they are to pray. God cannot work in and through prayerless people. Unless there is real prayer there cannot be any power. By prayer we tie God's omnipotence to our impotence. We are dependent absolutely on God for power. When we try to do things without relying upon God for strength we deprive ourselves of His blessings. Prayer is the channel through which blessings come from God. He is waiting to bestow His blessings upon us. If we do not receive them, it is because we refuse to open the channel through prayer.

Christ said, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Matthew 7:7). God's Word repeatedly teaches that He is attentive to the cry of His people. Numerous instances could be given in which God answered prayer. I shall mention just one which had a prominent place in the news during World War II. A group of men spent twenty-one days on a raft. When their food was gone and their supply of water was exhausted, when they were utterly destitute and almost without hope, they had a prayer meeting. A short time afterwards, a sea gull perched itself on the shoulder of one of the men, and in his weakened condition, he was able to grasp it. This provided the means of sustenance until they were rescued. There has never been a question in the minds of the men who went through that experience about the effectiveness of prayer.

Our Heavenly Father has said, "Call upon me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not"

(Jeremiah 33:3). If we shall enter into united, believing, persevering prayer, God will release His marvelous power and set it to work through us and others, but, if we fail to pray, His power will be withheld and both ourselves and others will be deprived of so many wonderful blessings. Unless we pay the price of penitence and prayer, we cannot experience a spiritual revival.

3. Persevering supplication.

"If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face." This means coming back to God. Seeking God's face is a condition of blessing. People today are seeking everything but the face of the Lord. Nations are placing their confidence in armaments, in instruments of destruction and in the basest things which man can devise. They are placing their trust in these things for their own security, instead of seeking the face of the Lord for the revelation of His will and His guidance in the more weighty decisions of life. Isaiah has reminded us, "Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you" (59:2). Have you lost the consciousness of His presence and His favor? If so, remove all that is between you and God, and get right with Him. Don't try to get along without God. Seek His face daily.

4. Personal reformation.

"If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways." Back to God means to turn from wickedness. God earnestly, urgently and persistently pleads with His children to separate themselves from their wicked ways of murmuring, inconsistency, covetousness, rebellion, indifference and devotion to self-interest. God's blessings are conditioned on our turning from our wicked ways. Since there is so little in the sinful lives of many professing Christians to appeal to the unsaved, they must turn from their wicked ways and come back to God, or they need not expect the unbelievers to trust Christ for salvation. Occasionally someone asks, "Why can't we have real revivals like we used to have?" The only reason is that we are not willing to pay the price for them. The price of a revival has always been and ever shall be the same -- humility before God, believing prayer, persevering supplications, personal reformation and individual witnessing to the lost. Are you willing to pay that price? When we do our part, God will certainly do His.

II. The Promise.

God's promise, "Then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land," is conditioned on our humility, prayer, supplication and reformation. These things must precede heavenly hearing, help and healing. The prescription precedes the healing, just as medicine precedes the healing or seedtime precedes the harvest. Just as certainly as we do our duty in these realms of humility, prayer, supplication and reformation, God will give us an indescribable joy, richly bless our church and save lost sinners. Let us pay the price without fail.