

God Promises to Hear and Forgive

Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light
Unit 2: God's Promises

Sunday School Lesson for the week of January 1, 2023
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:12-22

Key Verse: “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:14)

Lesson Aims

- To set the lesson in the context of a new year
- To set the scripture in its context: the dedication of the temple
- To explore the difference that is made when God's people pray and repent
- To examine the establishment of the temple as a special place for prayer
- To reflect on the conditional “if-then” promise made to Solomon
- To ponder the value of anticipating the consequences of disobedient actions
- To remember how the negative consequences of our actions do not have the last word

Happy New Year!

The date for this lesson is January 1, 2023. New Year's Day always fills me with excitement. As I transition from one year to the next, I look forward to the newness that can be introduced in my life. The first sermon I ever preached was as a student on Student Day in my home church. Student Day was the Sunday between Christmas and the new year. My sermon had a New Year's theme based on Paul's words of encouragement in Philippians 3:12-14:

“Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

What longings do you bring to a new year? Have you been thinking about using this time as an opportunity for renewal?

We are beginning a new unit, entitled “God's Promises,” which continues the Winter Quarter's theme “From Darkness to Light.” Dwelling on God's promises provides a great way to bring about a move forward in our ongoing journey from darkness to light in the new year.

The key verse for today's lesson is one that you often see decorating homes and public places. Take a moment to read aloud through the key verse several times. Emphasize a different set of words each time. What thoughts, feelings, and reflections are being prompted by this kind of reading. There is a reason for the appeal of this verse, and we want to tap into this. In the verse, there is a promise of being heard by God, being forgiven, receiving healing, and beginning again.

When one verse gets singled out and separated from its context, we want to make sure it is being used properly and understood properly. More than that, we want to explore what is to be gained by looking at the verse's larger context. What wider or deeper meaning is to be found by looking at the larger context? Prepare to look for these wider and deeper meanings in today's study.

The Larger Scriptural Context

Our scripture lesson begins this way:

12 Then the LORD appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him, "I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice."

We learn from this opening verse that Solomon is a central character in the story that follows. The First Book of Chronicles ended with the obituary of King David, and 2 Chronicles begins with the startup of the reign of Solomon, David's son and successor. We witness Solomon in the first chapter asking God for wisdom and God granting him that wisdom. We witness Solomon establishing his reign.

What night does the scripture refer to that the Lord appeared to Solomon? It was the night after a days-long festival to dedicate the newly completed temple.

What prayer had God heard? The prayer that the Lord heard Solomon lead was a prayer of dedication for the newly completed temple. The festival of dedication had gone on for days. It was a huge event.

What place was God referring to? It was a place God himself had chosen to be the location for the house of sacrifice. It was here where the people were to offer their hearts to God. To understand the significance of this, you need to go back centuries earlier to the time of Moses when God first mentioned this place in the Book of Deuteronomy.

God referred to this place as the special location God would choose for his name to dwell there. Notice the association God makes between this location and God's name. What is in a name? God's name is associated with God's divine reputation. It is also the name by which we call upon God. How we call upon God matters greatly!

This is why one of the Ten Commandments, the third commandment, is devoted to the use of God's name. The commandment prohibits us from misusing the name of the Lord—or using the name of the Lord in vain, or in an empty or profane way. Stated positively, we are to handle the name of God with great care. **Do you handle the name of God with great care? Is God's name handled with care in your home?**

When God referred to this place, we know now that God was speaking of Jerusalem although he had not revealed the name or location of the place until David acquired it from the Jebusites. Choosing a special place was a part of an effort to centralize worship. All the other worship centers, or “high places,” were to be closed down so that the worship of God could be consolidated into this one place.

The centralization of worship was desired by God for the purification of worship—to keep the worship of the Lord from being corrupted with the worship of false gods. The high places tended to be highjacked by the worship of local Canaanite deities and idols. By centralizing worship, God was declaring one place to be so associated with God’s name that God’s name could be said to dwell there.

Before we look at the words that God spoke in his appearance to Solomon on the fateful night mentioned in our opening verse, let’s look briefly at the prayer of dedication that precedes it in the 6th chapter of 2 Chronicles, since this is the prayer that God said he heard Solomon pray.

Solomon first pondered how you dedicate something as magnificent and important as the temple. One thing Solomon did was put the temple in perspective. In the prayer, Solomon posed the question: “But will God indeed reside with mortals on earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built.” (2 Chronicles 6:18) As great as the temple was, God is much greater. We do not build temples or houses of worship to contain God.

Solomon prayed, “May your eyes be open day and night toward this house, the place where you promised to set your name, and may you heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. And hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; may you hear from heaven your dwelling place; hear and forgive.” (2 Chronicles 6:20-21) The temple is a house of prayer. Notice that Solomon’s request extends beyond the prayers prayed inside the temple. It extends toward the prayers that are prayed *toward* Jerusalem. Solomon has in mind people from all over Israel praying in the direction of the temple.

Solomon envisioned people who would take oaths in God’s name before the altar to say that they were telling the truth when they brought a dispute against a neighbor. Solomon asked that God would make sure that the guilty and the righteous were repaid accordingly.

Solomon envisioned God’s people coming to God when they were defeated in battle. They would come to pray to be made right with God again so they could be forgiven and go out again and be victorious.

Solomon envisioned God’s people praying for God to alleviate all manner of suffering:

“If there is famine in the land, if there is plague, blight, mildew, locust, or caterpillar; if their enemies besiege them in any of the settlements of the lands; whatever suffering, whatever sickness there is; whatever prayer, whatever plea there is from any individual or

from all your people Israel, all knowing their own suffering and their own sorrows so that they stretch out their hands toward this house; then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, forgive, and render to all whose hearts you know, according to all their ways, for only you know the human heart. Thus may they fear you and walk in your ways all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our ancestors.” (2 Chronicles 6:28-31)

Solomon prayed that God would hear and answer the prayers of foreigners, “so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.” (2 Chronicles 6:33)

Solomon prayed that if God’s people were taken into captivity as judgment for their sins, and they prayed toward this place, and repented, God would hear their pleas, maintain their cause, and forgive their sins.

After the prayer of dedication was concluded, fire came down from heaven and consumed the offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. The festival lasted for days. Then, the scripture says, “Thus Solomon finished the house of the Lord and the king’s house; all that Solomon had planned to do in the house of the Lord and in his own house he successfully accomplished.” (2 Chronicles 7:11) In these first chapters of 2 Chronicles, we see all the details being put together successfully by Solomon, showing off the wisdom and organizational ability for which Solomon was famous.

What happened next is where we find the Lord appearing to Solomon in the night. The Lord said that he had heard Solomon’s prayer of dedication, and reminded Solomon that he, the Lord, had chosen this place for himself as a house of sacrifice. The very fact that God chose the place for his name to dwell is instructive. God comes to us in the context of worship on God’s terms, not ours. This is something to keep in mind as we continue to study this scripture.

When God’s People Pray

¹³ When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain or command the locust to devour the land or send pestilence among my people, ¹⁴ if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Notice that what God says he will do is in response to Solomon’s prayer in the temple that is contained in the previous chapter. The people believed that when there was an ecological disaster that resulted in famine, their first instinct should be to pray. This is what the temple was designed and built for. Whether we believe God causes disasters in response to sin, or whether we believe God allows disasters to test us, disasters and how we respond reveal a lot about us. When misfortune falls upon us, it reveals whether or not we are ready spiritually to cope with the situation. It reveals how active or inactive our faith is. I would venture to guess that all of us find ourselves wanting to marshal as much faith as we have and then some. It is a good thing when we find our faith wanting to call out to God in prayer. It is a good thing to do that individually

and also as a community of faith. There is something powerful in the way that we band together through struggle. It is often how we come together best as a community of faith.

Let's break down the fourteenth verse:

If my people...

God reminds us that Israel is his special possession. God laid his claim on them long before. They had a shared an intimate history. The New Testament reminds us that all who are believers have been grafted into that family, so that we, too, are God's special possession. **What does it mean that God knows your name and calls you by name and claims you as his?**

Who are called by my name...

Since God has claimed us, we represent God to the whole world. Have you ever been ashamed when someone knows your faith and they saw you act in a way that reflected poorly on your faith? When people know our faith, we become reflections of God, for better or worse. When we identify as Christians, "Christ" is literally a part of that identification. We are called by his name. We did not just claim it for ourselves, but we believe he claimed us. God's reputation is at stake. **How does it make you want to be a better Christian knowing that you bear the name of Christ?**

Humble themselves...

When we have sinned, when we have reflected poorly upon God in our actions, then we must humble ourselves. This is the time to admit how we have not represented the God we claim to serve. Christians are often too prideful to begin with. Even before we fall. Setting ourselves up on a pedestal puts us in a vulnerable position. People who put themselves up on a pedestal are often the ones who walk on their fellow human beings. Being humble puts us right where we need to be—on many different levels. **What are some concrete ways that you can become a more humble person in relation to God and your fellow human beings?**

Pray...

We need to admit that many people who want to say they believe in prayer, do not pray that much. We can read about prayer, talk about prayer, resolve to pray, but it is in actually praying that we can say that we attend the school of prayer. I talk as if praying is work, and it often is. The more we put in the work, the less prayer becomes a chore. I do not mean to downplay reading about prayer. The way I have benefitted from reading about prayer is to unlock more avenues to prayer. **Ask yourself, "How often do you really pray, and how much time do you spend in prayer each time?" How might you resolve to spend more time praying this year?**

Seek my face...

Prayer is relational. Say this ten times. To seek God's face is to learn more and more about the character and personality of God, which we can only really do by praying and by a deep devotional life. The more time we spend with God, the more God's countenance is reflected in us. **How might you mix in your devotional study of scripture with prayer so that you endeavor to learn as much about God as you are wanting God to know about your needs?**

And turn from their wicked ways...

The more time we spend with God, the more God is going to reveal about your character and actions that do not please God. If we never spend time in reflection we are going to miss this. Every day we live is a crucible for change if we pay attention. Each day you can engage in an examination of conscience and an examination of consciousness. **Where did you disappoint God (sin) today by your actions and inaction? When were you most conscious of God (closest) and the least conscious of God (most distant)?**

Then I will hear from heaven...

It is easy to feel distant from God sometimes, because he hears from heaven, but God does hear us. God is at the same time both transcendent and the one who is closest to us than we are to ourselves, because he knows us better than we know ourselves. Ponder this. Believing God really does hear us from heaven is the best way for heaven to become more real to us. **How might you journal or keep track of the evidence that God hears you?**

And will forgive their sin...

When God forgives us God releases us. This is why we must forgive others, because we are releasing them and we are releasing ourselves. God releases us to begin again. One of my favorite prayers is the pray of beginning again. It is where I receive God's forgiveness. It is where I am confronted with my own spiritual immaturity. It is okay though because I am a child again, and I am free to feel loved by God. God never stopped loving me, but in receiving God's forgiveness, the barrier I had erected is gone. **How do you plan to bring more requests to God for God to forgive you in the coming year? How might you deepen your experience of God's forgiveness? How might you grow through this experience and reach greater maturity in your faith? How might you find the liberation that you long for and truly leave behind the habits, hurts, and hang-ups that have kept you from experiencing all the peace and joy God offers?**

And heal their land.

With forgiveness comes healing. To speak of God healing the land in the particular context of our scripture means the rains coming again, the locusts and the pestilence going away. It means the land becoming fertile again and supporting human life. Healing and redemption go hand in hand. I believe God is in the business of healing and redeeming souls and circumstances. Do you believe this? **Where might you draw a mental circle in your life around that which needs healing and redeeming? How might you circle around this in your prayers, even if it takes all year?**

Here is God's promise to heal and forgive when we humble ourselves, pray, seek, and turn. This is a promise we can count on throughout the year and throughout our lives.

A Fixed Place

¹⁵ Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place. ¹⁶ For now I have chosen and consecrated this house so that my name may be there forever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time.

Recall why David desired to build God a house. His reasoning was that the place of worship until that time had been a tent of meeting. It was the portable worship center that had accompanied God's people since the time of Moses when God's people wandered in the wilderness and then made their way to the land of promise that God showed them. The tent compound had been designed according to God's specific instructions. Every space had a special purpose. It could all be moved wherever God directed his people by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. It was when the pillar stopped moving that God's people knew where they were to set up for worship until the next time they moved.

When they were shown that Jerusalem was to be the place for God's house to dwell permanently, it was natural for David to think it was time for a more permanent dwelling, the temple, to be built. God questioned David saying that the tent compound had served the purpose of divine worship adequately enough. God agreed however that the time for a more permanent place was upon them. Although David was ready to build it, God intended for Solomon to build it. The instructions for the more permanent temple were also given in the time of Moses.

Did God need a place? Or did God's people need a place? God's people needed a place that was authorized by God for divine worship, because God gets to set the terms for how God is encountered in worship. We cannot just make worship what we want it to be. God wanted his people to have a place where they, in their mortal human minds could count on God being there. Perhaps this is why God made a big deal about God's eyes being open and his ears being attentive to the prayer that is made in the temple. God reiterated that he had chosen the place and consecrated his house so that his name may dwell there forever. God's eyes and, moreover, God's heart will be in this special place for all time.

Based on what we are about to read, we might ask, "How permanent is permanent?"

A Conditional Promise

Some promises come without conditions, and some promises come with conditions. The tell-tale sign is when we find the words "if" and "then."

¹⁷ As for you, if you walk before me as your father David walked, doing according to all that I have commanded you and keeping my statutes and my ordinances, ¹⁸ then I will establish your royal throne, as I made a covenant with your father David saying, 'You shall never lack a successor to rule over Israel.'

On the day the temple was dedicated, Solomon recalled that it was his father, David, who had first desired to build the temple. God told David however that his son, Solomon, was the one God intended to build it. Instead of David building a house for God, God intended for it to work the other way around. God would build David a house. By "house" God meant a dynasty—an everlasting dynasty. God wanted to build a dynasty around David. (1 Chronicles 17)

God promised David, "you shall never lack a successor to rule over Israel." It was the way David walked with God. It is instructive to keep in mind all the psalms attributed to David. David had a heart for God. David was not perfect, but he never wavered in his faith in God. When other

rulers would forsake God for other gods, David remained true to God. He walked a straight path, straying neither to the right or the left.

So, at this pivotal moment in Solomon's life and reign, God reminded Solomon of the promise God made to David. There was a condition however: IF Solomon walked before God as his father David walked, and did according to all that God commanded him and keeping God's statutes and ordinances, THEN there would never lack a descendant of David to rule on the throne over God's people.

A conditional promise begs the question, "What happens if the condition is not met?"

¹⁹ "But if you turn aside and forsake my statutes and my commandments that I have set before you and go and serve other gods and worship them, ²⁰ then I will pluck you up from the land that I have given you, and this house, which I have consecrated for my name, I will cast out of my sight and will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples. ²¹ And regarding this house, now exalted, everyone passing by will be astonished and say, 'Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this house?' ²² Then they will say, 'Because they abandoned the LORD the God of their ancestors who brought them out of the land of Egypt, and they embraced other gods and worshiped them and served them; therefore he has brought all this calamity upon them.' "

God wanted to go on record that if God's people were taken into exile by a foreign army and the temple was destroyed, it would not be because God failed to keep his promise. It would not be because God was weak and powerless. If, in the future, people passed by abandoned cities and saw only ruins where the Jerusalem temple, in all of its magnificence, had once stood, they would surely be astonished. The reputation of such a people would become a byword, a proverb, and a cautionary tale told of a defeated people. They would no doubt wonder, "Why did the Lord allow such a thing to happen?" Before that happened, God wanted to go on record so that people would know the truth: it would be because the people abandoned the Lord and embraced other gods. In other words, it would not be due to God backing out of the covenant; but because God's people did not hold up their side of the covenant. They brought the calamity upon themselves.

This promise had a prophetic dimension to it. According to 1 Kings 11, Solomon entered into marriage with many foreign wives who worshiped other gods, and this had a tragic effect on Solomon's heart: "For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David." (1 Kings 11:4) For the sake of his father, David, God did not divide the kingdom in Solomon's day, but it did divide in the following generation. The northern kingdom was taken out from the line of David. In the southern kingdom of Judah, the kings in the line of David, with only a few notable exceptions, were unfaithful to God. Several centuries after Solomon, the temple was destroyed, the city of Jerusalem was demolished into ruins, and God's people were taken into captivity by the Babylonian army.

Although this is all covered in the last chapter of 2 Chronicles, destruction does not have the last word. The last word is about restoration: "In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so

that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also in writing, saying: “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Let any of those among you who are of his people—may the LORD their God be with them!—go up.” (2 Chronicles 36:22-23)

What does this mean? God holds up God’s side of the covenant even when we do not. There are consequences, for sure, when we break covenant. God, however, by upholding God’s side of the covenant, finds a way to restore covenant.

We know that through the prophets that God sent into the Exile, God kept on relating to God’s people in Exile. They learned through this experience that God had not died when the temple was destroyed. Communing with God through prayer was never dependent on the temple. It was in the Exile that people began meeting together to worship God around the message of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings—what was becoming the Hebrew scriptures—called the Old Testament by Christians.

The temple was rebuilt. In Jesus’ earthly ministry, he talked about the temple that stood in his day. He made predictions that soon not one stone would be left upon another. The temple would be destroyed again in 70 A.D. by the Romans. Temples can be destroyed, but the ability we have to worship God cannot be destroyed. Jesus, the Son of David, whose birth we just celebrated, lived, died, and rose again, and ascended into heaven to sit on the throne and reign. His reign is eternal, and it is made real for us through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

The promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14 is made more real for us because it is set within the Christian Story as contained in the Old and New Testaments.

How might you build on the foundation of your faith in the coming year through the study of God’s word? How do you plan to follow through?

Prayer

Gracious Lord, who claims us as Your people and hears our prayers, enable us to humble ourselves before you, pray, seek your face, and turn from our sinful ways, that we may find forgiveness and healing, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

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