

A Vision for Seeking God
2 Chronicles 7:13-14

Let's say you have a 16-year-old son who asks, "Hey Mom/Dad, may I borrow the car tonight?" You say, "Sure, as long as you get home by 10." Your son asks a follow-up question. "If I don't get home until midnight and you catch me and discipline me by taking away driving privileges for a month. . . and if I learn my lesson and commit myself to doing what you say, can I borrow the car again?" If you're like me, you'd say, "BRING THE CAR HOME BY 10:00!"

I lay out that scenario because that's basically the real-life situation we find in 2 Chronicles 6. Solomon had become king of Israel and had built the temple in Jerusalem. As he looked to the future he knew that the people would wander from God and need to be restored. So, in one of the longest prayers found in the Bible, Solomon lays out seven scenarios where the people are desperate for God to act. In three of those scenarios, the people are experiencing God's discipline/judgment because of their sin. For example, here's the scenario Solomon prays about in 2 Chronicles 6:26–27 (ESV)

26 "When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, if they pray toward this place and acknowledge your name and turn from their sin, when you afflict them, 27 then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel, when you teach them the good way in which they should walk, and grant rain upon your land, which you have given to your people as an inheritance.

He prayed this way because he knew that the people habitually strayed from God and his ways. Today we are going to look at God's response to Solomon's prayer in 2 Chronicles 7. We're going to see that God is more gracious and more reassuring toward his people than I would be toward my 16-year-old son in the "Can I borrow the car" scenario. Basically, God assures his people, ***If you seek Me, you will find Me.***

We need that same assurance today. If you are honest about yourself and about the people of God, you will agree that we habitually bring the car back at midnight; individually and collectively we sin and wander away from God; our obedience is selective; we have sinful blind spots. As a result we find ourselves in desperate, tragic situations. Of course not all of our problems are a direct result of our sinfulness. But whatever the case we need to hear God assure us, ***If you seek Me, you will find Me.***

Listen as I read 2 Chronicles 7:11-18.

11 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. 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. 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, and pray and seek my

face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. 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 that my name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time. 17 And as for you, if you will walk before me as David your father walked, doing according to all that I have commanded you and keeping my statutes and my rules, 18 then I will establish your royal throne, as I covenanted with David your father, saying, 'You shall not lack a man to rule Israel.'

We'll focus our attention on verses 13 and 14. In verse 13 God picks up on the scenarios Solomon had laid out in his prayer in chapter 6.

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,

The only reason God would have sent these types of destruction is if his people had rebelled and he needed to get their attention. So God says, if you find yourself desperate because of the mess you've made of your life. . .

14 if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

In the OT when God spoke of "my people," he was referring to the nation of Israel (although chapter 6 acknowledged that when people came from other nations to worship YHWH, they were included in the covenant community). In our day the "people of God" includes people from every tribe, tongue, and nation - everyone who comes to him through faith in Jesus Christ. As believers in Jesus, can legitimately hear this promise to us because we are "God's people" who are "called by His name."

"If you seek me. . ."

First, God says if "My people who are called by My name ***humble themselves***. . ." When you humble yourself, you adopt a stance before God that that acknowledges that He is God and you are not. One of the core ways we humble ourselves is by listening to and submitting to his word. We read in Isaiah 66:2

2 . . . "But to this one I will look,
To him who is humble and contrite of spirit,
and who trembles at My word."

Arrogance is saying, "I don't care what God thinks." Humility is saying, "The last thing I want to do is ignore what God thinks." Next week we'll talk about seeking God through the word; that's a core way of humbling ourselves before God.

Another way to humble ourselves is through the practice of fasting - going without food for a period of time. In Psalm 35:13 David wrote, "I humbled my soul with fasting" (NASB). In two weeks the message will center on seeking God through fasting.

Second, God say if “My people who are called by My name humble themselves **and pray**. . .” In 2 Chronicles 6 Solomon asked that God would respond to their prayers of repentance. Here God assures Solomon that He will indeed respond when they pray. In three weeks the message will center on seeking God through prayer. Jesus said very directly that “those who ask receive.”

Third, God say if “My people who are called by My name . . . **seek My face**. . .” The Bible speaks of God’s face to express that God is a personal God (as opposed to being merely a force or a power); it’s a way of reminding us that God sees and hears, that God speaks, that God has emotions. When we “seek God’s face” we intentionally notice these things about God.

If you have a dog, chances are that s/he “seeks your face.” Sometimes I’ll be sitting in my chair reading a book and I’ll look up to find Molly standing there staring at my face. She’s waiting for me to look at her because she wants something. Or if I whisper, “Molly!” she will sit up and lock in on my face; she studies my face to know whether I’m happy or angry or whatever.

In an analogous way we are to be that attentive to the face of God. We will experience God as He is revealed in Scriptures. We will experience Him as the father who is looking down the road waiting for the prodigal to come home; we will experience Him as a Good Shepherd who protects and provides for us; we will experience Him as the One who said to his disciples in sadness, “You of little faith. . .” As repentant people, we are to seek His face.

Fourth, God says that His people should “**turn from their wicked ways**.” This is a common way that the Bible speaks about repentance. When we repent, we turn **from** our sins (“our wicked ways”) and turn back **to** God. The premise throughout Scripture is that we are responsible to turn from our sins. We don’t do this independent of the Spirit, but we do engage our wills and turn from our sins; nobody can do this for us. Of course we enlist the prayers and encouragement and wisdom of others in the body of Christ. Sometimes turning from our sins takes time as we gradually train ourselves to think and act differently. But the responsibility lies with each of us.

When was the last time you thought of a sin as “wicked” or “evil”? We’re more likely to think of our sins as “struggles,” aren’t we? If you know me, you know that I don’t advocate self-condemnation and self-loathing when it comes to our sins. But there is a certain power and clarity in naming our sins using biblical terms such as “wicked ways.” If you see your sin as “wicked/evil”- whether sensuality or judgmentalism or materialism or pride - you are much more likely to understand its destructiveness; and you are much more likely to “turn from” that sin in mind and body.

“. . . **you will find me**.” This is what makes it worth it to seek God! We’re not merely seeking God because we’re supposed to; we seek God because he promises we will find him. First, God says “I will **hear from heaven**. . .” To “hear” means to hear

favorably. When we seek him in the comprehensive ways we've been discussing, we can be confident that God will hear from heaven and respond in mercy and grace.

Second, God says "***I will forgive their sin.***" When God forgives a person's sin, He says, "You have offended Me but I am never going to make you pay for it." There is no residual anger; God doesn't hold grudges. When He pronounces forgiveness, the relationship is restored and there is newfound freedom and fulness in that relationship. When God's people who are called by His name repent corporately, they experience a newfound freedom and fulness with God corporately. In the new covenant, we understand that our forgiveness flows from the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Third, God says "***I will heal their land.***" In the original context "their land" was the Promised Land (the land of Canaan). Depending upon the type of discipline that the people were under, this healing might involve God sending rain or ending some type of pestilence (see verse 13). "Healing their land" involved restoring whatever had been lost. Under the old covenant the condition of the "land" mirrored the condition of the people's hearts.

How might this apply in the new covenant in which "God's people" are scattered throughout the nations? "Healing their land" corresponds to God healing our hearts/souls. As well, history suggests that when the body of Christ in any location experiences God's fulness and blessing, there is often a ripple effect in their communities and in their nations.

This is the invitation God wants his people to hear: ***If you seek Me, you will find Me.***

The place to begin is to enter into a relationship with God. You do that through faith in Jesus Christ. If you believe that the death of Jesus on the cross paid for your sins, you will experience something miraculous. You will become a new creation with new appetites and desires; you will now have an internal motivation to experience God in the depths of your being. You are now among his children, his people.

Wherever you are in your relationship with Jesus, we want to challenge you accept God's invitation to seek and find him. We want to challenge you to make a long-term commitment to seeking God so that you might find him. Here's what we envision. . . . During the six weeks leading up to Easter (in some traditions this is called Lent), we are going to enter into a time we're calling ***A Season of Seeking***. It will be similar to the 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting we've done the past couple of years. This Season of Seeking begins on March 2nd. Between now and then, we would like you to do three things:

Decide ***THAT*** you will seek God.
Decide ***HOW*** you will seek God.
Discern ***WHY*** you will seek God.

First, we'd like you to decide **THAT** you will seek God. Many of you already seek God day by day; for you, this season of seeking will be more of the same. Others of you may

not be in that place. Maybe you're not convinced that "those who seek find." Or maybe you've experienced deep disappointment in the past and aren't sure whether or not you want to risk it again. During the next five weeks, make this a matter of prayer and conversation. I would plead with you: Whatever it takes, get to the place where you decide THAT you will seek God. Honestly, there is nothing more important in this life.

Second, decide HOW you will seek God. The next three Sundays we're going to talk about some core spiritual habits that you can use in seeking God. We'll teach about seeking God through the Word, through fasting, and through prayer. Again, some of you already practice these disciplines. Others of you might decide to begin practicing these (or other) disciplines. In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul described how he approached his relationship with God the way an athlete approaches competition. These spiritual habits will help you do that. In 1 Timothy 4 Paul told Timothy that training your body has some value, but training yourself spiritually have value in every way.

Third, discern WHY you will seek God. In other words, what is your specific reason for seeking God? It's not that you always need a specific reason, but in 2 Chronicles 7 God invited people to seek him when they needed to repent from some specific sin or needed to be rescued from some specific situation. Over the next five weeks, discern why you will seek God during the 6 weeks leading up to Easter. Pay attention to yourself and your circumstances and notice the thing(s) that matter most. Here are some ideas:

- * As one person put it, what is the stupidest thing you're doing right now? There's probably something you're doing that's sabotaging your relationships, your fellowship with God, etc. Seeking and finding God in that area of your life could be revolutionary.
- * A decision about your career or about a relationship. As you seek God through the word, you can get perspectives that you wouldn't have if you just think your own best thoughts; God specifically tells us that when we need wisdom we should ask for it (James 1)
- * A virtue that you need to cultivate. For example, you may recognize that you need humility. You notice that you're often critical of people around you, you look down on people who aren't as smart/spiritual/together. Instead of hoping that one day you're going to mysteriously wake up full of humility, you might purpose in your heart to spend the six weeks leading up to Easter seeking to cultivate humility. Honestly, if you emerge from this Season of Seeking with some habits of humility, it could change the whole tenor of your life. God promises that those who seek find.

Over the next five weeks, discern WHY you need to seek God. Let it fuel your disciplines and let fill you with motivation.

Four and a half years ago Brenda and I had an experience that drove home for me the power of having a compelling WHY that motivates you to seek God with all your heart. In 2017 our son Riley competed in an Ironman in Madison, Wisconsin. He had had ACL surgery the year before and wanted to prove that he could recover stronger than he was before his injury. An ironman is a triathlon where you swim 2.4 miles in open water, bike for 112 miles, and then run a marathon (26 miles). You don't just show up and do an

ironman; most people train for over a year. If you're going to train that long and that hard, you have to have a compelling "WHY" or else you'll cut corners or give up.

I'd like to tell you about two things we experienced at that Ironman that inspire me to find a compelling reason to seek God this Easter season; hopefully they will inspire you as well. First, there was a group of athletes who probably trained harder than anybody else. . . but they weren't trying to cross the finish line first. This group of athletes was paired with a "disabled athlete." The fully abled athlete swam 2.4 miles pulling the other on a raft, biked 112 miles pulling the other behind them in a cart, and ran a marathon pushing the other in a runner's stroller. The reason they trained and ran the race was so that somebody else could also cross the finish line.

One compelling reason you and I need to seek and find God is because there will be times when we need to be spiritually strong and fit for others. One reason we need to seek and find God so that we'll be useful for other people.

The second experience happened late that night. The Ironman started at 7 am; the cut-off time was midnight. Many of those who had crossed the finish line hours earlier stayed or came back late at night to cheer on those who were trying to cross the line before midnight. The streets of downtown Madison were lined with competitors who cheered on those who hobbled to the finish line at 11:30, 11:45, and midnight. Those who had run the race themselves were a powerful encouragement to those who needed to know that it's worth it and that it's possible to finish the race. One reason you and I need to seek and find God is because there will be people in our lives who need our compassion and encouragement and need to know that it's worth it not to give up and drop out of the race.

Please, make this a matter of prayer and thought and conversation: Decide THAT you will seek God and HOW you will seek God. And discern WHY you will seek God. God assures us: If you seek Me, you will find Me. If you find God you will experience a life of abundance and you will be very, very useful to him.