



Praying for a Nation

2 Chronicles 7:14-16

TRINITY PULPIT

This past week in my devotion on prayer I read this phrase, “What would Jesus pray for if He were still here on earth?” The devotional writer goes on to say that Jesus is still here on this earth living in the hearts of his people. When it comes to prayer we should seek to pray for the very things Jesus prayed for and for the very things we believe Jesus would pray for now.

That becomes very complicated when it comes to praying for our nation. When we look at what Jesus prayed for when he was on this earth, we discover that he prayed for unity of his followers. He prayed for openness to the work of the Holy Spirit. He prayed for strength and resolved to be obedient to the will of the Father. He prayed for others’ health and forgiveness. He prayed for his followers to know the will of God and to follow. What do you think Jesus would pray for now?

To complicate this more we might ask, “What would Jesus pray for when it comes to our nation?” We might say, “Jesus would pray that America would become a Christian Nation.” The only issue with this is that we cannot even agree on what is a Christian Nation. To be sure, our founding fathers did believe that much of what they were creating in vision and law was divine in nature. They often quoted scripture and looked to God. It is no doubt that they believed in the individual and the individuals’ freedom and saw this as Biblical. However, today we would debate what that means as far as being a Christian Nation. Some of us would say a Christian Nation is a nation where there are certain laws that prohibit certain activities. There are certain activities that a nation who honors God should not tolerate.

I can remember as a teenager hearing about a month of sermons against “serving alcohol by the drink at the Knoxville airport.” It was illegal to serve liquor by the drink in the county in which the airport was located. However, there had been some lawmakers seeking to

make an exception at the airport. It caused heated debate in the county government and, in particular, Baptist churches. So, my Pastor, whom I love, preached over and over again about the evils of alcohol and the degradation of our culture if alcohol by the drink could be served at the airport. Many of us might say that being a Christian Nation means living in a nation where there are various laws restricting certain activities.

Some of us might say a Christian Nation is one that keeps the Ten Commandments. No lying, stealing, killing, coveting, and you should honor your father and mother. However, would we be comfortable with having no gods before God and keeping the Sabbath day holy? In our culture that might be going too far. (Sarcasm intended) If we are going to make the Ten Commandments the guide, then we would have to add Jesus’ 11th commandment: “A new commandment I give to you...you should love one another.”

Others of us might say that to be a Christian Nation is to love our neighbor and accept our neighbor no matter who they are.

Depending on whom you talk to, a Christian Nation means various things. Herein lies our problem when we come to pray for our nation as Jesus would pray. How would Jesus pray for the United States of America?

As I thought about this topic this week in our Living on a Prayer series, I knew that, like everyone else, I had bias. It is almost impossible for us to consider this topic without our own bias getting in the way. The truth is, it is almost impossible for us to say anything about God without our bias getting in the way. I learned a long time ago that I have nothing to say that is eternal and meaningful apart from what God’s Word says to us. So as we approach this topic, I want us to turn to this familiar passage from 2 Chronicles 7:14 and see if we can, together, learn how to pray for our nation.

The first thing we must note is that this passage is not a universal passage to everyone for all time. It has a particular context and meaning. If we are going to have any hope of understanding how to pray for our nation, we have to understand the context of this passage. I have been guilty, like so many others, of taking some of these Old Testament passages and lifting them out of context — of God and God’s chosen Israel — and applying them to our time and our culture without truly understanding the context. The New Testament theologian D.A. Carson says, “A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text.”

So what is the context of this often-quoted passage? Solomon has completed the building of the Temple. If you remember, God would not permit David to build the Temple because of his sins. Instead, Solomon, King David’s son, would be charged with building the Temple during his reign. In chapter 7, the Temple has been completed and the people have come together and worshipped and made sacrifices. It is a high and holy moment for the people. They spent seven days dedicating the Temple. Then they spent another seven days having a festival celebrating the dedicating of the Temple. Then on the eighth day the people gathered and Solomon sent them home. The Bible says they were “joyful and glad in heart for the good things the Lord had done for David and Solomon and for his people Israel.” In other words, this is as good as it gets. They had a two-week party because the Temple was complete. God had been faithful to Israel and the people went home rejoicing and glad. First, they had peace enough to come and celebrate. They had the means to come and celebrate and they went home joyful and glad. In other words, they felt good about their nation, their king and the God who was with them. You want to talk about national pride, they had it.

Then the Lord appears to Solomon and says, “I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place as a temple for sacrifices.” In other words, you have done well. This is acceptable to me. However, there will be days of trial ahead. When there is no rain, or locusts come upon the land and destroy your crops, my people should pray to me. When times get difficult and they will. When the economy is in the tank and it will be in the tank. When everything is not like today...my people should pray. You need to know if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways then will I hear them from heaven and I will heal their land. I will see them through. I will restore them.

That is the promise to God’s people Israel. At the height of success and national pride, God says hard times will

come; but in the hard times, you can turn to me and pray and I will hear you.

How do we take this passage and apply it to us? How are we to pray for our nation? I think there is some guidance for us.

First, this passage reminds us to know our identification when we pray. God tells Solomon, “If my people, who are called by my name, will . . . pray.” The phrase means those God has chosen and those who have the marker of God. The people of God here in this passage are the nation of Israel. However, when we apply this to ourselves we have to determine just who in our context are the people of God. First, we know that the people of God are not the United States of America. We make a great mistake when we begin to equate God’s people with any certain nation on the face of the earth. America is not the New Israel. The New Israel is the church. That is, the new people of God are those who follow Christ.

The Gospel Coalition published an article last November entitled, “Jesus is not Your American Patriot.” The writer reminds us:

In the Bible, Jesus has one nation: his people. He has one political interest: his kingdom (Matt. 6:10). We become citizens of this kingdom through faith in him (Rom. 5:1–2; Eph. 2:8–9). God’s number-one priority is his glory and the advancement of his kingdom (Matt. 28:18–20; John 6:38; 4:34). No earthly nation, including America, has a monopoly on God’s favor and blessing. Additionally, the Jesus of the Bible shed his blood for people from every nation (Rev. 5:9). All of God’s promises and blessings are directed toward the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multinational body of Christ.

In Christ we are all blessed, from the least to the greatest. From Englewood in Chicago to the Korngal valleys in Afghanistan, God has children all over the globe. Salvation has come to all nations. The United States is not a new Israel; the church is.

Thus, when we begin to pray we need to pray with the proper identification. As followers of Jesus we must remember that we have a dual citizenship. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God and we are citizens of our great nation. However, as followers of Jesus — who is King of Kings and Lord of all and to whom every knee shall bow — our ultimate allegiance belongs to God and God alone.

In Abraham Lincoln’s second Inaugural Address, after

the most deadly war in American history, he said:

Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged.

Thus, when we pray, we recognize that we are praying as Jesus did for the Kingdom of God to come. If I let my primary identification be a political party, then I find myself many times praying against other brothers and sisters in Christ who might be of another political party. If I find my primary identification as American over follower of Jesus, I can even sometimes find myself praying against another nation and fail to remember that in those other nations are my brothers and sisters in Christ where God is at work. It is only when I pray with the identification as a follower of Jesus that I can even begin to be able to pray as Jesus would pray.

We must have the proper identification when it comes to praying for our nation, but we also must have the proper attitude. There are three attitudes that God mentions. God says if my people — those belonging to me — will humble themselves, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear and heal their land. Three essentials to attitude of prayer are found here.

First, we must be humble. The Bible calls us to humble ourselves and it speaks clearly about the sin of pride and the obstacle of pride.

Listen to a few verses:

When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.

The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.

But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Humility is a great way to begin to pray for our nation. When we humble ourselves before God, we remind ourselves that God is sovereign over all the nations. When we humble ourselves before God, we realize that no matter what we might be feeling at this moment or what the circumstance is of the moment, God is at work bringing all things under God's rule. When we humble ourselves before God, we recognize that we need God's help.

Let me speak from my heart. When I humble myself before God to pray for our nation, it frees me from thinking that it is only by my efforts, my voice, my politics or my opinion that change can come. Humility places the present and the future into God's hands.

Second, we must seek God's face. To seek God's face is to put you before God. It means to come into God's presence. To seek God's presence is to want God's will above all else. It is to put the gospel and the Kingdom of God first.

Back in 2005, D.A. Carson wrote to the evangelical community – of which he is a revered part – warning them about not keeping God's will and the gospel primary in the church. He was worried how some Christians in America turn toward politics and not Jesus. So he wrote these words:

When you're busy hating everybody and denouncing everybody and seeking political solutions to everything it's very difficult to evangelize, isn't it? It's very hard to be compassionate, to look on the crowds as though they're sheep without a shepherd."

It is hard to love others when we are not seeking God's face. It is hard to share Christ with those we have made an enemy. When we pray for our nation we must put the will of God first.

Third, we must repent of our own sins. When we are praying for our nation we have to admit to God we are part of the problem. God says of Israel, "My people must turn from their wicked ways." The problem was not the other nations, the problem was Israel. So, when we begin to pray for our nation we turn our attention not on those people who are ruining everything or the government. We open our own hearts and lives to the work of the Holy Spirit. We admit to God that our sin and rejection of God's ways are part of the problem. It is our lack of loving our neighbor as our self that is the problem. It is our lack of grace when we demand grace for our self that is the problem. It is our overlooking of the poor, imprisoned, hurting, and sick that is the problem. It is our refusal to seek justice for all and tend to the wid-

ows and orphans or, in our language, the helpless and hopeless that is the problem. In our current culture of polarization and name-calling and demeaning language and actions, we have to look at our own attitudes. Do we demonize others? Do we post or share on social media that which builds up or tears down? Are we working as peacemakers? We must turn from our ways that are not Christ's ways.

So when we pray we must have the right attitude. We must be humble, seek God's presence and pray and repent of our own sinfulness.

Fourth, we can pray with confidence. God says if my people will have the right attitude and action then I will hear from heaven and heal their land. Now what exactly is this promise? The healing mentioned here is not what we usually use this verse to mean. It is not a promise to heal their national laws or even their national conflict. Here the word means land. The issue is when the rain is shut off or the locusts come then there is an outcry to God. So, if anything, it is economic. The crops fail due to drought or due to insect infestation. God says when that happens and God's people cry to me, I will hear them and restore their land. Now we can't take this too far, but we dare not just see it as economic or agriculture.

The land was closely tied to the people and the people closely tied to God. This was the Promised Land. This was the place where God led his people and promised abundance for His people. Thus, the land symbolized God's provision and blessing. So what does it mean for us? I think we can say that God promises to be with us. God promises to sustain His people. God promises to provide for His people.

From this passage, I don't think we can say if we will pray the American culture will change. However, I think we can say, with confidence, that when God's people pray

and put God first, we can be sure that God will hear our prayers and sustain us. God will provide for God's people. God will not forget us. When we feel like we are wasting away in a land that is spiritually dry or when we feel like all that we hold dear is being devoured and there is going to be nothing left...we pray and we know God hears and God will sustain us and provide for us.

How would Jesus pray for America? How should we pray for our nation? Using this very familiar quote from 2 Chronicles, I would say we pray from the perspective of God's people in this world. We pray with humility, seeking God's will and confessing our own sin, and we pray boldly believing God hears his people and will sustain them.

So what does that mean in a practical sense? There is an action word in this passage and that word is pray. We must pray but not just for our nation as a whole but also for the individuals of our nation. Let us pray for government officials. Let us pray for our neighbors. Let us pray for the strangers on the street and in our lives. Let us pray as Jesus instructed for our enemies.

In the moments when we don't know how to begin to pray for these let us begin with their salvation. Pray for their salvation. That is the gospel and if we are unwilling to start there then we really do not need to continue. Pray for the Holy Spirit's transforming work to be done in their lives. Pray for their actions to follow the commandments of Jesus that they might love others even as they love self.

Finally, pray for yourself. Be willing to humble yourself and say, "Lord, how am I making a difference in my nation? How do my actions reveal Christ to others? How can I engage in politics or community service in a way that builds up and gives you glory?" Let us pray for our nations even as Jesus would pray for America. ▲



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