

In The Middle Of The Night...

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Read 2 Chronicles 7:11-22



And so it begins. The next few weeks (and in fact the final few “Thought for the Week” articles) will be focussing on Bible readings that reflect on, build on, and spring from the verse that sits almost at the middle of today’s reading: *if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land* (2 Chronicles 7:14). During this time, there will be opportunities to read, hear and mull over different voices, all with the aim of hearing God and what he would have us do and who he would have us be. In the spirit of the Bronte sisters, I address you, dear reader, to request that you also add your voice to this; if there is anything that you feel is right to share, please let me know. There is a dedicated page on the church website where comments and reflections will be posted as and when they are given; printed copies of these will also be distributed where needed.

Today we begin our journey by looking at the source of the verse and the context in which it was first heard. We travel back in time to the reign of King Solomon, son of the great King David, and the consecration of the Temple in Jerusalem. The verses in view today come in the aftermath of the great big shindig that had been going on for the previous few days as the people gathered in the city to celebrate the opening of the Temple.

And what a party it had been. The Chronicler (and the writer of the parallel passage in 1 Kings) tells us that just after the Ark of the Covenant had been brought back to the city, and the celebrations began in earnest, Solomon sacrificed twenty-two thousand cattle and one hundred and twenty thousand sheep and goats in honour of the Lord (2 Chronicles 7:5, 1 Kings 8:63). Now that's quite some barbecue, though we must remember that in those days there wasn't the option of a meat-free alternative. If that wasn't enough to get the party started, there was music from all the musically-gifted priests, accompanied by a choir of 120, who had all been following the Ark on its journey into the city. In all, the celebrations lasted a fortnight (possibly even a week longer, as the Chronicler is a little ambiguous about timings), before Solomon sent the revellers away and returned to the palace for a rest.

And it is in this state, with Solomon on his own, far away from the crowds, with the smell of the grill still hanging in the atmosphere, at the dead of night, that he receives a reply from the Lord. What had gone before was in public, a spectacle for all to see and celebrate. What followed was intimate, personal, and private.

In one sense, there is a parallel with Elijah, who, a number of years and monarchs later, had had his own personal and private encounter with the Lord following a big public event. In 1 Kings 18 and 19, we read of the victory of Elijah's God over the prophets of Baal, in front of the royal family and a crowd of onlookers. A few verses later, we see Elijah cowering alone and afraid in the mouth of a cave as God calls him on to the future. From the massive spectacle to the quiet moment, God is present in both, but what he really wants to convey comes in the stillness of a whisper.

We find this in our reading today as well; God doesn't tend to respond in the crowd, but in the stillness of the night. Of course, it would have been great had the voice boomed out from heaven, and the whole crowd had heard, but that's generally not God's way. Leaping forward a few centuries to the time of Jesus, we hear the audible voice of God twice, once at his baptism (Matthew 3:13-17) and once during the visitation of Moses and the aforementioned Elijah on the mountaintop (Matthew 17:1-8). And there weren't many people around then at that time either.

Let's briefly look at what God says to Solomon in the quietness of his bedroom. It's a response to the prayer that Solomon offered publicly in the previous chapter (2 Chronicles 6:14-42) as part of the dedication of the Temple. In fact, if you go through these two sets of verses in parallel, you will see the pattern recurring: Solomon says something that God refers to either in confirmation or response. There isn't time in this article to go through them in detail, so you'll have to do your own comparisons in your own time.

In the middle of God's response to Solomon's prayer is the verse that we are focussing on today and for these next few weeks. 2 Chronicles 7:14 is a transactional promise from God; it requires the choice of the people to act in a certain way in order for God to act in response. In one way of looking at it, the onus is on "the people" to change before God will do anything. Of course, what God will do is far in excess of what any of the community is capable of achieving; no-one has the ability to forgive sins, let alone heal the land. It could be said that the power, if there is such a thing, in this transaction belongs to these same "people". It is up to them to choose whether to act or not; the unspoken corollary being sins remaining unforgiven and a land unhealed. But that underplays the greatness of the gift that God is offering in return for the people making the choice.

Let's just take each of the conditions of God's promise and ask ourselves some critical questions in light of the greatest commandments, as defined by Jesus when asked (Matthew 22:34-40):

God says to Solomon (not forgetting that this verse is not a complete sentence in itself, which is another study all of its own), "...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 from heaven and will forgive their sin and

will heal their land.”

So, the first thing for God’s people to do (once they’ve got over the fantastic news that they are indeed God’s people) is *humble themselves*. Combining this with *turn from their wicked ways* is defined more simply as *love your neighbour as yourself*, the second of the greatest commandments. The wilful act of humility puts others first, and there are so many ways (wicked and the like) that cause harm to others and ourselves. Loving both neighbour and self will surely help in our humbling and turning.

And, hardly surprising, we find a correlation between the two middle acts of praying and seeking God’s face in order to fulfil the holistic commandment to *love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind*. Talking to, and listening to, God is one way of showing our devotion, as is actively looking for him and evidence of him in the world around us. For those of us who are in love with someone or something, try showing this love without either communication or recognition.

So, what does all this mean to us today?

We would do well to be attentive to God at all times and in all places. It’s not known whether Solomon was expecting God to speak during the dedication festivities (though it might have been difficult for him to be heard over the singing and eating), so we won’t know if the night-time conversation was a surprise or not and whether he went to bed disappointed that God hadn’t shown up in more than cloud-form (2 Chronicles 5:14) or fire (2 Chronicles 7:1). But we do know that Solomon heard. Whether he responded in the way that he should is for another time.

Equally, we need to be listening out for God in the stillness as well as the clamour (possibly even more so). Set aside time to be alone with God and open yourself up to him. He might just have something to say.

Finally, do what he asks of us. Though we are not the same people who celebrated the opening of the Temple, or the return of the Ark, we are at a time of opening (and reopening) and returning (and rethinking) as we slowly transition to a post-pandemic world. We would do well to work on the challenge that God has set before us, whether we want to use the words of 2 Chronicles 7:14 or Matthew 22:37-39, to take us into the future of a closer relationship with God, and what that means for ourselves and our neighbours.

Time will tell...

Amen.

(Photo by [Matthew Henry](#) on [Unsplash](#))
