

Urban Legends – Part 12

2 Chronicles 7:14

Urban Legend.

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- *2 Chronicles 7:11-22*

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- **Humility.**

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- **For our church, our community, our nation, our world.**

- **Forgiveness.**

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- **Through you!**

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Urban Legends¹ *2 Chronicles 7:16*

By now, you know what an “urban legend” is, right? An urban legend is a commonly circulated myth that is not true, but it gets repeated throughout the culture so often that it comes to be believed as true.² Urban legends only *seem* true because we hear so many people repeating them so many times. But it doesn't matter how often we hear it; a lie told twice is still a lie. A myth told many times is still a myth. And this tendency to believe urban legends is especially dangerous when it involves Scripture, because we end up with a wrong understanding of God and a wrong representation of the Gospel in our lives.

Today is the last day in our series called “Urban Legends.” The reason we've been doing this series over the summer is really for two reasons: one is to dispel a handful of the myths that are circulating about Scripture and our theology. The other is to encourage every one of us to do our own due diligence when we read the Bible, to take the time to study the Scripture, especially realizing the importance of knowing the context that the Scripture is in. But don't think you have to study as much as I do. In all these passages that I've been preaching on, I've taken a lot of time to research them – reading commentaries, study Bibles, and books in preparation to preach. I've researched the original language and the historical cultural contexts of these passages, as well as the biblical contexts. But don't be discouraged if you don't have the resources or time to be able to do that. I totally understand that! Let me just encourage you and challenge you when it comes to *your* Bible reading (I'm assuming you read your Bible every day!). When you read a passage of Scripture and a particular verse stands out to you, make sure you try to get the context; back up and look at in two ways: first look at the context of the immediate scriptural surroundings. Make sure you see how it fits with the theme of the book and the chapters and paragraphs and verses on either side of it. That's the *immediate* context. Then, make sure it fits with your understanding of the greater context of the big theological themes of the Bible that you are aware of. That's the

¹ Sources for this series/sermon:

David A. Croteau and Gary E. Yates *Urban Legends of the Old Testament* (B&H Academic, Nashville TN 2019)

David A. Croteau *Urban Legends of the New Testament* (B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2015)

Michael Svigel and John Adair *Urban Legends of Church History* (B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2020)

Mitchel Modine, *1 & 2 Chronicles: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2014)

Eric J. Bargerhuff, *The Most Misused Verses in the Bible* (Bethany House Publishing, Bloomington, Minn., 2012)

Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997)

John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Phil 4:13

² David A. Croteau, *Urban Legends of the New Testament*, xiii.

theological context. And then if you are still uncertain, ask me or one of our pastors or a mature Christian that you trust.

Especially do this when you hear someone making a claim on social media or in a meme or TicToc video. Okay?

Now, let's get to our final urban legend.

Tomorrow as a nation, we will celebrate a holiday by getting the day off of work. It seems like in our country these days a national day off of work is about the *only* thing that we are unified around.

I don't need to list all the things that are concerning about the politic and governing of our nation and culture these days, do I? There's so much division, disrespect, and dysfunction politically, socially, economically, and relationally today in the United States.

But there is an urban legend from Scripture that some people cling to, that they believe promises a cure for everything that is wrong with America. There's one Scripture verse that gets quoted over and over that many Christians believe will fix our broken United States. It is *that* urban legend, and that Scripture in particular, that we are going to look at today.

Here is the Scripture that I'm talking about:

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 I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.
(2 Chronicles 7:14, niv)

Now this *is* a *great* Scripture that teaches us a whole lot about prayer and how God responds to our prayers. But there are some dangers; this verse is often used in prayer meetings, especially during the National Day of Prayer. It "makes a dramatic promise, and many who love the Lord and love their country have placed their hopes on its truth."³ But there's a problem – this verse does *not* promise what many people claim it promises.

Here is...

The Legend

...around that Scripture: If Americans – especially our political leaders – would pray this prayer, then God will hear it, will forgive us, and will heal our great land. America will once again prosper, will produce great wealth, and will be victorious in our desire to see freedom and democracy spread throughout the world. God will fix our nation.

Now, I would *love* it if this verse did actually make that promise, because we all know that our nation is in desperate need of some fixing! But to take that promise from Scripture and make it apply to America is to take the verse entirely out of its

³ Bargerhuff, 72

context and appropriate it and contort it and force it to mean something God never intended it to mean. Honestly, I'm frustrated and deeply concerned about our country. But I am also deeply upset whenever we Americanize God's Word.

So if that verse isn't a promise for America, what hope do we have? We're not left without hope – not at all, and *of course* we should pray for our nation. But this verse is *not* a promise for America.

So let me ask you: if we are going to understand who this verse is really for and what it really means to us, what are we going to have to do? Yes! We are going to have to look at...

The Context.

Let's start by looking at the immediate context of the passage. 2 Chronicles tells us about Solomon becoming the King of Israel, stepping into the role after his father, David. Remember that David had promised God that he would build a Temple to God, a place for the people to worship and encounter God. But God wouldn't let David build it because of the blood on his hands from all the wars he fought and because of when he murdered Uriah after David's affair with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. So Solomon, David's son, is the one to build the Temple. And in these chapters, all of Israel has gathered for the dedication of the Temple and to inaugurate sacrificial worship. Chapter three gives us the details of when Solomon built it, the measurements, the beautiful and ornate architecture, and artful craftsmanship. Then in chapter five we are told the story of the Ark of the Covenant being transferred into the Temple (remember that the ark was the symbol the place of God's presence and rest). Inside the Ark were the stone tablets that Moses brought down from Mount Moriah. After the Ark was placed in the temple, a cloud filled the temple and we're told that the Glory of the Lord filled the Temple. In chapter six, Solomon gave a speech and then a prayer of dedication. Imagine seeing Solomon standing before thousands of Israelites giving his speech and their roar of excitement, and then seeing Solomon turning to face the Temple and kneeling before the Lord, spreading his hands to heaven, and worshiping the Lord by recounting God's covenant faithfulness and then praying that beautiful prayer of dedication. And then in a powerful supernatural display and as a response to Solomon's prayer, God sent fire from heaven to consume the offerings and the sacrifices on the altar – a clear sign of God's approval and acceptance of the offering and of the Temple itself.

Solomon prayed that the Lord would be attentive to his prayers and the prayers of his people that are offered in this place, the Temple. He then asks that the Lord would act as judge, the forgiver of sins, and that when the people came to the Temple to repent of their national sins, that God would relent from divine judgment (and he lists specific things like drought and famine). Solomon then asks the Lord to also listen to the prayers of foreigners and Gentiles who come to the Temple to seek God, and that the Lord would bless Israel when they are in times of war. And then

finally, if Israel was defeated in war because of their sins, Solomon asks God to forgive them and restore them when they repent. After that is when the fire came down from heaven and burned up the offerings, leaving no doubt that God heard the prayers and approved of the Temple. The people all fell down on their faces in worship and were overwhelmed by this magnificent place and event, and they worshipped the Lord with singing, sacrifices, and feasts that last for another week. After this, Israel returned to their homes with joy in their hearts.⁴ As one author says, the glory days of Israel are at an all-time high.

Some amount of time passes – we don't know how long. It might have been a few weeks and some scholars say a few years. But then suddenly, in the middle of the night, the Lord appears to Solomon in private and God gives his response.

Let me read to you God's response in 2 Chronicles 7, and then we'll discover what is going on with our verse today and deal with the urban legend.

This is what God says:

When Solomon had finished the temple of the Lord and the royal palace, and had succeeded in carrying out all he had in mind to do in the temple of the Lord and in his own palace, the Lord appeared to him at night and said:

"I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices.

"When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, 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 I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place. I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.

"As for you, if you walk before me faithfully as David your father did, and do all I command, and observe my decrees and laws, I will establish your royal throne, as I covenanted with David your father when I said, 'You shall never fail to have a successor to rule over Israel.' (2 Chronicles 7:11-22, niv)

Okay we've got some context so we can begin to understand better how to apply our verse for today.

Now, for the sake of time I did not read Solomon's prayer in chapter six, because it is quite long, and it would have taken most of our time. But if you were to go back and read it, you would see that it is a beautiful prayer. And not only that, you would recognize that some of the things the Lord says in his midnight meeting with Solomon are very similar to the prayer that Solomon prayed. The point is that our verse today is in the middle of a longer statement that God is making, that is a direct response to Solomon and his prayer *for that Temple, in that Time, and for that Tribe.*

⁴ Bargerhuff, 74

In fact, let me point out how specifically God's answer is aligned with Solomon's prayer:

First, in 6:40, Solomon starts his prayer by saying, "Now, O my God, let your eyes be open and your ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place" (esv). In 7:15, God begins with the same Hebrew word that Solomon used: "Now," which is "attah." It means, "surely," or "furthermore." Its root word is also used to describe marital sexual intimacy. In other words, it is a deeply personal, relational word. Remember, Solomon said, "Now, O my God, let your eyes be open and your ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place" And God's response is "Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place."

When you back up, you see all that Solomon prays about, and God answers specifically and in the same order every one of Solomon's prayers. Solomon mentions that when Israel sins, God will punish with drought, famine, plague, and war. God gives the exact same list. Solomon prays that when they face those consequences and realize they need to repent, he prays that God will forgive them. God promises to forgive, relent from those judgements, and bring healing back to their land. Keep in mind that Solomon's prayer and God's response were taking place during a time when God's response to peoples' sins was judgmental consequences, and the way that they showed repentance was through sacrificial worship. That is different than for us – our sin may have consequences, but the sacrifice has already been paid and judgment comes at the end, especially if we've not repented and responded in faith to Christ.

Here's the point of this: God's response is given specifically to Solomon, the king who represents and leads God's chosen people, the nation of Israel. The "place" that the Lord is referring to is specifically the temple itself. The promise that the Lord gives is specifically to *this* king and *these* people in *this* time and *this* place. As one scholar writes, "It is not meant to be a general promise that is given to any other nation on the face of the earth. No other nation could ever claim to be "God's people," and no other nation today has a temple where the living God dwells.⁵ "We must remember that Americans are not God's people."⁶

Solomon's prayer and God's response are all tied to God's specific covenant relationship with the people of Israel. In other words, ***2 Chronicles 7:16 is for a specific people, in a specific place and time, and is a specific promise. This is NOT a promise for the United States of America.***

It was a promise in a specific time, to a specific tribe, in that specific temple. Applying this passage without carefully considering the immediate, historical, literary, and theological context is wrong and inappropriate.

So what am I saying, am I saying that we can't or shouldn't pray for our nation, or that we shouldn't pray for God to heal our land? Am I saying that God doesn't want

⁵ Bargerhuff, 75

⁶ Croteau and Yates, 131

to heal the United States? Absolutely not! There are some very powerful and practical lessons for us in our verse for today.

So now that we have the right context, here is the...

Application.

There is an expectation of obedience in our verse, and that certainly applies to us. Their response was to make the appropriate sacrifices and to change their behaviors. But remember that for us, God has *already* made the sacrifice for us in the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. So, assuming that we've responded in faith to Christ, what's left for us is our prayer and obedience. Remember, this whole conversation is based within an intimate, loving relationship that we too can have with our God. And if we are going to follow what God is saying in our verse, today, it is going to start with our...

– Humility.

Most definitely, if we want to approach God appropriately and in prayer, we must humble ourselves. He is God and we are not. We cannot come before him to demand anything, nor does he owe us anything. There can be no arrogance on our part in our relationship to God; it is only because of his incredible grace that we can come to him *at all*. Jim Cymbala is a leader in present day prayer, and he says, "Humility is the key to experiencing God's power."⁷ So from our verse we realize that we must humble ourselves.

Then, we must come to him in...

– Repentance.

Our verse reminds us that we must approach him with an attitude of repentance from any sin. I love what one author says about this vital step of repentance: "Repentance is not a fatal day when tears are shed, but a natal day when, as a result of tears, a new life begins."⁸

It is in these attitudes of humility and repentance that we can then approach God in...

– Prayer.

As God's new covenant people, we can, and we should pray. And certainly, we can learn the value of prayer as being...

⁷ Jim Cymbala, *Leadership*, Vol. 14, no. 4

⁸ *Ilion T. Jones, Christian Reader, Vol. 32, no. 5*

– **For our church, our community, our nation, our world.**

Yes – absolutely, we should pray for each other, for the effectiveness of our church in sharing the Gospel in our community, and so for the health of our community. Absolutely we should pray for our nation – in fact, God’s Word commands us to do so in 1 Timothy 2:1-4. Our nation needs God’s love and God’s intervention. Thomas Jefferson, one of our founding fathers, once said, “Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.”⁹ If Thomas Jefferson was concerned about the immorality of our nation in its early years, how much more should we be tremble at the thought that God is still a just God today! So yes – we can and should *always* pray for our church, our community, our nation, and our world. And we should ask for, and expect God to give us...

– **Forgiveness**

...when we ask for it. Remember, God does promise us in 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” So we ask for God to forgive us, and we can pray for the forgiveness of each other, our community, our nation, and our world, when people respond in faith the God’s grace. But remember, it’s starts with us. We can pray for revival in our country, but we should not expect that prayer to be answered if revival has not first come to our own lives. Someone once said, “If you want revival to come to America, you should draw a circle on the ground, then step into that circle, and then pray for God to bring revival to everyone inside that circle.

Because it is only when we respond to God’s grace in faith and we receive his forgiveness for us, that’s when...

– **Healing**

...comes in our lives. It begins with spiritual healing and then, as we live holy lives of love to others.

And that means that for us as people who dwell in God’s new covenant relationship with us, the promise of healing for our nation will come.

– **Through you!**

God definitely wants to bring healing to our nation, and it begins with you and then extends from you and through you to your family, your neighborhood, your community as you live out your Christian life and share the Gospel. God heals our

⁹ Thomas Jefferson in Notes on Virginia; Manners. Christianity Today, Vol. 34, no. 11

nation one person at a time as they are transformed by the Gospel through Jesus Christ, which you show and share.

Although God is concerned with the spiritual life and health of every nation, his relationship with Israel is unique. As Christians pray and live their lives honoring God, we will be salt and light in their culture, and therefore have a positive impact on the society that we live in (Matthew 5:13-16). Even if this happens and great revivals occur throughout our nation, that does not necessarily mean that anything in the political system will be fixed. The promise was for Israel, not us.

In the meantime, we need to live out the Gospel and pray for healing to come through us.

Many of you remember that for three of my four years of college I was in a Covenant Group with eleven other college guys and our mentor – we met weekly for several hours at a time for confession, accountability, Scripture study and prayer. And one of my covenant brothers wrote a beautiful song related to our verse today. I'm not going to sing it to you (you'll thank me later), but I will recite it to you:

Why is it so hard to have a broken heart?

Why can't the fallow ground be broken all apart?

Why is this soul of mine like an iron gate?

Not even the Spirit of God can seem to penetrate.

Why is it so rare for me to weep?

The harvest is plentiful, there's many to reap.

Why don't I hurt when I see the world cry?

I'm so complacent, while those around me die.

Plow up your fallow ground, it's time to seek the Lord.

He'll rain down his righteousness into your heart.

He said if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves, humble themselves, humble themselves and pray, then I will heal their land.

Even as I sing these words, my soul is feeling dry.

But I will never give up or let the seeking die,

for I am on a journey and there's no turning back.

I'll seek the Lord forevermore, and he'll fill what I lack.

I'll seek the Lord forevermore, and in his time, he'll fill what I lack.

I'd like to invite us to a time of prayer and seeking the Lord. We're going to pray just as we've learned to pray *appropriately* from this verse.

- *humility*

- *repentance*

- *prayer*

- *for our church, our community, our nation, our world*

- *forgiveness*

- *healing*

- *through you!*

Pastor Jason – benediction:

“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.” Numbers 6:24-26