

Great Verses of the Bible

If My People...

2 Chronicles 7:14

June 11, 2023

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This is the day that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church! I bring you greetings from the Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, which I attended this past week. This is the Conference that the Reverend Kim Fields and I are members of. I am happy to report, to the best of my knowledge, we did not do anything stupid! That is important to you because, number one, they are a part of the body of Christ just like we are. And we root for one another; we lift up one another; and when one celebrates, we all celebrate; when one hurts, we all hurt. And, number two, in the Pacific Northwest, Conferences have a tendency to follow the lead of one another, and your Conference is next week. And we set a good example, so hopefully y'all won't do anything stupid either. But your delegates and I will be attending, and we'll be watching and listening, and we will make a report to you, probably in the next few weeks. One thing that happens at these Conferences is we have reports from different agencies. One of the things I want to report to this body, because it has a personal flavor for this congregation. The United Methodist Committee on Relief, UMCOR, as we know it, is one of the best things that United Methodists do. And one of the tragedies that is going on in our world right now is the conflict in Ukraine. And that's near and dear to a lot of people's hearts in this congregation. And I wanted to report to you that the United Methodist Committee on Relief has dedicated \$27 million this year to support the peoples affected by the conflict in Ukraine and have already distributed \$18 million. And I thought that you would be interested in knowing that.

Now, a long, long time ago in a land far, far away, there was a 16-year-old boy that wanted to get his driver's license. And his dad said, "Okay, son. Conditions: Number one, you got to pick up your grades. Number two, you got to clean your room. And number three, you got to get a haircut. And we will revisit this in about three months." Three months passed and his grades had significantly improved. His room looked significantly better, especially compared to most 16-year-old boys' rooms. But he had not got a haircut, and his father said, "Son, the room's good, the grades are great, but you haven't gotten a haircut." And he said, "Oh, Dad, it's just hair. And after all, Jesus had long hair." And the dad said, "Yes, son, He did have long hair. You will note He walked everywhere he went!"

There are a lot of things in life that are conditional, are they not? Today we are looking at one of my favorite Old Testament passages: 2 Chronicles, chapter 7, verse 14. God speaking: "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 forgive their sins and heal their land." It is conditional. God's love is unconditional, but God's approval is conditional. I want to begin today by starting at a 30,000-foot level, before we actually get to this particular passage. This passage comes from the Old Testament. You'll note this summer we are doing a series on "Great Verses of the Bible," and a number of them come from the Old Testament. How are we to receive, how are

we to view, how are we to read the Old Testament? Several times this year I have reminded you that the word “testament” means “covenant,” so it is the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. We are people of the New Covenant, not of the Old Covenant. Does that mean that the Old Covenant is not relevant? Absolutely not. It is relevant. It is important. But we are people of the New Covenant. The New Covenant is binding on us; the Old Covenant is not. But the Old Covenant is our history; the Old Covenant is where we came from; the Old Covenant is how God brought about the New Covenant. The Old Covenant contains inspiration and examples of unparalleled dedication and sacrifice. It contains a history of how God deals with God's people. Now, do you consider yourself God's people? If you consider yourself God's people, then this applies to you: “If My people, who are called by My name...” Do you claim the name of Jesus as your own? Then this applies to you. We cannot disregard the Old Testament. It contains many lessons that we need to learn. Our passage today is a microcosm of the Old Testament, the Old Covenant. It is how God has always dealt with God's people. We see this pattern repeated again and again and again and again and again in the Old Covenant. Now, that is the 30,000-foot level. Let's come down to about 10,000 feet. Here's the background: King David of Israel, perhaps their greatest king, had died. His son, Solomon, had taken the throne. Israel was experiencing a brief period of prosperity. Solomon used monies and materials his father had collected, and he had supplemented, and built himself a palace and built the grandest of the three temples to Yahweh, where sacrifices would be offered.

Now, let's get to our passage. Solomon had completed the work on the temple. They had dedicated the temple. They put burnt offerings on the altar, and God sent fire from heaven and consumed those offerings. God inhabited the temple, symbolized by smoke, known as the Shekinah glory of God. When God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai and gave him the 10 Commandments, the mountain was enveloped in smoke. When Jesus was transfigured on the Mount of Transfiguration, the mountain was engulfed in smoke, symbolic of God's presence. It's called the Shekinah glory of God; look it up. So, God occupied the temple by filling it with smoke. So dense was the smoke, the priests could not enter for some time. When they finally did, Solomon and all the people of Israel offered sacrifices for days and days. And they sang and they danced, and they offered sacrifices for days. Finally, Solomon called an end to the celebration, and he sent the people home. And when the celebration had died down and everyone had left and Solomon was alone at night, God spoke to him. And the passage that we have is more or less a summation of what God said to Solomon. And He said, “This is how I am going to deal with My people, and this is how I'm going to deal with you.” If you'll read the verses just prior to verse 14, you will hear God saying to Solomon, “If My people have sinned, and I have shut up the heavens and there is no rain, or if I have sent locusts on the land, or if I have sent 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 will I hear from heaven. I will forgive their sins and I will heal their lands.” We see this pattern repeated again and again and again. “If My people, who are called by my name...” It is “If, then.” God's love is unconditional, we can rest assured of that, but God's approval is not. This is not for the world at large; this is for God's people. This was spoken to the nation of Israel. It is also

speaking to us who are the new Israel, God's people. "If My people will humble themselves and pray and seek My face, then will I hear from heaven."

Now, this church has a lot of scientists and engineers in it. I thought about that, and I had planned on saying that this church has more scientists and engineers than any church I have ever pastored. Well, numerically, yes, but percentage-wise, no. Here's why: I happened to pastor the church at Rainier, Oregon, just before they shut the Trojan Nuclear Plant down. And we had about 35 people in that church, and I had six nuclear scientists in it. So, it was a pretty good percentage. But the reason I mentioned that is for you scientists and engineers. We have a three-point formula of how to get God's approval. "If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves..." Humility is a change of attitude towards self. It is an acknowledgement of disobedience. It is an acknowledgement of straying. It is an acknowledgment that you're no longer on the path that you need to be. It is a change of attitude toward self that says, "I have been disobedient." Disobedience is an arrogant rejection of God's way. It is no longer following God's path. It is willfully choosing to go our way. God says, "If My people will humble themselves and pray..." Prayer should be the opposite of arrogance. It is a penitent attitude. Jesus used a parable of a Pharisee praying and a tax collector praying. Jesus says the tax collector prayed about himself. Have you ever done that? I don't think I've ever done that. But this guy prayed about himself. He looked to heaven, and he raised his hands, and he said, "God, I thank you that I am better than most men. And I thank you that I don't do this, and I don't do that. And I'm certainly better than that tax collector. And I keep the Sabbath and yada yada yada yada." The tax collector wouldn't even look toward heaven. And he beat his breast, and he said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." And Jesus said, "That man went away justified." And the Pharisee just went away.

"If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face..." Seeking God's face means seeking what God wants, what God desires, what God requires. It is acknowledging that God's way is right, and my way is not. I did not grow up Christian, but when we started going to church, I was in a little church where, by the time I got in high school, I was absolutely, positively, unequivocally convinced that God did not want me to have any fun at all. And if I was having fun, I was probably sinning. What I have come to learn is that God wants what's best for me and wants me to do what's best for other people. It's not that God does not want me to have fun; He doesn't want me to have fun at your expense. You hear me? God's way is good for us. God wants what's best for us.

"If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways..." See, it's not a matter of just saying, "I'm sorry." It's a matter of doing. Repentance is a matter of action. It is a matter of changed behavior. It is to resolve to embark on a life based on God's way and God's will. Repentance is an action. God says, "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, forgive their sins and heal their lands." We see this pattern again and again and again in the Old Covenant, in the Old Testament, with the children of Israel. But if we are honest, we will see this pattern repeated again and again in our

own lives. I often realize that I have strayed. I often realize that I have a bad attitude toward an individual or a group. I often want to pull the ears off of people, in a loving grace-filled way, of course. But I have to admit that's wrong. I often find myself with an arrogant attitude and a sense of entitlement because, after all, I'm a child of God, instead of embracing humility and gratitude.

I have no idea where you're at. You may be saying, "You know what? That has been me in the past, but right now me and God are cool. We're good." You may be at a place where you go, "You know what? I got some stuff. I got some stuff, and I need to talk to God about it." And you may be at a place where you go, "I'm so far away from God, I have no idea how to get back." Today's message may have sounded a little bit harsh, but it's not. It's good news. It's good news. Wherever you are in life, you are as close to God as your next breath, as your next step. If you are not that far away but a little bit off the path, if you are forever away, if you will humble yourself and pray and seek God's face and turn from your wicked ways, God will hear and forgive you and cleanse you and restore your relationship. It is an "If, then." The prodigal son, in the story of the prodigal son and the loving father, when he had come to his senses in the faraway land where he was sojourning and starving to death, when he came to his senses, he returned to his father's house. But without returning, without returning home, he could not have been received as the lost son, born again. We have a Southern saying: You got to get lost before you get found. You got to get lost before you get found. You got to get lost before you get saved. You got to admit you have a problem before you can get forgiven. You got to admit it. You got to own it and say, "You know..."

God's blessings are conditional; His love is not. I want to say to you: Sometimes people have a fear of God. Look, don't fear God. Some people have a fear of going home again. I can remember one time when I had disobeyed my father, and I knew how I disobeyed my father. And I knew, within reason, he probably knew about it. And I was going home. You see, in this particular incident, we had been told not to go to a particular area to hunt, but my cousins convinced me to go, and then they had fired some shots. You can't unhear those things. And I knew I had to go home. And I knew I was going home to a loving father that was very punitive. But I want you to note, in the story of the prodigal son, when he came to his senses and he went home, his father saw him coming a long way away. And he went out and he grabbed him around the neck. And when he started to explain away his behavior, his father says, "Shut up, son!" And he gave him a big hug and a big sloppy kiss on the cheek. And he put a robe on his back and a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. And then they killed a calf and celebrated because the lost son had come home. And that is how you will be received when you come home, when you humble yourself and pray and seek His face and turn from your wicked ways. You will, I promise, be received as a beloved child.

Let us pray together. No matter where you are in your relationship with God, you are as close to God as your next breath or your next step. Now, about a year ago, I had the altar rail on the north side of the Sanctuary reinstalled. That is to pray at. And if you feel like you would like to come to the altar and pray, for whatever reason, for yourself or for somebody else, I'd invite you to do so. If you want to do that during my prayer, if you want to do that during the closing song, if you want to do that after we have finished, our

altars have been too lonely and too dry for too long. And I want to give you an opportunity to come. If you don't want to go to the altar here, the Prayer Room is just on the left side of the Welcome Center. If you want to go to the Prayer Room, there's going to be people there that will be there to pray with you. I want to invite you to do that this morning. Let us pray together.

Gracious God, in the quietness of this time, in this beautiful place, we come before You, humbling ourselves before You, seeking Your face, turning from our ways and seeking Your ways, Lord. Now, Lord, hear our prayers. In Jesus' name. Amen.