

Marion weekly update

SERMON April 7, Healing: Heal Our Land, 2 Chronicles 7:11-22, Daniel 9:18-19

This week we begin a series on healing. There are many different kinds and ways of healing, which makes sense as there are many kinds of brokenness. This morning we are focusing on a corporate healing. We are focusing on a nation wide healing.

Israel was no stranger to the need for this. Their brokenness was often and widespread. It looked like mistreating one another, neglecting one another, taking advantage of one another, and so much more. When a nation no longer has a spirit of unity and looking out for each other brokenness is the only end possible. For Israel the root of this was typically idolatry. They had lost their focus on God. When we see the behaviors the prophets reveal, there was more idolatry than just the false gods they were led to follow. It's this idolatry plus that we have to contend with today.

Yes, there are many who don't believe in God or Christ in the way that we do. Even those that do can fall into the same idolatry of Israel. This is the idol of self and selfish desire. It's possible to be in church Sunday after Sunday and still be led away from God. Selfishness puts God on the back burner. Sure, words might reflect some sense of faith, but actions tell the true tale. We make idols of ourselves, of parties, of personalities, of celebrity, of flags, and so much more. We know when this happens when our devotion to any of these things leads us to choose ungodly words and deeds in pursuit of them.

The land is broken. The land is torn. The land needs healing.

The Chronicles passage is famous and familiar, yet it's Daniel that gives us the actual first step towards healing.

Daniel is one of the most positively spoken of figures in scripture. Yet in his prayer as he is captive in Babylon is telling. It's a "we" prayer rather than a "they" prayer. Daniel includes himself in the sin of the nation. We don't know what all he's referencing, but he's not looking at everyone else and interceding only on their behalf. He is owning in his own sense that he too is part of the problem that has put he and his people in exile. In other words he is owning his part in the mess.

This is step one in any corporate healing. Each individual that is part of the group has to own their own part in the mess. This is what confession is. It's responsibility. It's self-awareness. How can any of us expect the greater whole to move forward changed and transformed if we can't do it ourselves? After all, in the larger group the only thing we can control is ourselves. Step one is being the model for others to follow of what ownership and change look like.

We also need to recognize that there is sacred and secular confession. Both can be part of corporate healing. For those who believe in the divine, sacred confession is a wonderful catalyst for change. It's a layer beyond secular confession. We come before God humbly admitting our faults and seeking forgiveness. We look to the Spirit for strength to change from our old ways. This is the power of the sacred. In our ownership we partner with the Almighty to make the changes needed to heal the land. Secular confession misses out on this layer, though in truth if we believe the Spirit speaks to every heart we might say that the heart that owns wrongdoing and looks to change is prompted by the Spirit. Just because someone doesn't have a name for what's happening doesn't mean it doesn't exist. A person who doesn't understand the term "gravity" nevertheless experiences it by not flying off the earth into space. While secular confession doesn't intentionally seek out the divine, it does seek out change. "I'm messing up and I need to do something about it."

Sacred or secular, confession is a key and foundational component to the healing of a larger group. Chronicles gives us the next component. Those who are called by God's name must humble themselves, pray, and turn from their wickedness. It's not just pray, it's also act. It's confess and seek with the intention of changing. There's a cartoon that circulates where some leader or pastor asks the people gathered who wants things to change and every hand raises. Then the leader asks who wants to change and every hand stays down. If we want change in the greater whole there MUST be change in us that starts the process.

Once again we see a sacred and secular aspect to this.

The sacred are those who believe and go to God with the intention of asking forgiveness and seeking strength and direction to heal the land. The sacred are those who intentionally look to God for how to genuinely live together in community as God desires. They look for courage to take the difficult stand to show the compassion, grace, and integrity of life and faith even when the world would push to sideline Godly treatment of one another for convenience, standing, wealth and so forth. We call for unity even when the world is screaming divide. We set the example of the Jesus of the gospels not the Jesus of culture and politics. In doing so we call those around us to a higher standard of being. We call them to live in the love and light of grace given to us and given by us because that is how we fulfill the great commandment to love our neighbor.

This is turning from wickedness that is partnered with prayer. Prayer seeks God, but it is that prayer put into action in our lives that does the most significant healing.

It also fuels the secular turn as well. Paul writes the following in Romans 2

23 You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?

24 As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

25 Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.

26 So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised?

27 The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

28 A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.

29 No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.

Paul is saying to the Jews that they had a job, which was to show the world what it looked like to follow God. Their idolatry and the following actions didn't accomplish that task and he says that the Gentiles blasphemed God's name because of them. He also remarks that it's possible to follow God's desires even if someone isn't specifically following God. There are people of faith whose lives defy God's desires and somehow there are those who do not share faith yet in following their heart do what is pleasing to God. This returns us to the sense that the Spirit speaks to every heart, and even without the language to identify it people can still respond to those nudges to love, forgive, and do what is right.

The point here is that if the people of Christ live into the faith correctly they become an example that even those who don't believe can follow. There's a reason that we are called to be the light of the world, a city on a hill for all to see. Our example should shine to believer and nonbeliever alike to what it means to live in the grace and light of God. That example is an example of what turning from wickedness looks like.

There is something we don't often recognize that goes hand in glove with this. Some people transform their actions because they come to believe. Others come to believe because they begin by following the actions of people of faith.

When I graduated college I called myself a Christian, but looking back I don't believe that I was. I knew the words to say and the short list of morality to follow, but the fullness of Christ was not in my heart. I didn't really do much at all in the way of prayer or study. I wasn't interested in church. I was doing my own thing and had my fire insurance. The group home I was working in at one point began having the kids do community service by helping a fledgling congregation convert an old school house into a church. The sanctuary was this tiny portion of the building that had been drywalled and had a giant plastic tarp separating it from the majority of the building that was being ripped down to studs to redo. It wasn't much to look at. I worked there not because I believe in the church or as a service to God. It was part of my job. That was it. But working side by side with the kids and these church members I was moved. I began attending services eventually and that's where I would say my faith was

truly activated. It put me on a life changing path. But I didn't believe and work as a result. I worked and through that came to truly believe.

Sacred or secular, the tools to heal our land are available to everyone. Those who already believe are called to humbly pray to God. If we truly believe that God desires all of us, then we know that there is no person out there who isn't called by God's name. It's just a matter of claiming that call. Which means that all of us have the ability to choose to do what is right in the eyes of God.

The land can be healed. It takes work. It takes humble self and soul searching. It takes time. In the end it's worth the effort. The effort heals the land by healing each of us. It brings us all together seeking what is best and doing it God's way. Along the way we trust that many who don't yet believe will be persuaded by recognizing the wisdom in the way God has called us to live together. Along the way we trust that one by one we will add new believers to the body of Christ. And not only will we celebrate but we know that heaven celebrates along with us.

BIBLE STUDY—! Samuel 14

Chapter 14 is all about character when it comes to Saul. It also establishes the character of Saul's son Jonathan.

Saul seems to be a very complex person. He keeps messing up yet it also seems he also tries to do right. On the doing right side he brings Ahijah along. Ahijah is a priest, and so he's not risking heading into conflict without someone who is legitimate to initiate and execute rituals and blessings. He builds an altar to the LORD. He calls out the men on their ritually sinful act of eating meat with the blood still in it. He goes to inquire of God as to whether or not he should go after the Philistines after the main battle was done. This all seems like good stuff. Saul is looking to God for his direction.

But maybe not so fast.

Saul is also a temperamental and rash man. Seeking God's favor he embarks on a foolish oath forbidding the soldiers to eat before and while going into battle. He commits to it without considering how many men, his own son included, might not have heard said oath, thus condemning them. When he asks about pursuing the Philistines further, he goes extreme stating that if someone has sinned, even his own son, that prevented God's response that person should die. Of course who turns up as the culprit? His son Jonathan.

There is something not right about Saul.

Jonathan on the other hand is less willing to sit and wait. He and his armor bearer head towards the Philistine outpost and Jonathan tests God with a version of lot casting. "If they say this, we'll do this". His faith is strong as he trusts that when God is involved numbers in battle have no meaning. This proves out when the two defeat 20 Philistines. Not only that, but in seeking God the summon God's favor in a powerful way.

Their willingness to trust God stirs such a commotion that the enemy is panicked. They are not only scattering and fleeing but literally killing one another. The commotion is so great the Saul takes notice and wonders if it's time to attack. He even sends for the ark but makes a call as the panic grows to just go and attack. He tells the priest to "stay his hand" because it's no longer necessary to divine God's will.

This is an incredibly important piece of the story. Saul is looking to get God to lead, and then senses that God is already doing it. The seeking is no longer necessary. What is necessary is to jump in and participate in what God has done. Too often believers spend all their time asking for an answer or a sign and miss the sign itself. Sometimes God has already led the way for us. It's not our place to be still and seeking. It's our place to jump in faithfully and participate.

There are some strange turns in this chapter. Perhaps first and foremost is what the definition of sin is. Saul had made an oath, not God. Yet Jonathan was singled out as the sinner even though all he'd done is sought and followed God. The sin was actually committed by the men who ate meat with the blood still in it and somehow they escaped judgement. If sin means missing the mark, then Saul clearly missed any mark of sensibility in his oath. Was that sin? Perhaps. The most innocent man in the

camp is Jonathan and he is the one who is selected to die. What?

Jonathan's "sin" was eating a little honey. Which is no legitimate sin at all particularly when you don't know the king has made some rash oath. The moment he hears about the oath more of Jonathan's character is revealed. He calls out his father's foolishness. He's not afraid to take a stand even against his father. This comes out later when he defends David over and above his dad. Jonathan is brave for certain, and unafraid to stand up for what is right even if it means defying a king. Once again, what a wonderful example that more of us could learn from.

When Saul is ready to go through with his commitment to kill Jonathan the men stand up as well. They essentially remind Saul that if there's one person through whom God worked that day it was Jonathan. You don't destroy that powerful instrument of God. And so Jonathan is thankfully spared. All of this bears further looking into the passage. Specifically regarding the lot casting.

Just because someone says God is controlling the outcome doesn't mean God is. So when Jonathan is selected is it possible that they were attributing something to God that God chose to have no hand in? I would say it's possible. In which case their response isn't permitted by God, it's just their response based on assumption.

On the other hand, is it possible that God spoke through the lots not to out Jonathan falsely, but to call out Saul? Perhaps this was God trying to help Saul recognize that his impulsiveness wasn't serving the people well. He's ready to kill his own son out of a reckless oath. Maybe Jonathan's selection was God's wake up call for Saul. "Of all the 'sinning' going on here Jonathan is the least guilty. But you want to kill your own son? Maybe think a little before opening your mouth next time."

How often do we attribute something to God that isn't God? How often do we miss a lesson because we're so consumed with our own sense of self that we can't see warning signs, feedback, and loving support? When we fall into such traps we are one with Saul.

Saul is a conflicted king. He wants to do the right thing yet can't help himself when his own temper or ego rises. Here his son is in the crosshairs. Thankfully Jonathan is spared.

What is clear as the chapter ends up is that Saul has done and will do one thing right. His future victories are laid out. We remember that the initial reasoning for a king was to have that king defend Israel. Whatever Saul lacks in sense otherwise, he is clearly a capable military leader. That role he fulfills successfully. If we are tempted to view Saul as merely a villain we do well to keep in mind his complicated rise to the throne. We do well to see his efforts to do what's right even when he fails and does wrong. And the main purpose for which he was selected he seems to do decently.

Saul's family is recorded. Why? In the telling of the rise of a king, any natural curiosity is who and where he came from. What children did he have? Who was his wife? This question is answered at the end of the chapter.

Finally we see the beginnings of Saul creating a standing army. It's also a fulfillment of Samuel's prophecy. Wherever Saul goes when he finds strong, valiant men he conscripts them into his army. It's like an ancient draft. And just as Samuel predicted, the king begins to scoop up the sons of the people to fight in his army.

Ultimately we see that God's wisdom never fails. The warnings about an earthly king come to pass as the torch of leadership is passed from a rejected God to a requested king. Sadly we'll see Saul's failings come to a head when chapter 15 unfolds.