

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Bible Prayers: Solomon's dedication prayer

It was a day of great celebration. A day the whole nation could be proud of and rejoice. The temple had finally been built in Jerusalem! What had started as an idea in the heart of King David had come to fruition during the reign of his son Solomon. All the furniture for the temple had been brought in. All the elders of Israel, the heads of each of the twelve tribes and the chief fathers of the children of Israel gathered in Jerusalem. All the people of Israel gathered for a period of feasting. More sacrifices were offered to God that day than perhaps on any other. The people watched as the ark of the covenant, which contained the two stones upon which the ten commandments were written, was brought into the temple. A choir of nearly 300 men and 120 trumpeters stood in glistening white tunics and they praised the LORD together saying, "*He is good, for His mercy endures forever*" (see 2 Chronicles 5:11-14). The crowd listened eagerly as they listened to their king, Solomon, address the nation and remind them of the things God had said to them about the temple (2 Chronicles 6:1-11). It was a day of great thanksgiving as the people recalled what God had done. Then there was a hush over the crowd, as Solomon started to pray.

The details of this joyful event in the history of the people of Israel can be found in 2 Chronicles 5-7. We don't have enough time to read and speak about all of these verses this morning but please try and find time to read through them this week to fill in some of the background for the things we will think about today and to remind yourself of the challenges we hear from God's Word this morning.

So far in our series on Bible prayers, we have been considering prayers from the New Testament, and have looked at the prayers of Paul and of the Lord Jesus. These prayers can be so instructive for us. Let's use these prayers in the Scriptures to mould our own prayers and alter the way we pray. But it's not just prayers in the New Testament that hold lessons for us today. The subject this morning is the prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the new temple in Jerusalem. This prayer is found in 2 Chronicles 6:14-42. I think if you read it you will agree it is one of the most astonishing prayers in the Bible. We can catch a glimpse of the relationship Solomon had with God and the feeling of this prayer. That must be a challenge to us!

If there is an overriding lesson for us in this prayer it is one about God and forgiveness. That seems a bit strange, doesn't it? Why would Solomon be praying for forgiveness at a time of great celebration for the people of Israel? Wasn't this a momentous occasion for the people that would be remembered in future generations alongside other great events like the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 14:1-31), the crossing of the River Jordan (Joshua 3:1-17), the defeat of Jericho (Joshua 6:1-27) and David's defeat of Goliath (1 Samuel 17:1-58)? I think the fact that a plea for forgiveness forms such a large part of Solomon's dedication prayer is instructive. When things are going well and we are in a period of life where we can rejoice, it's easy to forget how far short we fall of what God requires of us. It's easy to forget how much we need to depend on God and His grace. Solomon knew this. He knew the people were celebrating at that time, but he wasn't so naïve as to think that his people would always have things going their way. He knew there would be times in the future when the people would suffer, either because of their own wrongdoing or because of circumstances outside their control. So Solomon prays that in these more difficult times there would be hope for the people, an opportunity to turn back to God and seek forgiveness and restoration. How much we need that today!

Let's return then to the scene we started with. The crowd had hushed as Solomon started to pray. In 2 Chronicles 6:14 he begins his prayer "*LORD God of Israel, there is no God in heaven or on earth like You.*" What an important place to start. Do you realise that when you pray you are praying to God who is unique and like no other? Although there is a sense in which it is right to think of prayer as a conversation with a friend, it is so much more than that. Do we realise whom we address when we speak in prayer? There is no one like God! Anywhere! This fact should make us show an appropriate respect, and reverence, when we pray as we recognise that God is supremely great.

Solomon recognised that prayer was a privilege. In 2 Chronicles 6:18 he asks "*But will God indeed dwell with men on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!*" God was not so small as to be contained within the temple Solomon had built, no matter how great that temple. But Solomon was amazed that God who is so great, would provide this place where He would meet with His people. He was filled with wonder at the fact.

Do we realise what a privilege we have to pray to God? The God that cannot be contained in heaven and the heaven of heavens, wants to hear from me. Let's be challenged to appreciate the privilege we have of being able to pray and be aware of the greatness of the God to whom we pray. But this fact is not meant to discourage us. In fact the opposite is true. If we are thinking about forgiveness and we recognise that God is uniquely great then we realise, too, that His forgiveness really must be uniquely great.

So often the forgiveness we see amongst ourselves can be so flawed. I might say that I forgive my wife for something she has done to upset me. But how often would I bring it up again sometime later when she upsets me again? My forgiveness can be so limited and flawed. Not so with God! His forgiveness surpasses even the best examples of forgiveness. Sometimes you can read in the papers of parents who choose to forgive the murderers of their children. That would be harder than I can even begin to imagine and yet God's forgiveness is even greater. Let that be an encouragement to you this morning that no matter how much you have failed and sinned, you can come to God, who is like none other and ask for His remarkable forgiveness.

The next thing to notice from Solomon's prayer is that God is a God who keeps His word. In 2 Chronicles 6:15-17 we read: *"You have kept what you promised Your servant David my father; You have both spoken with Your mouth and fulfilled it with Your hand, as it is this day. Therefore, LORD God of Israel, now keep what You promised Your servant David my father saying, 'You shall not fail to have a man sit before Me on the throne of Israel, only if your sons take heed to their way that they walk in My law as you have walked before Me.' And now, O LORD God of Israel, let Your word come true, which You have spoken to Your servant David."*

Solomon has had first hand proof that God keeps His word. After all, here he was standing in front of a magnificent temple. God had said it would be built, and it had been. For Solomon, the fact that God had been seen to keep His promises was a sign and a proof that God would keep all His promises for the future. Reading the rest of the Bible reveals to us that God's promise that there would always be a king from David's family on the throne would ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus. He would truly be God's King, not just of Israel but of the whole world.

When we go through this prayer and see Solomon's requests for forgiveness, it's helpful to remember that Solomon knew he was praying to God, who kept His promises. This is especially significant when we consider that in 2 Chronicles 7 God answers Solomon's prayer and promises that He will forgive. More on that later, but for now let's remember that we can be sure that God keeps His word. When we read in the New Testament in 1 John 1:9, *"If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins"* we can be sure God will keep His word because God keeps His promises. God has said that He will accept the death of Jesus Christ in our place if we repent and turn to Him in faith. God has said it and so it is true!

Having made these initial points, that God is uniquely great and that God keeps His promises, we can now move into the main points of the prayer and discover some helpful things about forgiveness. If you read through Solomon's prayer in 2 Chronicles 6, you will find that five times Solomon asks God to forgive His people. You can find these requests in 2 Chronicles 6:21, 25, 27, 30 and 39. Solomon knew there would be times when both he and his people would require God's forgiveness. With that in mind, we can consider some helpful lessons for us today.

The first to consider is that we can come to God for forgiveness in any circumstance. Just a quick glance at the verses highlights for us that the people of Israel could approach God for forgiveness in a wide array of circumstances. Let's take some time to think about them together. They could approach God when they had been defeated in battle. In 2 Chronicles 6:24-25 we read, *"If Your people Israel are defeated before an enemy because they have sinned against You, and return and confess Your name, and pray and make supplication before You in this temple, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of Your people..."*

On other occasions the people of Israel could be suffering from drought. We read in 2 Chronicles 6:26, *"When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against You, when they pray toward this place and confess Your name, and turn from their sin because You afflict them, then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of Your servants."* It's clear that not all droughts, famines and natural disasters that occur are directly related to the sin of a particular group of people. But in at least some cases recorded in the history of Israel in the Old Testament God used things like droughts to teach His people valuable lessons. Here, Solomon's prayer is that if that happens the people will recognise their sin and turn back to God and cry out for forgiveness. Not only that, Solomon prays that God would hear their cry and forgive them.

A similar request, when the people were suffering from famine or pestilence comes in 2 Chronicles 6:28-30 although in these verses the set of circumstances in which to approach God is widened. The people could be suffering because *"their enemies besieged them in the land of their cities"*, there could be *"plagues"* or *"sickness."* Even more generally, we read in 2 Chronicles 6:29 that *"each one knows his own burden and his own grief."* That could cover so many situations but in all of them each person could come to God and ask for forgiveness.

The fifth cry for forgiveness is perhaps the most broad of all. We read in 2 Chronicles 6:36: *"When they sin against You, (for there is no one who does not sin), and You become angry with them..."* What an important lesson for us to learn from this prayer. So many different circumstances may occur in which God's people fail Him and let Him down and yet in all of them it is possible to return to God and ask for forgiveness. May that be an encouragement to us this morning. Perhaps you've been struggling for a long time feeling guilt for past sin and failure. Maybe you know there are circumstances in your life where you have let God down and done things you know you shouldn't. Maybe in some cases you feel that the things you have done are so serious that God could never want to have anything to do with you ever again. If that is the case, then be assured on the authority of the Bible that there are no circumstances in which we can not come to God and ask Him for forgiveness. Maybe some sin has ruined your closeness to the Lord and for months now your Bible reading has felt dry and your prayers have dried up. What is stopping you this morning from coming to God and asking Him for His forgiveness?

Maybe there are some listening to the broadcast this morning who have never asked God to forgive them. Please don't feel that only some people could ask God for forgiveness. In Old Testament times God had a special relationship with the people of Israel. They were His chosen people. But that didn't mean that He was uninterested in people of other nations. We get a hint of this in Solomon's prayer. In 2 Chronicles 6:32 Solomon prays *"Moreover, concerning a foreigner, who is not of Your people Israel, but has come from a far country for the sake of Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm, when they come and pray in this temple; then hear from heaven Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, that all peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You."* Solomon recognised that it was not only Israelites who could call to God. Anyone could! God wanted people of all nations and all religious backgrounds to come to know Him. That is still true today. God still cares about all people regardless of who they are, where they were born and what culture they grew up in. God is not interested in how long you have been part of a "Christian culture" and won't limit His forgiveness to churchgoers and religious people. It is available to you today.

I don't know what has caused you to listen to the broadcast this morning, but if you have never asked God to save you and forgive you, don't let mistakes you've made in the past stop you! Why not ask God to forgive you for the first time today? As we've seen, you cannot do anything so bad that God would not want to hear from you and hear your plea for forgiveness. He is ready to hear your prayer and, as we'll see in the rest of this morning's talk, the wonderful truth is that He is ready to forgive you and make you new.

So we learn from Solomon's prayer is that there is no situation in which we can't cry to God for forgiveness. We also learn that a cry for forgiveness must be genuine. In 2 Chronicles 6:30 we read that *"You alone know the hearts of the sons of men."* God knows our hearts. He knows whether we are genuine in our requests. Nothing is hidden from God, so we shouldn't try to deceive Him. Throughout the Bible there are examples of people who thought that they could deceive God. In all cases they failed. God knows the hearts of men! This reminds us that we don't only need forgiveness when we've been publicly caught in some sinful behaviour. God sees even the hidden sins in our thoughts or those committed in private. What a challenge to us!

Another important lesson from Solomon's prayer in 2 Chronicles 6 is that all of us require forgiveness. Do you remember that we read in 2 Chronicles 6:36, *"There is no one who does not sin"*? I hope we are all honest enough to admit that. The New Testament states that *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23). If an earlier lesson reminded us that no one is too bad to ask God for forgiveness, then 2 Chronicles 6:36 reminds us that no one is so good that they don't need God's forgiveness. May God reveal to all of us this morning and over this coming week how much we stand in need of His forgiveness.

The next lesson for us to consider together about Solomon's prayer is that God's forgiveness requires repentance. Let's read together 2 Chronicles 6:37-39: *"When they come to themselves in the land where they were carried captive, and repent, and make supplication to You in the land of their captivity, saying, 'We have sinned, we have done wrong, and have committed wickedness: and when they return to You with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their captivity, where they have been carried captive, and pray toward their land which You gave to their fathers, the city which You have chosen, and toward the temple which I have built for You name: then hear from heaven Your dwelling place their prayer and their supplications, and maintain their cause, and forgive Your people who have sinned against You."*

This prayer would have been a very real encouragement to the people of Israel when many years later they were captives in Babylon. Perhaps people like Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah actually thought about this promise whilst they were prisoners and were given hope of restoration one day. For us today, the lesson is important. The people of Israel had to return to God with all their heart and soul. This was no attempt to hedge their bets and ask God for forgiveness just in case He existed or could do anything to help. They were genuine in their plea for forgiveness and they had turned back to God. They admitted they had done wrong and acted wickedly in God's sight. May we be prepared to do that and acknowledge our fault before God and cry to Him for forgiveness. God is willing to forgive but we must ask for it!

Before we finish this morning we need to spend just a few minutes looking at God's response to this prayer. At the start of 2 Chronicles 7 we read that *"When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the LORD filled the temple"* (2 Chronicles 7:1). I think that is really significant. You see, in many of the Old Testament references to forgiveness there is a link to atonement. If you look at Leviticus 4-6, and Numbers 15, the phrase *"the priest shall make atonement for them and it shall be forgiven"* occurs some 13 times in relation to the sacrifices. The priest offered sacrifices to cover the people's sin, as a visible sign of their repentance and God would accept the sacrifice and forgive His people. That's why the fire consuming the sacrifices is significant in 2 Chronicles 7. God shows He heard Solomon's prayer, accepts the sacrifice and would forgive His people. God confirms this in 2 Chronicles 7:14-15 when He 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 I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to prayer made in this place."*

God had promised that He would forgive if His people turned to Him again. Think how much that must have encouraged the people as they witnessed this spectacular event in the history of Israel. God had given the clearest indication that He had heard Solomon's prayer and would forgive His people whenever they returned to Him. There could be no doubt now for the people who had seen this grand display of God's acceptance. They would never need to ask for forgiveness and then wonder whether or not God had heard their cry. They didn't need to worry about whether they were forgiven or not. God had said He would forgive.

That's still how God works. The book of Hebrews reminds us that *"[Jesus] offered one sacrifice for sins forever"* (Hebrews 10:12). Jesus offered Himself in our place to face the penalty for our sins. On that basis God can promise to forgive us if we repent and turn to Him. We don't need to face Jerusalem. God's eyes and ears are not only attentive towards Israel. Wherever we are, whatever we have done we can cry out to God for forgiveness. Have you? Maybe some of you have asked God for forgiveness but live lives that are plagued by doubt. Has God really forgiven you or not? God promises that all who genuinely come to Him in repentance and ask for His forgiveness will be forgiven. May that fact encourage you this morning! God has accepted the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ. His sacrifice is of much more value than the animal sacrifices Solomon saw offered on the day we have been considering this morning. They had to be repeatedly offered to cover the sins of the people (see Hebrews 10:11). Jesus Christ died once for all our sin, in a sacrifice that would never be repeated because it would never need to be repeated.

Just finally, look at 2 Chronicles 7:3: *"When all the children of Israel saw how the fire came down, and the glory of the LORD on the temple, they bowed their faces to the ground on the pavement, and worshipped and praised the LORD, saying: 'For He is good, for His mercy endures forever'".* As we realise how great God is, as we realise how remarkable His forgiveness is; as we realise He has accepted the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in our place and is waiting for us to ask Him to forgive us, will we fall down and worship and praise God, *"for He is good and His mercy endures forever"*?

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