

If My People - 3

‘A small but powerful word’

In my last sermon I spent a lot of time talking about the first word of this challenging verse:

2 Chronicles 7:14 *“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.”*

I have never spent a whole sermon on one tiny word before ... it hardly seems worthy of such attention, does it? However, as we saw last week – this one little word, ‘IF’, when placed at the beginning of a sentence, has total control over everything that follows. It is a word which carries tremendous power and should attract far more of our attention than it does. So perhaps this small but powerful word needs two sermons!

The reason we don’t spend much time meditating on this little word is that we are too busy focusing on the word that usually follows later in the sentence: ‘then.’ IF you do a certain thing, THEN a certain consequence will follow. This is the natural cause-and-effect reality which we see in every area of life.

- ⇒ IF you put your hand in the fire, THEN you will be burned.
- ⇒ IF you walk out on a crowded highway with your eyes closed, THEN you will get run over.
- ⇒ IF you get more sleep, THEN you will be better able to meet the challenges of the day.
- ⇒ IF you save some money, THEN you will be able to pay for those unexpected expenses which occur from time to time.
- ⇒ IF you drive too fast, THEN one day, eventually, you will have an accident and someone will be injured or killed.

Every day in so many ways, you and I encounter these ‘if-then’ realities. These are examples of the thousands of fundamental cause-and-effect realities of life. They are so simple and so obvious that you are probably wondering why I would even bother pointing them out. Well, I want us to start simple and remember that this process is simple and it’s irrefutable. I want you nodding early in the sermon as you agree with these really basic cause-and-effect realities of life because the further we go today the harder it will become for you to keep nodding! So are you with me thus far?

Your actions have consequences. This is true whether you are a Christian, a Buddhist, a Muslim or an atheist. There is nothing particularly spiritual about what I am telling you at this point. This is just the way life is. We make choices and there are consequences which follow. Things we do and things we choose not to do will always have consequences.

Now of course Christians most certainly have an enormous advantage in that some of our choices are empowered by God and therefore they can be far more significant and fruitful ... but they are still OUR choices. **God cannot and will not make our choices for us.** Many of these cause-and-effect choices are superficial and relatively insignificant to life, but many others affect us at the core of our being and that’s why I started simple at first - because the other choices are more confronting.

For example: IF you choose to ignore the clear truth of the Gospel and reject the free gift of salvation offered freely by God, THEN you will spend eternity separated from the reality of God's love and grace and presence. IF you choose to believe that God loves you and has opened up a way through Christ whereby you can be re-united with your Creator in a wonderful, life-changing, eternal encounter, THEN you'll experience all the power, majesty, victory and beauty of life as God intended it to be.

Choices and consequences - they surround us everywhere don't they? This is as true in the Church as it is outside the Church. In fact I would suggest that this 'IF - THEN' reality is even more applicable for Christians because we have been totally and wonderfully set free in Christ and God has returned the freedom of choice given to man which we had when we were created. Look up the words *free* and *freedom* in a New Testament concordance and read how many verses there are which remind us of our freedom of choice and there will be consequences to each one of those choices. Some are liberating and life-changing, others are devastating and destructive.

Now you may ask, *"Isn't God sovereign? As Christians, are we not aware that there is a higher power Who controls everything? Surely Christians worship a God who is able to do anything He wants ... regardless of our choices. Unlike the world, we are in submission to a higher power and if our sovereign God wants to do something ... He will just do it ... regardless of our choices."*

Do you realise that there are millions of sincere, Godly men and women all over the world who would say a hearty AMEN to what I just said? I guarantee some of them are listening to, watching or reading this sermon right now. These are genuine disciples of Jesus who sincerely believe that if God wants to do something He will just do it - regardless of our choices.

Why these people believe this I will never know. Why Christians all over world choose to park their brains when they come to Jesus defies me, it really does. Our thoughts run our lives; what we think will in a large measure determine how we live. IF our thoughts are wrong, THEN our lives will be wrong! So many people in the Church have lost the ability, or given up the responsibility to reason and judge and analyse and weigh up truth and logic and common sense. When they encounter teaching or practices which they may not agree with or understand or accept, they switch to this 'spiritual mode' and float off with the fairies somewhere saying, *"God will reveal His truth to me, I just need to pray."*

By all means pray about everything - God exhorts us to do just that - but the same God said, *"Come, let us reason together."* The same God tells us that we will be transformed by the renewing of our mind. He doesn't tell us to sell our brains for spare parts when we come into His Kingdom! The vast majority of problems we have in understanding God and His will and our purpose in that will would disappear if we would just THINK more clearly about our faith and work through things logically and sensibly.

Of course we should pray ... but that should not be our first response. Please listen carefully here - I do not want to lose you here because you think I have a low view of prayer - I have a very high view of prayer and you will see that in the weeks to come as we move through this verse in 2 Chronicles 7. Prayer is wonderful. Prayer is essential. However, prayer should NOT be a place we run and hide when we don't want to use our brain! There are many, many times when God does not want us to run to Him straight away - He wants us to THINK first and recall what He has already told us!

When we were children, we asked our parents a hundred questions a day and many of them were ridiculously basic and simple. As we matured, our parents encouraged us to think for ourselves and work out the answers to many of those questions based on our own experience, using our own minds to reason, assess, evaluate and examine all aspects of a situation. That's called growing up.

Christians need to mature in exactly the same way in their spiritual lives. There will be things we simply have to ask God because our experience and the clear teaching He has already given us in the Bible may not be enough for us to work it out ourselves. However (in Jesus' name please get this!), the vast majority of stuff I hear coming out of the mouths of Christians (including my own some days), in our prayers and petitions to God is a total waste of time and a clear indication that we have lost the ability to think. We still run to Daddy with some of the most basic, childish, ignorant requests – all of which He has already answered over and over and over again in the Bible, in a thousand sermons and in our own life's experience! If we would just stop, think and work it out with some anointed common sense, we would not get ourselves into most of the complicated situations and debates we do and we would be a hundred times more effective as disciples.

We cry out to God for intimacy. *"I want to know you more, Lord, I want to hear your voice and know your presence and power and glory."* If I had a dollar for every time I have heard that kind of prayer, I would be a very rich man. Yet God has clearly told us that this highly coveted, rarely experienced intimacy is actually ours for the taking. We don't need to ask Him for it - it is freely available to everyone. Intimacy with God is not just a *prayer* away, intimacy with God is just a *choice* away!

James tells us more clearly than anyone when he says, *"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you."* (James 4:8). There's another IF – THEN statement and a very powerful one at that. It just doesn't use those words. But it effectively does: IF you make a deliberate, daily choice to live and act in a way which attracts God's real presence THEN God will visit you in the most intimate, personal, powerful way - every day of your life.

I cannot find a clearer statement in the whole Bible which, if actually understood, would instantly remove a backlog of millions of useless prayers which appear to be unanswered by God. Well, it appears to us that they are unanswered prayers because we still do not have the intimacy we pray for. God most definitely answered those prayers - He answered them long before we prayed them by showing us very clearly in the Bible how we might achieve that place of communion and intimacy with Himself.

Our experience also tells us the answer and renders our prayers unnecessary. Genuine disciples know from their own journey as they reflect on those special times when God seemed really near to them. I guarantee that if they analyse their own actions and choices before and during those times of intimacy they will realise that they chose to do and not do certain things which allowed them to 'draw near to God' and He was faithful to them and He drew near to them in a powerful way. Cause and effect; if - then. It really is that simple.

We cry out to God for renewal in the Church and revival in our land. *"Please God, we beg You to come and heal our land and reconcile Your lost people to Yourself. We cry out to You for our city, Lord, for the salvation of every man, woman and child; we beseech Thee Father to send us revival by Your sovereign hand!"* If I had just 5 cents for every revival prayer being prayed across this nation just today I would be an instant millionaire.

So what's wrong with praying for revival? Nothing is wrong with praying for revival ... IF ... you know how God plans to answer that prayer and as long as you know the implications of that prayer. Unless you know what brings revival, don't pray for it, because you will not like how God answers your prayer. Just like you may not be liking what I am saying right now in this teaching series because I am focusing on you and your choices and that usually makes people squirm a little.

Well friends, it may come as a shock to some of you, but teaching like this is the answer to your prayers for revival. There has been a growing ache in people's hearts for revival in recent days and I have heard many people around me praying for God to move in power and bring that revival. Well, if you are one of those people, be encouraged - God is listening. God has heard your prayers and now He is answering them. Revival is coming and I am here to tell you how. If you have been crying out for revival then God is answering you right now. Listen to His voice. He is saying:

"I am bringing that revival ... it is already on its way ... and IF My people, who are petitioning Me day and night for revival ... Will humble themselves and deal with that ugly pride in their hearts ... and commit time to seeking My face instead of My favours ... if they deal ruthlessly with the sin which still lurks in their hearts which, although forgiven and atoned for in My eyes, continues to attract the ministry of doubt, discouragement, deception, darkness and death ... if My people would just do those few simple things over a sustained period of time, THEN transformation (not just revival) will most certainly come."

We cry out to God to release the reality of all the 'THEN' promises in our lives and across our nation but we continue to ignore all the 'IF' components to the fulfilment of those very promises. Which brings me right back to that statement I made earlier which I believe many Christians would support and that is: If our sovereign God wants to do something ... He will just do it ... regardless of our choices.

Let's switch our brain on and actually think about this for one minute ... that's all it will take. This is not a deep theological issue - this is just a logical issue. This is not a debate about the sovereignty of God - this is simply a clear examination of truth and the experience of mankind throughout history.

God will do what God wants to do? OK let's start there. What does God want to do? We know this already ... this is not a trick question ... the Bible so clearly reveals God's heart on a thousand issues - let's pick a few shall we?

Does God want everyone to be saved? You'd better believe it! The Bible says it is not God's will that any remain outside the knowledge and experience of His love and grace. Well, are there people in the world today who still haven't embraced their salvation in Christ? Yes. How long has it been God's will to save them? Thousands of years! So here is one thing that God wants that isn't happening.

Does God want you to know His will, hear His voice and walk in harmony with Him every moment of every day? Yes, of course He does ... He has said so many times. Well, is that your current experience? Is that how you are living now? Do you hear God's voice clearly, above your own and others and Satan's ... all the time ... every day? No? Well there is something else that God wants and is not getting at present.

Does God want the power and reality of the Kingdom of Heaven to flood our current world and sweep all of us into the river of abundant, eternal life? Of course He does! Jesus Himself told us to pray that the Kingdom of God would come and flood our current reality so that what is true in heaven becomes true in our experience right here and now.

Well, are there still sick people in our city? Are there unsaved people in our city? Are there sad, defeated, broken and bruised people in our city? Yes? Of course there are! Well, God is not getting what He wants, is He? So to say that our Sovereign God will do whatever He wants regardless of our choices is simply not true, is it? Why is that the case? Why is God not getting what He wants?

You know why ... deep down in our hearts we all know why. We just don't want to think about it. We just don't want to accept that **our choices can determine whether God gets what He wants or not.** God wants our lives to work and be victorious, effective, fruitful and fun! But we continue to make choices which cut across His desire and His will. This 'IF – THEN' dynamic will just not go away!

IF you choose to accept what God is teaching you now and start to evaluate your choices and your responses and your behaviours BEFORE you cry out to God for a miracle cure that does not involve you making better choices, THEN you will have travelled a long way in your journey to see your life and this city transformed. These annoying 'IF – THEN' realities are everywhere friends. You can ignore them all you like, but they will still be there. IF you believe that God chose to channel His life-changing power through the choices of His people, THEN hopefully you will start to make better choices.

IF you believe that God is truly able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, THEN you will rise above the worst circumstances and the greatest attacks of the enemy and you will know Christ's victory on a daily basis. IF you choose to let the pressures of life and the actions of others hurt you or offend you or upset you for more than a minute or de-rail you from your journey into the heart and purposes of God, THEN you will, by your own choice, become a victim who sucks the life out of people and whole Churches as you expect them to hold your hand and comfort you whilst you wallow in self-pity and pride.

IF you choose to believe the clear teaching of Scripture and the testimony of thousands of people who live out those Scriptures; that God has called us into partnership with Himself and that the transformation of this city is as much in our hands as it is in His, THEN you will understand that nothing will change in this city or this nation until you and me and all the people who bear the name of Jesus make some different choices each day.

God is not going to fix this without us friends. Why do you think we are still here more than 2,000 years after Jesus came to wind all this up and save the world? Is God slow? Has He lost His touch? Was saving the world a little ambitious for even God? Or does that delay in seeing the Kingdom of God advance and drive out the kingdom of darkness have something to do with us and our responses and our choices and our wrong thinking and our stubborn refusal to do what He has told us?

IF you choose to give God and His people and His ministry and teaching only a fraction of your time, energy and devotion each week, THEN you will stagnate spiritually, lose the ability to hear from God and become an obstacle to step around in the Church rather than a vital part of His Kingdom ministry.

IF your choices are always governed by your personal needs and desires, THEN God will not be able to use you in any significant way in the Kingdom and you will not make a difference in this life at all and you will probably be a pain to everyone around you.

IF you choose to believe this day that you have the ability to open a door to the radical, spiritual and socio-political transformation of this whole city and nation and IF you have a passion for God's will to be done here as it is in heaven, THEN you will see the desires of your heart fulfilled in your community and you will join the thousands of communities across the world where God's transforming power is being released RIGHT NOW ... through the choices of His people ... as God does exactly what He promised to do: HEAL OUR LAND.