



THE STORY ABOUT GOD'S PEOPLE (cont.)

Numbers

Primary Information for Starters

It is named "The Number" for the census account that you see in Numbers 1-4, and then later in Numbers 26-27. It is the census that is taken of God's people as they are leaving Mount Sinai—a count of God's people.

The overarching message is that God honors faith and He punishes unbelief, which is the root of sin. Numbers teaches us that unbelief is a lack of trust in God's Word. This is exemplified in what happens in Numbers 13-14. They leave Mount Sinai and were given the promise to go into the land. They come to the very edge and they see it. They send men to spy out the land. They come back and the majority vote says, "We don't go. We don't believe God is going to give it to us. They are too strong. They are too big. They are too powerful. We don't believe that we can do this." The result is that they come so close to the Promised Land, but because of their unbelief, they turn back and they miss out on the land that God had promised them. An entire generation misses out because of unbelief and a lack of trust in God's Word. That is the core of sin. The root of sin is unbelief—a lack of trust in God's Word.

Practical Advice for Study

Throughout this book you are going to see six main failures of God's people between the censuses that are taken.

You will see them complaining at different times (Num. 10:11-12:16); rebellious at Kadesh-Barnea, the encampment where they looked into the Promised Land (Num. 13:1-14:45); they also rebel at Korah's rebellion (Num. 15:1-19:22). Moses disobeys God (Num. 20:1-29) and experiences judgment for his sin by not being able to go into the Promised Land. There is more complaining in Numbers 21:1-35. This is a very interesting passage of Scripture. It is the story of the bronze serpent and how God brought salvation in a very unusual way to His people. Then there is adultery and immorality in Numbers 25:1-18. You see the failures of God's people over and over again.

It is really interesting when you get an overview of the book of Numbers to see the price of unbelief in the geography and time frames of Numbers. This is the information that we often think, "What is the importance of why they went here, or there, and for how long?" We will see it unfold.

There are several key places to recognize geographically. You have them at Sinai in Numbers 1:1-10:10. They journey to Kadesh-Barnea in Numbers 10:11-13:25. They are encamped at Kadesh in Numbers 13:26-20:21. They turned back and returned to Moab in Numbers 20:22-21:35. They encamped at Moab in Numbers 22:1-36:13. That was the geography of God's people. When you look at the geography on a map, you will see that it was a circle.

Then you see the time frames. Numbers 1-10 last about 20 days. Numbers 11-14 last about 70 days. Numbers 15-20 last about 38 years—an entire generation misses out. Finally, Numbers 21-36 last about five months.

They wandered around for 40 years for the price of their unbelief. But God is faithful despite His people's failures. He still led them. He did not let them go back. They said, "Let us go back to Egypt." He did not let them go back to Egypt. He is faithful. He is going to accomplish His purpose in the next generation.

Deuteronomy

Primary Information for Starters

Once Numbers finishes, we are ready to go into the Promised Land. We have the "second Law," which is basically restating the Law to the new generation in preparation for the Promised Land. It is also a rehearsal of the covenant as they prepare for the Promised Land. It is not a new covenant. The covenant had been given in Exodus. In Leviticus we saw the terms of that covenant: the laws, ritual living, righteous living, and ritual offerings. In Numbers they wander around and miss out so there is now a need for renewal—a rehearsal of what this covenant is about. Some of the things that we see are things we have seen before. God is bringing it back to His people.

Practical Advice for Study

In Deuteronomy we see how the Law applies to all of God's people. In Leviticus we saw how the Law applied to the Levites, who were the leaders. In Deuteronomy you have all of the people of God preparing to go into the Promised Land, and the Law applies to all of them.

As you study, it would be good to memorize the Shema; you may already know it. Deuteronomy 6:4-5, "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*"

That was a key part of the Old Testament for the people of God. It unfolds in three facets. First, there is one God, which separated them apart from all the nations that they were about to go into—polytheistic, pagan nations. Second, there is one Word. This Word is the means by which one can know the one God. Finally, there is one love, repeated at least 20 times. It's not that the love of God hasn't been there before as a major theme in the Old Testament. However, it really begins to unfold in Deuteronomy.

Look for their anticipation of the land and their commitment to the covenant. They are gathering together, and committing to the covenant. Everything is changing. You have an entirely new generation. You have a new challenge before them. You have a new leader: Joshua. This is something new for the people of God, because Moses previously led them. Now, there is a new leader and new temptations that they are going to face.

Read Deuteronomy closely. It is the most quoted book in the Bible. It is quoted 356 times, 190 in the New Testament alone. If you want to understand the Bible, it is good to know Deuteronomy. This is the spring or the fountainhead of Old Testament theology. It gives us a picture that is going to unfold throughout the remaining history of God's people as He interacts with them. If we want to see the river of God's revelation in the Old Testament, then knowing Deuteronomy is key.

THE NEXT 12 BOOKS IN THE STORY

That's the first five books, known as the Pentateuch (Law). The Pentateuch, which consists of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus Numbers and Deuteronomy, is the picture of God's people from creation all the way to the edge of the Promised Land. Next we come into the Historical Books, with them going into the Promised Land. This is going to last all the way from Joshua to Esther.

The next books can be divided into three categories. What you will see in each of these three sections is that some of the books are going to give a chronological picture, and the last book in each of these sections is going to be like a spotlight on what has just been told in the history. For example, Joshua and Judges continue the story. Ruth doesn't add new chronological information but it gives us a spotlight of what happened during the time of the Judges.

The first category is the "pre-monarchy before the kings." This is the continuation of the story found in Joshua and Judges.

The second category is "monarchy." Here you have six books, and three double books. By that I mean 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. Samuel and Kings continue the story mostly in chronological order. When you get to Chronicles, you don't have new historical or chronological information. Both Chronicles spotlight David as king of Judea.

The third category is "post-monarchy." The last three books capture the era after the kings and after the nation of Israel and Judea have been destroyed. The story continues through Ezra and Nehemiah. Esther gives a spotlight of something that happened during the time of Ezra. Esther probably happens between Ezra 6-7. We really don't know for sure.

When you get to Chronicles, don't expect new chronological information. When you get to Esther don't try to tie this in to what happened after Nehemiah. These 12 books are mostly chronological, but in each of the three sections you have one spotlight book at the end. This should help in understanding how it all fits together.

The first pre-monarchy group is Joshua, Judges, and Ruth.

Joshua

Primary Information for Starters

Joshua's name literally means, "The Lord will save." In Greek, the name is equivalent to Jesus. Now that is a great picture: Joshua leading his people into the Promised Land. "The Lord will save"—the same as what Jesus does in our lives.

The people of God claimed the inheritance God had promised them. These three verses, Joshua 21: 43-45, show us that God will keep His Word. After all the struggles we saw in Numbers and Deuteronomy, now there is just this release in Joshua as they come into the Promised Land. They see God is faithful to His Word. He has not left us. He is not going to fail on His promise. He is going to make it all happen. God is faithful to His Word.

Practical Advice for Study

This is a book that would even be good to read with a map nearby to see the journey into the Promised Land. It is good to see the geography and how this is all working together. The journey is split into four different sections.

First, they cross. They crossed the river into the Promised Land (Josh. 1:1, 5:12). Second, they take. Once they get there they take the land (Josh. 5:13, 12:24). Joshua 5:13 begins the story of Joshua and the Battle of Jericho. From Joshua 5:13 all the way to Joshua 12, they are taking the land. Next, they divide. Once they have taken the land, they divide it among the different tribes of Israel (Josh. 13-21). Finally, they serve. In the last few chapters they serve (Josh. 22-24).

What you have is: cross, take, divide, and serve. That's where you see Joshua coming before the people and saying, "*Choose you this day whom you will serve. As for me and my house, I am going to serve the Lord*" (Josh. 24:15). You have all the people, the land is divided, and it is now time to walk with the Lord, to serve the Lord and not turn back. He has given them the land, they have taken it and divided it, and now it is time to serve Him. Unfortunately that is not what happens.

Judges

Primary Information for Starters

You get to the book of Judges and you see a completely different picture of what the people are saying than what you see in Joshua 24.

There are several key characters. God used judges (military leaders) to deliver His people out from under their sin. When you think of Judges, don't think of a person in a black robe with a gavel in his hand. That is not what is being talked about here in the book of Judges.

The key theme is this: when God's people disobey Him, the result is always judgment. Disobedience results in judgment.

The key verse is Judges 17:6, "*Every man did that which was right in his own eyes*". Do you see how far they have come at the end of Joshua 24? In a short amount of time they have gone from saying, "We will serve the Lord," to saying, "we are going to do what is right in our own eyes."

The key chapter is Judges 2. It is a miniature version of the entire book. Judges is where things start to get fuzzy. We have a pretty good understanding through Deuteronomy up to Joshua. You get to Judges and wonder, "What is it about?" Look at Judges 2. I just want you to see a picture of their disobedience and how God uses Judges to deliver people out of their disobedience. Let's look at verses 16-19:

Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. They quickly turned from the ways of their ancestors, who had been obedient to the Lord's commands. Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

It is a constant denigration. The Judges rise up, God saves, and then they fall back into sin even worse than before. Disobedience results in judgment.

Practical Advice for Study

Observe the interplay between oppression and deliverance. The first part of the book and the last part of the book mirror each other. Their failure to conquer the land and their failure to keep the Law is highlighted at the beginning and at the end. In the middle section, eight times it references how they went back and forth between oppression and salvation. They would disobey God and go into oppression. God would save them and they would go back into oppression. It was just back and forth, eight different times from Judges 3-16. Then you have the bookends on each side at the beginning and the end. There is failure to conquer the land (Judg. 1:1-2:9); failure to keep the law (Judg. 2:9-3:6); failure to conquer the land (Judg. 17-18); failure to keep the law (Judg. 19-21). It is really a cycle of disobedience and victory that we see in each of those eight instances.

What happens is they relapse and fall back into sin. They disobey God. Relapse results in their ruin and they experience the judgment of God. They repent and they are restored. Throughout the book you will see relapse, ruin, repentance, and restoration, and then God brings them into rest. Can you identify with the book of Judges? Do you see how this is real for our hearts over 2,000 years later? Observe the gradual deterioration of Israel in the book of Judges. It is going to lead to what happens in 1 and 2 Samuel.

Ruth

Primary Information for Starters

Ruth literally means "friendship", and it is the spotlight book. It is a love story. The overall purpose is to trace the royal lineage of king David and ultimately, king Jesus. This is giving us a picture, or a line that is going to lead to Jesus in Matthew 1, where Ruth is mentioned.

Boaz is the center of the love story, the knight in shining armor. Boaz, a kinsman-redeemer, pays the price to bring Ruth, a Moabite, into the people of God. He was the nearest of kin, he had the right to buy her, and he could do it, so he paid the price to bring her into his family.

Practical Advice for Study

Pay close attention to the transition in Naomi's life. Naomi gets left out of the picture sometimes because we get enthralled with what is going on with Ruth and Boaz, but Naomi is there and the transitions go like this: from emptiness to fullness in Ruth 1; from despair to hope in Ruth 2-3; and from bareness to inheritance in Ruth 4. What happens between Ruth and Boaz brings inheritance to Naomi.

Remember that this takes place during the time of Joshua and Judges. During that time, you have the deterioration of Israel happening in that period of history. In Judges you have struggles going on and then you have a spotlight that says, even in the darkness of God's people, He shines the light of His covenant. That is what Ruth does. It gives us that spotlight.

Don't miss a very important point. Connect Ruth 4:13 with Genesis 12:1-3, and connect Ruth 4:14 with Matthew 1:1-7 (especially v.5). What that means is that Ruth, who is a Moabite and not a part of the people of Israel, has been brought into the family of God. This had been told to Abraham in Genesis 12 that through the people of Israel all the nations of the earth were going to be blessed. Now you have someone outside of Israel being brought into the family and that is huge. That is huge for the implications of what is going to happen in the rest of the Old Testament. But Ruth 4:13-17 talks about how Ruth is now in the line that would lead to the King. When you get to Matthew 1, you see a listing. For some wild reason, God decides to display the grace that He has shown in Ruth, by putting her name right in the middle of the line that leads to Jesus Christ. Through Ruth, who was not an

Israelite by birth, would come the lineage of the one who would ultimately bring salvation, not only to Israel, but also to the nations.

Joshua, Judges and Ruth fit together and create a beautiful picture. Now you get to the time of the monarchy. What leads up to the monarchy?

1 and 2 Samuel

Primary Information for Starters

The time frame is from Samuel's birth (1,100 B.C.) to the end of David's kingship (970 B.C.). Within the timeframe of the account, you have the story of Samuel to the story of David and in the middle you have Saul's story. Solomon is not in 1 and 2 Samuel. You have Samuel's life to the end of David's kingship.

The overall theme is kingship. 1 Samuel depicts transition from theocracy to monarchy. In the book of Judges, God was the King. He led His people and He raised up judges. Then they get to the beginning of 1 Samuel, they say, "we want a king of our own. We want a king like all the other nations." And they have a horde of motives behind it. They resist God and say, "we want a king so we can have power like other nations." So they raised up Saul and said, "He is going to be our king." That is where we see the transition from a theocracy—which basically means serving God—in the book of Judges to a monarchy that unfolds through Saul. 2 Samuel mainly focuses on David's dynasty as king.

There are three key characters: Samuel who was the last judge that God had raised up and he anoints the first two kings over Israel (1 Sam. 1-7). Saul is the first one (1 Sam. 8-15). David is the second and most important king (1 Sam. 16-24).

The key verse is 1 Samuel 15:22, "To obey is better than sacrifice."

What we see unfold is that God's Word is the sole basis for obedience and faith.

Practical Advice for Study

Always look for how the King of Israel was expected to be loyal to the covenant. This is huge because Saul was disobedient to the covenant in 1 Samuel 15 and it is his downfall.

It is David's obedience to the covenant in 2 Samuel 7 that is the pinnacle of the unfolding of that covenant. There is an incredible passage in 2 Samuel 7, where God establishes His covenant with David. The Davidic covenant was huge for the rest of the Old Testament.

Pay attention to the transitions in 1 and 2 Samuel. We talked about the transition from the rule of periodic judges to a more permanent monarchy. This monarchy was a transition from the typical worldly expectation of a king to a king that is loyal to the Lord and anointed by God. David is not the one that you would have expected to be the leader of the people of Israel. We also see a transition from God not having a central place where His name dwells, to a new center in Jerusalem. David brings the Ark to the center of Jerusalem.

Remember how we talked about major flaws in individuals, and this is not to harp on David, but even as a king after God's heart, David's life demonstrated the need for another king who will come in purity and absolute loyalty to the Lord. Don't miss it. David's kingly success is described in one chapter (2 Sam. 8). David's kingly sin and its effects are described over eleven chapters (2 Sam. 10-20).

Don't read 1 and 2 Samuel for the story of David and Goliath and talk about how we need to be like David, fighting all the giants in our lives. If we do that we have missed the picture

that is being painted in 1 and 2 Samuel. The picture painted is of a man who was after God's own heart, who had some major weaknesses, and as a result, we see some major effects of sin that point us to the need for a perfect king.

1 and 2 Kings

Primary Information for Starters

1 and 2 Kings contain over 400 years of Israelite history (970-560 B.C.). Chronologically, we are still moving forward. This chronology is grouped into four segments, each ending with a major catastrophe. First, you have the division of the twelve tribes (970-931 B.C.). Next you have Jehu's slaughter of all, but one crown prince or heir to the throne of David (931-841 B.C.). After that there is the fall of Samaria (Israel) to Assyria (841-722 B.C.). Finally, you have the fall of Jerusalem (Judah) to Babylon (722-586 B.C.).

Two major themes are seen in these catastrophes. First, the rejection of Israel as God's people comes as a result of Israel rejecting God. They are saying, "We don't want to follow you." They are disobeying Him. It is a gradual deterioration as we saw in Judges. The decline is heightened as the kingdom is divided into Israel and Judah. The second theme is the rise of the prophets who proclaim God's Word.

The king was to be the agent of God's covenant. That is the picture we see with David. However, the kings dropped the ball big time. As a result, the prophets begin to rise up and begin to speak because the kings are disobeying God.

Practical Advice for Study

Overall Structure: we see the united kingdom in 1 Kings 1-11. The story of the divided kingdom is in 1 Kings 12 - 2 Kings 17. The captive kingdom in 2 Kings 18-25 is where Israel and Judah are both destroyed, taken captive, and exiled.

The two books cover 39 kings from the united and divided monarchy. The first three books cover Saul, David, and Solomon. Then you have 36 kings that are covered after that. Then you see story after story about kings.

Covenant loyalty is the measure of success, or of downfall for a king. There were 19 Northern kings. Not one of the 19 Northern kings followed the Lord. It did not say that one king followed the Lord, and as a result you are going to see men like Isaiah rise up to speak for God when everyone in the country was going against God.

Out of the Southern kings, eight of the 20 Southern kings followed the Lord. Their names are listed here, so as you study the books of 1 and 2 Kings you will recognize those who followed the Lord (Asa, Jehosophat, Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah, Jotham, Hezekiah, Josiah).

As kings were disloyal, God raises up prophets like Elijah and Elisha to accomplish His purpose. We will talk about the prophets later on.

1 and 2 Chronicles

Primary Information for Starters

Remember 1 and 2 Chronicles is our spotlight book, and it is the final book in the Hebrew Bible. The English arrangement of books in the Bible is different than the Hebrew arrangement of books in the Bible. 1 and 2 Chronicles is at the end in the Hebrew Bible, and it was possibly written by Ezra.

Follow along carefully here. We are going to see the spotlight. It was written more from a spiritual kingdom perspective. It focuses exclusively on the positive facets of David and

Solomon. It focuses on the good things that were going on. Also, it demonstrates the blessing of God on obedient kings in Judah. We don't see the negative facets of David and Solomon or all of their disobedience. You see the obedient kings. Finally, It gives a more idealized representation of the kingdom of God.

Remember when you come to 1 and 2 Chronicles, you are not looking at new history. What you are getting is the spotlight of what happened before. It is an idealized picture, and the central focus is on the temple and Israel's wholehearted worship.

Practical Advice for Study

With that being said, the question becomes "Why?" Why would the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles, whether it is Ezra or someone else, give that kind of perspective of the kingdoms and speak of David and Solomon as the kings who were obedient?

You have to understand the perspective of the author, who was trying to restore the kingdom. Now here is where we fast-forward in history. These two books are giving us a picture of the history of the united monarchy and of the divided monarchy, but it was written after the exile and their return to Jerusalem. What happened was men like Ezra, or whoever wrote the book, had been taken out of Israel, they had come back, and were trying to restore what was completely obliterated. If you are going to write a book, a history of God among the kings to encourage the people to rebuild the temple and to follow God, you are not going to tell them of the things that went wrong. You are going to give them a picture of the glory of those who followed God and why the temple was so important. That is why we get this emphasis. It is like our being in exile for 70 years and coming back together. I would preach what I thought would motivate us to gather together and restore what existed before the exile, in this case, the temple and the city of Jerusalem.

The story told in the chronicles has three parts. First, there are genealogies (1 Chron. 1-9). Don't get too bogged down there. You can read through it pretty quick. The second and third parts are the united monarchy (1 Chron. 10-2 Chron. 9), and the divided monarchy in Judah (2 Chron. 10-36).

See the emphasis on God's goodness when the presence of God is renewed in Israel. There is great celebration when the ark is brought back to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 16:34), when it is brought into the temple (2 Chron. 5:13), and when the temple is consecrated (2 Chron. 7:3).

The history books we have up to this point are 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. In the middle of all of that, you have the building of the temple and now you have Ezra saying rebuild the temple, so he gives another picture of the temple in 1 and 2 Chronicles.

There are three more books left in the history.

Ezra—Nehemiah

Primary Information for Starters

Ezra and Nehemiah are grouped together because they were one book in the Hebrew Bible. They tell one main story in three facets.

The first facet is the return of the remnant to Jerusalem. The remnant consists of everyone who was exiled. Imagine, if you can, us being destroyed—if we are the nation of Israel—we are separated from our families, and taken captive. Our friends are scattered and we are put in a foreign land. They take us to California. We are all in California. You are looking

around and everything is different. The people are talking different. The people around you are not the same as those who were around you. You are slaves in California. You don't want to be a slave in California, but that is what you are at this point. You finally come back together and you say, "We need to regroup." That is what is going on in Ezra and Nehemiah. The remnant returns to Alabama. In this case, the remnant returns to Jerusalem.

The second facet is the rebuilding of the temple. God brought His people back to Jerusalem and the temple is being rebuilt.

The third facet is the rebuilding of the city walls. They rebuild the temple, the central place of worship, and rebuild the walls around the city. The book of Ezra is the rebuilding of the temple and the book of Nehemiah is the rebuilding of the city walls. The author is likely Ezra or Nehemiah. "Ezra" means "helper" and "Nehemiah" means "God is comfort." These were men who really did come on the scene for people who were hurting to bring help and comfort.

God's sovereignty works to preserve His people for His glory. Don't miss that. It is that whole "rock of God's sovereignty" coming back in. He is not going to let His people live without hope. He is not going to leave this people alone. He has brought them back just like He had promised through the prophets.

Practical Advice for Study

The overall structure in the book of Ezra is a balance that goes back and forth between national and spiritual. You have national restoration (Ezra 1-6) and spiritual reformation (Ezra 7-10).

The first part of Nehemiah covers the physical repair of the city walls (Neh. 1-6) and the second part is basically a spiritual revival (Neh. 7-13). God renews His people. What you have is the physical and spiritual reform going together as they rebuild the temple and the walls, and repent of sin. Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 9-10 both show a picture of God's people renewing the covenant. This is one of the themes that we see over and over throughout the Bible. Nehemiah 9-10 shows a great service of prayer and confession where they renew the covenant. Nehemiah 8-10 is the high point of the story with a covenant renewal ceremony. Purity and obedience to the Word are at the heart of the covenant.

Esther

Primary Information for Starters

Now we come to Esther our spotlight book. Esther gives us a picture of something that most likely happens during the time of Ezra. We have seen how each of these spotlight books is used to encourage the people of God amidst some of the struggles they had experienced. Esther does just that.

The events take place before, or during, the time of Ezra. God's providence is evident, though His name is never mentioned. You never see the name of God in the book of Esther. Not one time. Some people have debated whether or not it should be included in the canon. What is interesting is that you see God working throughout it, but His name is not mentioned.

There are four main characters. The Persian King Xerxes (mentioned by name 29 times), Haman (mentioned by name 48 times), Mordecai (mentioned by name 54 times), and Esther (mentioned by name 48 times). The people of Israel are under threat of extinction under the Persian king. The people of Israel are saved by God's providence from extinction.

Practical Advice for Study

Here is some practical advice. Though God's name is not mentioned, look for evidence of His providence. Providence meaning His sovereignty, His control, how He provides. Look for evidence of it over and over again.

Esther is chosen to be brought into the king's palace, and Mordecai discovers the plot to kill the king. It almost seems like a coincidence. Lots are cast to destroy the Jews. The king welcomes Esther after ignoring her for a month and has deep concern for her welfare. These things don't make sense apart from the providence of God for His people. It is something we have all seen in our lives when you look back and you see things that came to together that really shouldn't have come together, but they did to bring you to the point you are now. That is what we are seeing in Esther. And all we can do is say "God, praise you for your leadership in that."

Compare Esther and Proverbs. There are some really interesting parallels. Compare Esther 3:7 with Proverbs 16:33. Also, compare Esther 5:9-14 with Proverbs 16:18. Look at Esther 7:10 with Proverbs 11:8, as well as Esther 5:1-4 with Proverbs 21:2.

Recognize the influence of the godly on the lost. That is one of the main questions that Esther begs us to ask. What does this mean for the way we use our influence on those who are lost? This is a very, very interesting picture.

That is all the history of God's people. That means everything else we see in the remaining books of the Old Testament gives us more understanding of what we have already seen. At this point, Genesis to Esther, we are done with chronology. Now there will be times and dates mentioned but it is all refers back to the historical books. The spotlight books help point out different points, or facets in history.

THE WRITINGS OF GOD'S PEOPLE

The writings of God's People, also known as poetic and wisdom literature, are captured in most of these five books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. Most of them are written in Hebrew poetry. They stand in the final position of the Hebrew Bible after 1 and 2 Chronicles. They include man's responses to the words and deeds of God found throughout the Law and the Prophets.

We've seen God's activity among His people in the Historical Books. The way I like to look at these books is as writings from our own level, giving us a picture of our response to God in the middle of it all. Psalms is a good example. As you see the history of God's people, how do we respond? Job is the perspective of a man who is going through deep suffering in the middle of this over arching picture.

Divine speech is rare. In these books you will notice the writers are speaking for man to God, rather than the reverse. With the Prophets we are going to see the exact opposite. God is speaking to man through His prophets. Here, men are speaking to God. Divine speech is rare.

Primary theme: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 1:7).

Job

Primary Information for Starters

There are a lot of questions surrounding the book of Job. Job was written anonymously. We do not know exactly when it was written. Most likely it was written during the time of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Chronologically, it would fit somewhere in that time frame. Job was a real man in real history (Ezek. 14:14-20; Jas. 5:11). Again this is not a fictional fable or story. What is written actually happened.

The question that Job asks across the board is, "How and why do the righteous suffer?" Job is the most righteous out of all men. How does he suffer and why does he suffer? These are the questions you see going back and forth throughout this book.

God is completely sovereign in His dealings with His people and He will never allow anything to come to His people that is not for their good and His glory. Don't miss that. God's glory and man's good are going to be working together, and that creates very difficult tension in Job's life.

Practical Advice for Study

This is an oriental book, and by that I mean it is filled with thoughts and expressions from Eastern peoples. We need to remember that these are not western minds that are writing this. They think differently than we do. Keep that in mind, even as we see Job interacting with his so-called friends.

This is a poetic book, so it looks very similar to Hebrew poetry. Ultimately it is a difficult book. Suffering, in a world where God rules, is not an easy subject to address. It was not easy in the patriarchal times and it is not easy today. How do you bring together suffering in a world where God rules?

Don't be too intimidated by the structure. In the beginning, the prologue (Job 1:1-2:13) sets up the story. And then you have poetry (Job 2:14-42:6) divided into three dialogues (Job 4-27).

In the middle of the book of Job, chapter 28, you have the central question that ties together the whole purpose of these writings: "Where does wisdom come from?" Here we see the practical relationship of wisdom that comes from God and suffering. Are we wisest because of our successes or because of our sufferings? Where does our wisdom grow the most? Where does it deepen? Obviously the answer is not in our success, but in our pain. This is where wisdom becomes a reality and begins to take root. This is what we are seeing unfold in the book of Job.

Lastly, there are three monologues (Job 29-41) and the epilogue (Job 41:7-17). When you read Job, don't look for an easy answer to, "Why and how do the righteous suffer?" There's not one. "If God is good, why is there so much evil in the world?" There is not an easy answer to that. If there was any book where God had the opportunity to give that answer, here it was. Here is Job looking up, "Why is this happening?" It would be easy for God to say, "Here's why." But He doesn't do that. What does God do? He asks Job 40 or more questions to reveal to Job His character as the only sovereign God. He says, "You can trust me." It is not an easy answer, but you can trust me. "Trust Me" is what is highlighted in Job. Don't look for an easy answer.

Here are some practical implications. First, God alone is sovereign. Don't forget Job 1-2. Satan is not sovereign. Satan is not free to do whatever he wants to do in the world. Satan can only do what God allows him to do by His providence. That is good news. Satan is not sovereign. God alone is sovereign.

Second, suffering is a privilege that God extends to His children. That is a sentence we could camp out on. That is what we are seeing unfold in the book of Job.

Third, God is glorified when suffering saints worship Him. Look at Revelation where you see those who have been martyred at the throne of God singing His praises forever and ever. God is honored when suffering saints worship Him. God was honored in Sudan when a million believers die in the middle of suffering, and Christianity quadrupled because they worshiped Him in the middle of their suffering. That is the message of Job.

Psalms

Primary Information for Starters

The word "psalm" means, "a poem sung to musical accompaniment." The Psalms are basically the hymnal of the Jewish nation. They were intended to be sung. These are not just poems that were written to be in a poetry book, but they are actually songs. You come out of Job with a song in your mouth.

The Book of Psalms was written by many authors from the early monarchy until after the exile. David wrote a lot of the psalms, but he didn't write the entire book of Psalms. You have others like Asaph, and the sons of Korah, who were authors as well. The psalms were written throughout the history of God's people. In some of the psalms we know what part of the history they are alluding to and some we don't know. But it is great to be able to get a picture of what was happening in the history of the people of Israel when a song was written. David had "messed up", and that is why in Psalm 51 he says, "*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*" That is just one example of what you find all throughout.

The authors are expressing trust in, and praise to, the Lord for His greatness and goodness. The Lord is the sovereign king of the universe and the nations. That is emphasized over and over again. "*Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all people*" (Ps. 96:3).

Practical Advice for Study

There are five divisions, each concluding with a doxology, which reflect Israel's history. For example, by the time you get to Book 3, there is only one Davidic song. Book 1 consists of Psalms 1-41. Book 2 consists of Psalms 42-72. Book 3 consists of Psalms 73-89. Book 4 consists of Psalms 90-106. Book 5 consists of Psalms 107-150.

There are different types of psalms, but the main types are personal praise and personal lament. These are psalms of personal praise and personal lament over things that were difficult. You get into some of the psalms and it is like, "God why is this going on? God strike him down." You begin to see this lament, and you really see the people's heart come out in these songs. It gives us a lot to wrestle with as we study it. Many of the psalms are corporate, not just for one person to sing, but for the people of Israel to sing. You see both corporate praise and corporate lament.

There are wisdom psalms and royal psalms. You also see Christ in a number of psalms. You see the crucified Savior in Psalm 22. You see Christ as the Shepherd in Psalm 23. Tie these psalms to what is going on in the New Testament. You see Christ as the sacrifice in Psalm 40:68, and also as the stone in Psalm 118:2-3.

Proverbs

Primary Information for Starters

There are 31 chapters in Proverbs. In Hebrew the word means "comparison". Solomon wrote most of the book of Proverbs. Men like Hezekiah also had a part in writing some of the proverbs, or at least compiling them together.

The foundational passage is Proverbs 1:1-7. That gives the picture of the fear of the Lord being the beginning of wisdom, and wisdom being supreme. We need wisdom. We want wisdom. Solomon had asked for wisdom.

The major themes that unfold are: "attain wisdom and reject folly," and "walk in righteousness and avoid evil." These contrasts are seen throughout—wisdom and folly, righteousness and evil. They are seen over and over again. There are constant warnings throughout.

Practical Advice for Study

Many people read a chapter of Proverbs a day. My mentor in seminary did that. He reads a chapter a day.

You see the overall structure outlined there in your notes. A few reminders: these are figurative and not all are intended to be taken literally. They are practical, giving practical advice. They also reflect practical wisdom. They are memorable and here is why that is important. We are at a disadvantage with the English language because these were written in Hebrew poetry. Some things translate into English and some don't. We have sayings such as, "A penny saved is a penny earned," and "an apple a day keeps the doctor away." These are sayings that you remember. You know these, whether they rhyme or they just go together. That is the kind of thing that is going on in the Proverbs. The only problem is when you take it out of Hebrew and put it in English, it just doesn't have the same ring, or the same memorable picture.

How do you remember them? There are a variety of literary techniques. Alliteration, catchwords, poetic meter, allusions, and metaphors—all of these different techniques unfold in the book of Proverbs.

The Proverbs are not guarantees; they are guidelines for living. That basically means they are good advice, but not exhaustive. Proverbs are not intended to be exhaustive for everything in life. They are good advice, and they are guidelines, but not guarantees. There is a difference between a Proverb and a promise of God. This is not to say that these things won't happen when we seek wisdom, but there is a difference.

The goal of wisdom literature is to apply the Word to practical living, and that is exactly what we see happening. The Law that had been given to God's people didn't cover everything and so what we see in Proverbs as well as other parts of wisdom literature is the practical application of the Law to things that the Law didn't address in different areas of life. This was especially important for students and for the youth during that time. Many of the proverbs were intended to be memorized and recited by those who were young, because there were so many sayings that dealt with pressures to sin. Even in that day there were pressures whether it was the tongue, money matters, friendship, home, business, or contracts. In Proverbs, there is a lot about sexuality, a man's relationship with a woman, men being carried away by women who are evil, and a lot about honoring God by your wisdom. There are constant warnings to be on guard over and over again.

Lastly, Jesus ultimately is the Wisdom of God (Prov. 8:22-31).

Ecclesiastes

Primary Information for Starters

Ecclesiastes was written by "the teacher." That is what it says at the very beginning. It is written by the teacher, which is most likely Solomon (Eccl. 1:1-2, 12).

The key question that Ecclesiastes asks is, "Is life really worth living?" This is a very interesting book. "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the teacher. "Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless." That is how it starts off. And unfortunately, it is not only the message of the first part, but also the message of the second part, and of the third part, and of it all. It is just meaningless over and over again. "Life is meaningless." We live our lives and we die and somebody else inherits all our wealth and wastes it. That is basically the message of Ecclesiastes. It is a depressing book.

Some key words are: man, labor, under the sun, meaningless, wisdom, and evil.

Practical Advice for Study

Everything is meaningless. That is what the author keeps saying over and over again. That makes it a very difficult book in the Old Testament, and the reason we say, "Why do you want to read it?" But look for major ideas that are behind "everything is meaningless." This book is showing us that God is the ultimate reality, the Creator of all. That means all meaning comes from Him. If you try to live your life outside of God, the ultimate reality, there is no meaning. The implications here for atheism are huge. This book is huge today when it comes to defending our faith and really showing who God is—His beauty and His grace.

It also shows us that God's ways are not always understandable. They don't always make sense. They don't always add up. It also shows us that life does not always progress as expected. The author says over and over again, "The righteous aren't getting the good, and the evil are." Why is that happening? It is not working like it is supposed to.

Finally, in Ecclesiastes we see that death is the ultimate equalizer. That is a depressing statement, but it is true. In the end, death claims rich and poor, wise and foolish. Life is a vapor. That is the message of Ecclesiastes. It is short and death will come to every single one of us.

Don't forget, Ecclesiastes is a book without an ending. Remember the context of the writer. Solomon, the teacher of wisdom unfolds all this revelation but is longing for something more to have meaning. He needs more. Thankfully we have the opportunity to look at the book of Ecclesiastes through the lens of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Death is the ultimate equalizer until Christ conquers death and He is not equalized by it. That gives meaning to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that if the resurrection is not true, then yes, Christianity is meaningless. However, if it is true, it means everything. That is what unfolds in Ecclesiastes. It is huge when you look at it in light of the New Testament.

The practical application of the book is to enjoy the blessings of God today, to fear God, and to obey God's Word. Invest your life in what really counts. This really counts.

Song of Songs

Primary Information for Starters

There is a contrast from depression in the book of Ecclesiastes to delight in the book of Song of Songs. "Song of songs" literally means, "the finest of all songs." It is the finest of all songs. Solomon is said to have written a thousand songs. This would be the finest of all songs. This is when you come to Secret Church with your spouse. This is where the Old Testament gives you what Hollywood could never give you on a date.

Like Esther, Song of Songs never mentions the name of God. These are the two books that don't mention the name of God. The Song of Songs is where I begin to sweat teaching the Bible in house churches. I just don't want to answer the questions that they have.

The theme is celebrating the sexual love between a man and woman.

Practical Advice for Study

There are three main characters. First, you have the woman who is referred to as the "beloved" (leading role). Second, you have the man referred to as the "lover." Third, you have the woman's companions "the daughters of Jerusalem," who are "friends."

Throughout history there have been different ways that people interpreted Song of Songs. There are three possibilities for interpretation. The first is a literal interpretation, which understands that this is between a man and a woman. Second, a historical interpretation, which believes this is a picture of God and His people, Israel. Third, is the typical interpretation, which implies that this is a picture of Christ and His Church.

Many people have said the marriage relationship here in the book of Songs of Songs represents the relationship between Christ and His Church. When it comes down to the interpretations, we could talk for a while. I believe it is pretty clear that the primary meaning of the Song of Songs is a celebration of sexual love between a man and a woman. You tie this back to Genesis 1-2, and you have a beautiful picture of what marriage was intended to be, which is expressed more fully in Song of Songs. It is an amazing picture.

Does that affect the way that we perceive our relationship with God? Undoubtedly Scripture is intentionally showing us that the marriage covenant is a reflection of God's covenant with us. Therefore, the delight that is seen in Song of Songs certainly has implications and ramifications for the delight that God has with His people. The primary and practical meaning is a literal interpretation of the man and woman enjoying each other. See the delight and unquenchable nature of true love, where man and woman take delight in each other without shame.

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