

Last week we concluded with the prophet Samuel anointing David as king. But just so you know where we are on the Bible roadmap, we're in the book of 1 Samuel. The next five books, 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles tell the history of the Israelites. Starting with the reign of King David in 1011 BC through the invasion of Israel by the Assyrians and Babylonians, including the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, then their captivity into foreign lands, and then their eventual return to Judah in 538 BC. Now from this point on, you can't read the Bible chronologically. The stories will jump years, even centuries, and they will be out of order. Remember, the Old Testament is grouped – the Torah (or Law), the Writings, and the Prophets. But I will do my best to take you through a timeline.

But now, back to King David. Before I sing his praises, I think a little bit more about Samuel, and Israel's first king, Saul, is in order. Samuel was born in answer to the prayers of his previously childless mother, Hannah. In gratitude for the child, she dedicated him to the service of the high priest Eli, in the town of Shiloh. So now, just a few sentences into today's sermon, I'm going to go off on a tangent. Think for a moment about all the cities and towns in this country that are named after biblical towns and places. Literally hundreds. And most people probably don't even recognize that they are from the Bible. Towns like Shiloh, Tennessee. And there's Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Carmel, Indiana; Lebanon, New Hampshire; Salem, Massachusetts, and so many more. In fact, every state in the union has a town named from the Bible with the exception of Hawaii. I don't know about you, but to think that these names from the Good Book are remembered and honored in this fashion, gives me a good feeling. Because I think there is power in a name. But I'm also somewhat apprehensive. Could it be that someday, some group might argue to change those names because they're offensive to secularists? After all, nothing would surprise me now. Dr. Seuss just had six of his books cancelled.

Anyway, under the care of Eli, is when Samuel found out he was a prophet. God spoke to him. Now if you remember, even though the Israelites made it to the Promised Land, they were always in battle against the previous inhabitants, as well as nations bordering the Promised Land who wanted what the Promised Land had to offer. In one significant battle, the Philistines defeated the Israelites, and what was worse, they captured the sacred Ark of the Covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments. Obviously, that wasn't a good omen for the Israelites. But it also turned out very bad for the Philistines.

Because God brought down plagues on the Philistines reminiscent to what he did to Egypt. Fearing Yahweh, the Philistines sent the Ark back to the Israelites but continued to fight. In the ensuing battles, the Israelites finally won the war, and as a reminder of the great victory God gave to Israel, Samuel erected a great stone, calling it 'Ebenezer,' meaning "stone of help." It was to be a reminder to the nation of Israel that God had protected and led them to victory. And that's the term – Ebenezer – very few of us recognize when we sing the great hymn, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. "Here I raise my Ebenezer, here by Thy great help I've come."

So this battle was won, but because of all the civil and moral turmoil that existed in the land, the Israelites wanted a king, hoping to bring about some stability to the nation. Although both Samuel and God were against the idea. Because what need is there for a king if the people follow God. But God finally relents and has Samuel anoint Saul as the first king. Saul, as I indicated last week, did well for time, until his pride and disobedience got the best of him, and things began to go south. So God told Samuel to go to Bethlehem to anoint a new king - how's that for coincidence! So he goes and anoints a young shepherd boy named David, to be the king – but at some point in the future. Now is when the real drama begins! Because of Saul's guilt, he feels rejected by God, and experiences a spiritual depression of sorts. So his aids recommend a musician to soothe his soul. Well, it seems David's reputation was not only that of a good shepherd, but also as a poet and musician besides. So David enters Saul's court to play music for the despondent king, and before long becomes the king's armor bearer. At this point in their relationship, Saul loved David!

Meanwhile though, Saul still has the Philistines to fight. Now the Philistines had a champion warrior, a giant of a man named Goliath, who stood 9 feet tall. The shaft of his spear was the size of a wooden beam. His iron breastplate alone weighed 120 pounds. So Goliath issues a challenge to Saul, "Choose a man for yourselves and let him come down to fight with me. If he kills me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him, then you shall be our servants." When Saul and all Israel heard these words from the giant, they were greatly afraid. But not so, David. You see, he was excellent with the sling. Whenever a bear or lion would take a lamb from the flock, David would go after it and strike it down with the sling, rescuing the lamb from its mouth. So Saul allows David to go up against Goliath. First they put armor on David, but he could hardly move. So David removes the armor and goes out to meet Goliath with these famous words, "You come at me with a sword and spear, but I come at you in the name of the Lord." And, really, what greater power is there than that? David takes out a stone, and on his first attempt, buries it into Goliath's forehead, killing him. David thus, becomes a national hero.

But David's popularity did not sit so well with Saul and he decides to get rid of David. More than once Saul attempted to kill David, so David has to flee for his life. Yet his legend grew. He becomes a Robin Hood of sorts out in the hinterland of the kingdom, doing good while Saul did evil. Their paths cross numerous times, and David even had the chance to kill Saul, but did not. Perhaps he remembered God's command from one of the books in the Bible that nobody seems to like, Deuteronomy, where it says, "Vengeance is Mine, says the Lord." That's certainly different from the way many people think today. Eventually though, Saul is slain in a battle against the Philistines. That sets up a mini Civil War of sorts between David and Saul's son Ishbosheth. David becomes king of the southern realm, Judah, and Ishbosheth becomes King of the northern realm, Israel. That lasted for about seven years until finally David became king over all of Israel. He made Jerusalem the capital of the new united kingdom and he moved the sacred Ark of the Covenant there, where he hoped to build a Temple to God Almighty.

Rev. Kalas says, "Everyone is special to God, but some people are especially special." I don't think this is evidence of favoritism on God's part, but rather it's that some people make it easier for God to have a relationship with them and use them for his purposes. Apparently David was that kind of special person. God called David, "A man after my own heart." So here's a question for you. How would you describe the heart of God, in a word? Well, for me that word would be "love." And if you think about it, that's a theme that is repeated over and over again in the Bible. That God is love! So when we read that David was man after God's own heart, it's obvious that he knew God loved him and he loved God in return. But, that doesn't mean David was a perfect person. As I've said now for three weeks in a row, God doesn't have any perfect people to work with. So he does the best he can with what we give him. And in one of the most dramatic stories in the Bible, we hear of the time when David was, in fact, a very imperfect person. He saw Bathsheba, the wife of his most trusted lieutenant, Uriah, bathing naked. So he sent for her and he slept with her. Sometime later she announced that she was pregnant. To cover-up his sin, and so that Uriah would not find out what he did, he sent Uriah to the front lines of battle where he was killed.

So who can reprimand a king for what he has done wrong? It takes the prophet Nathan who confronts King David by telling him a story. This story bears repeating and goes like this. There were two men in a city, the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceedingly many flocks and herds. The poor man had nothing except one little lamb, which he had brought up and nourished. And it grew together with him, and with his children, and drank from his own cup, and lay in his bosom. But then came the

rich man, taking for himself the one and only lamb of the poor man. The point of the story was to provoke outrage in David about the injustice of the situation. And David is, in fact, outraged, telling Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this thing deserves to die.” I can imagine a very long pause. And then Nathan points directly at David and says, “You are that man!” “You are that man!” And David immediately realizes the story was about him and Uriah and Bathsheba. And perhaps that's another thing that affects God's heart. The ability to honestly repent for our sins. Because David made no attempt to excuse himself or use his kingly prerogatives. He repented with almost ferocious intensity, saying, “I have sinned against the Lord,” and he repented. And as you read some of the psalms King David wrote about sin, such as Psalm 51, “Against you O Lord, I have sinned and done what is evil in your sight. Remove the stain of my guilt, ” you can definitely feel his pain and anguish.

David wanted to do more for his people and God, and his intention, as I previously indicated, was to build a Temple in Jerusalem. However, Nathan once again intervenes, telling David that job would be left to his son, Solomon. King David died after ruling for forty years. Despite all his importance and prominence, perhaps his greatest accolade is this: when Jesus arrived on the scene, they called him, “Son of David.”

Now to Solomon the son of David and Bathsheba. King Solomon started his reign with such promise. The nation of Israel was relatively peaceful, secure and prosperous. He would get to oversee building the great Temple. He was a gifted writer – authoring parts of Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes. And to top it off, he was wise! God came to him in a dream one night, and said, “Ask for whatever you want.” Well, Solomon asks for wisdom. And Solomon’s reputation for wisdom, as well as his wealth and power, becomes so great that rulers from other nations sought him out. One was the Queen of Sheba, a kingdom, scholars believe, that bordered the Red Sea, and could be either Ethiopia or Yemen. The Bible tells us she “came to test him with hard questions. And Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her.” Often people in power feel threatened or jealous by other people in power. We see it in business and politics all the time. But not the Queen of Sheba. She said, “Praise be to the Lord your God who has placed you on the throne of Israel.” And she gave him lavish quantities of gold, precious stones and spices. Interestingly, her story is also told in the Qur'an, the Islamic scripture. And, legend has it, she bore Solomon a son.

With Solomon, regretfully, we start to see the “beginning of the end” of the united kingdom. For Solomon may have been wise, but he was also a “ladies man”, which was his downfall. The Bible tells us, “King Solomon loved many foreign women, including the daughter of Pharaoh.” And these many wives and lovers turned him away from God and toward their pagan idols. At this point, the spiritual underpinnings of the Israelites are beginning to crumble. Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, eventually becomes king. Now it should be noted that there were always divisions and tribal jealousies among the Israelites, but when the ten tribes in the northern kingdom wanted King Rehoboam to lessen their tax burden, he increased it instead. So they revolted and the twelve tribes become two nations again. Israel in the north, with its capital of Samaria – yes, where the Samaritans are from, and Judah in the south, with the capital of Jerusalem. Thus was the beginning of the immense hatred between these two nations, and is probably why Jesus uses the example he does in that great parable of the Good Samaritan.

The next few hundred years is once again rather bleak and repetitive, for both nations. It was a continual cycle of them turning away from God, being attacked by a foreign power and oppressed, repenting of their ways and being delivered by God once again. The Northern Kingdom, who had no righteous king, was captured by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and they were dispersed into the various parts of the Assyrian Empire where they intermarried and assimilated into the pagan culture and eventually lost their identity. The Southern Kingdom was able to hold off the Assyrians - they had a few righteous kings who were able to inspire the Israelites to maintain their faith in God. But they were eventually attacked by the Babylonians and King Nebuchadnezzar around 600 B.C., who destroyed the Temple, captured the Ark of the Covenant, and took the Jews away as captives where they lived in exile for some 70 years. In Babylonia, they refused to assimilate with non Jews, thus preserving their identity, and when King Cyrus ruled Persia, they were finally able to return to Judah and Jerusalem, and rebuild the temple. We find this in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra.

Now just a tad of ancient world history: the Assyrians were defeated by the Babylonians who were then defeated by the Persians. And the Persian Empire ultimately controlled much of the world from India to Ethiopia to Egypt to Greece. This now leads us to the Book of Esther, which in fact opens like this: “Now it came to pass in the days of King Xerxes, who reigned over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces stretching from India to Ethiopia, that in those days the king sat on the throne of his kingdom.” Curiously, the Book of Esther is a book in which the name of God is never mentioned. However, the hand of God is seen throughout, orchestrating events. Esther was a beautiful Jewish woman living in this

kingdom after their captivity. Her cousin, Mordecai served as a palace gatekeeper for King Xerxes. And once, after a seven day eating and drinking binge, King Xerxes wanted his Queen Vashti to come out so that “all the other men could gaze upon her beauty.” This was a “show and tell” moment for the King – see what I’ve got! Vashti, however, didn’t want any part of this “red carpet photo op,” so the King had her banished – gone, just like that. But he needed a new queen, and Esther was chosen as one of the candidates, though she kept her identity as a Jew hidden. She and the other potential queens went through an extensive twelve month period of beauty treatments, with special ointments and perfumes, choosing clothing, jewelry and more. Until the final test – spending the night with the King. Esther won, and became Queen. Now the King has a top ranking official, Haman, and everyone was supposed to bow in reverence to him. But the gatekeeper, Mordecai, being a Jew refused to bow to anyone but God. This angered Haman, and he plotted to kill not only Mordecai but use it as a opportunity to kill all the Jews. Mordecai learns of this plot, and implores his cousin Esther to tell the King. She had not revealed that she was Jew, and was frightened to say anything. But Mordecai convinces her by saying, “Perhaps you were made Queen for such a time as this.” Which made Esther stop and think about her destiny and her responsibility. Was it just to be a queen, or was she destined to do something more, something greater? And we would all do well to ask ourselves this same question. Are we content just to live our lives, or does God have a plan for us, a purpose at this particular time and place. Esther fasts and prays, and then she tells the King about the plot against "her people," the Jewish people. The King proves his love for Esther and Haman is put to death, and the Jews are saved. It is from this event that the Jews today celebrate The Feast of Purim, where the Book of Esther is read, and every time the name Haman is mentioned, the congregations hisses and stomps their feet.

This now brings us to the Wisdom Books. I’ll talk about Job and Psalms, but let me quickly review the others. Proverbs is written mostly by Solomon, and he told us why he wrote them: “Their purpose is to teach people wisdom and discipline, to help them do what is right, just and fair.” These proverbs are basically a series of “life lessons.” Things like “Start your children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old, they will not turn from it.” Or, “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.” Or “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” Next is Ecclesiastes, likely written by Solomon, and includes some philosophy, like "For everything there is a season, a time to be born and a time to die." That lesson was so good they made it into a popular song! There is also the cry of one who looks at all his wealth, position and possessions, and questions the futility of it all. It ends like this: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for that is

the whole duty of everyone." Then there's Song of Solomon – a beautiful tribute to romantic love and intimacy. It begins, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine." Some will argue this is about God's love for Israel or God's love for the church. But most scholars see this as a sampling of erotic poetry reminding us that God invented love and sexual desire and it is a special gift.

Now to Job – a man who could best be described as the 'poster child' for the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Because the Bible tells us that Job "was blameless – a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil. He was the greatest of all the men of the east." In addition, he was also probably the richest, with extensive property, thousands of animals, multiple servants, and ten children. Life was very good for Job. Until Satan comes along, and goes to God claiming that the only reason Job has such faith is because he has all these blessings in his life. Satan wants to test Job to see if he will remain faithful if he doesn't have these blessings. So God, for reasons known only to him, agrees to let Satan put Job to the test. And then, in an 'everything-to-nothing' series of disasters, Job loses it all – his property, his animals, his servants, and even all his children. Then to top it off, Job is struck with painful sores all over his body. And yet, through it all, he holds on to his faith in God. His wife, however, is none too happy, and in her anger and anguish, she pushes Job to "curse God and die!" Yes, difficulties and trials can put strain on a marriage, as probably all of us can attest. Next, four of Job's friends come by to provide support and comfort. At first they do so by remaining silent. This is the right response when a friend is suffering greatly. Just be there for them. Don't say much, if anything, just be there, and pray. Unfortunately, Job's friends finally start talking and espouse some bad theology. They were convinced that God was punishing Job for something he had done. They believed, like we often do, that if we're good, only good things will happen to us, nothing bad. I'm guessing that every one of us has struggled with that same issue – what did I do, or my loved one do, to deserve this or that? And for the next 36 chapters, there is a back and forth between Job, who maintains his innocence, and his friends, who try to convince him he must have done something wrong. As an aside, I will say the colloquialism we often hear, "the patience of Job," really doesn't fit. Because Job gets angry. He complains to God, "Will you never let me alone even for an instant? Turn away from me so I can have a moment's joy." Finally Job needs to talk it out with God himself. "I desire to speak to the Almighty and to argue my case with God." Well, in the ensuing conversation God reminds Job of God's deity and authority, and of his power over all creation. And God reminds Job of his place, asking, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Have you ever given orders to the morning or shown the

dawn its place? Did you set the boundaries of the ocean or cause the rain to fall?” God goes on like this for quite some time, then says, “Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify myself?” And with that, Job humbly confesses, “I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. And I sit in repentance.” The whole point of this story is to remind us that the Almighty does not have to answer our "Why" question. Instead we are to remain faithful, even when we don't understand, and we have to trust in God's wisdom for our lives. Job finally comes to this place of acceptance. And in the end, actually comes out the victor, proving Satan wrong. In the final chapter we read, “God blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the first.” God replenishes his animals and wealth and he had ten more children. But I think the greatest blessing Job learned is one that we should learn too: that when we get to a place where all we have left is God – we find we have all we need.

Next, is Psalms. Now I’ve talked a bit about how to read the Bible. It contains various literary forms – imagery, history, poetry, and so we are to read it contextually, not literally. Some books of the Bible we read for instruction, some for information, and others we read for inspiration. Psalms is one of those. We find The Book of Psalms in the middle of the Bible, and it’s the longest book with 150 chapters. King David is the author of seventy-three of the psalms, and over forty were written by the famous “anonymous.” It is a collection of prayers and hymns written over hundreds of years. And in this book you will find every conceivable human emotion. Love, joy, despair, anger, doubt, fear and more. And that’s why we have to read the Psalms differently. As author Philip Yancey points out in his book, *“The Bible Jesus Read,”* what makes the Psalms unique is that “the intended audience is not other people, but God.”<sup>1</sup> We are meant to see ourselves in the psalms. Like when we are outside on a warm summer night, looking up into the immense sky, seeing it dotted with a multitude of lights, and in awe we say with the psalmist to the Almighty, “When I consider your heavens, the moon and stars you have set in place, what are mortals that you mindful of us?” When we have felt God’s presence and our prayers have been answered, we express our joy, “I prayed to the Lord and he answered me, he freed me from all my fears.” When we know that we have sinned and done wrong, “Have mercy on me, O God, and cleanse me from my sin.” When our enemy is not a foreign power threatening to overtake us, but rather an illness or a personal habit that threatens to overtake us, and we cry out, “Let not my enemy cancer, my enemy resentment, triumph over me.” When the years begin to creep up on us, “Even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me.” When we are desperate feeling unsure or hopeless, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” And even when we are hurting and we feel like God is silent, and we

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey, *“The Bible Jesus Read”* pg. 113



wonder where he is, we cry this from Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Yes, even Jesus was quoting the Psalms while dying on the cross. And so, in the Psalms, I’m sure you will find yourself. But I also hope that they will also take you beyond yourself. To discover the presence and power and love of God through every facet of your earthly life.

Finally we come to the prophets, humans filled with God's Spirit and who speak on God's behalf. Now you will notice there are many prophets in the Old Testament but not in the New Testament. Why is that? Because who ultimately spoke the true and final word of God? Jesus Christ, the Word, made flesh. God himself has spoken, and that ends all future prophesy.

Now all of the prophets came forward to change the hearts of a rebellious people. And all their stories can't be told in my quick summation. But I'll give you some highlights. First, Elijah, a prophet sent to Israel and Judah. Not only did he have to deal with a rebellious people who weren't listening, he also had to deal with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. We talked about names earlier, and today we use the name Jezebel to imply a wicked, shameless woman. And yes, that was Queen Jezebel. She was manipulating and self-serving, and she and Ahab worshiped the pagan god Baal. Now the idols of the god Baal were made in the shape of a bull, representing power and strength, and reflecting fertility and lust for sexual pleasure. And Elijah confronted Ahab and Jezebel about their worship of Baal, and he challenged 850 prophets of Baal to a showdown. A bull was sacrificed on an altar and Elijah said that whichever ‘god’ brought down fire to consume the sacrifice would be the true God. Of course, our God wins this contest hands down, which infuriates Jezebel, and she threatens to kill Elijah. So he goes into hiding, where God encourages him through his troubles with "a still, small voice". Elijah was single-minded in his devotion to God, and he is the model for a prophet, as we see when he appears with Moses at the transfiguration of Jesus.

Jeremiah is referred to as the “weeping prophet,” because of his often gloomy message and the grief he expressed for his people after Jerusalem was destroyed. And he is the likely author of the Book of Lamentations. Daniel was a captive in Babylonia and stayed true to the Jewish laws and diet, and paid for it by being thrown into a lion’s den. But God saved him from death by closing the lions jaws. Jonah refused to preach to the people of Ninevah, the Assyrian capital, because he felt they didn't deserve God’s compassion and mercy. But a few days in the belly of a big fish changed his mind. You see, the Assyrians were enemies of Israel, but God's intent was to bless them nonetheless, consistent with God's

promise to Abraham that his people would be a blessing to all the nations. Micah shares us with the words that tell us how to live: “What does the Lord require of you mortal, but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.” Isaiah spoke for God in Judah under four Kings. But he also prophesized about a new king. A servant who suffers on behalf of those he comes to rule. And that's the last thing I will say about the prophets, because they point the way to Jesus Christ. From Micah's proclamation that “You, O Bethlehem, from you shall come forth one who is to be ruler in Israel,” to Isaiah's words again, “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his stripes we are healed.”

In the prophets we see God's plan for salvation beginning to take shape. Even Jesus quotes the prophets, and shows how he is the fulfillment of these scriptures. At the beginning of his ministry, he quotes Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.” And, though we heard earlier some referred to Jesus as the “Son of David,” Jesus most often referred to himself as “Son of Man,” quoting the prophet Daniel. You see Daniel had a vision and in it, he says, “Before me there was one like a 'son of man' coming with the clouds of heaven.” And this “Son of Man” would be appointed by the Most High to rule an eternal, universal kingdom that will be over all other nations.

This brings us to the end of the Old Testament. And it will be four hundred years before we hear from God again. But when we do – watch out!