

Part 2: Jesus in the History (Part 1) – God’s people and the problem of leadership

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By the time I was in Seminary I had been a Christian for nearly two decades. I grew up in a Christian home. I went to a Christian school from kindergarten through graduation, memorizing entire books of scripture and taking many classes on the Bible itself. I had been on staff at a church, preaching weekly for nearly five years.

But in one Seminary class they asked us to open our Bibles to the book of Daniel, a book I had preached through before, and I couldn't find it. I tried to sing the book of the Bible song to myself to remind myself of where it might be. But despite my singing and frantic flipping, I was still looking for it while everyone around me was already there. Too arrogant and ashamed to look it up in the table of contents I found a spot that appeared to be near where I remembered the book, and nodded along as the class progressed hoping no one saw I was in a different spot altogether.

Why do I share this story with you today? Because I want you to know that there is no shame in realizing we don't know the Bible as well as we should. It's a big book, with lots of things in it. But it is a book we should be growing in. What is shameful, what is truly ignorant, is to know what you don't know and choose to do nothing about it.

This eight week series is designed to help discouraged Bible readers find hope, non-Bible readers find confidence, and voracious Bible readers see Jesus more vividly. As we endeavor to read the whole Bible together over the course of two years, this series helps us encourage one another and assist one another in the process.

Last week we looked at the first five books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy and we saw the story of God and his people. We were introduced to the primary three themes in scripture: God's people, God's place and God's presence. God's perfect creation included his people, in his place, in his immediate presence, but sin ruined all of it. What remains in the Bible is God's covenant plan to redeem all three of those through Jesus Christ so that we might again be God's people, in God's perfect place, in God's perfect presence.

Today we are going to pick up this story in what is often called the history, or the former prophets. We are going to be looking at the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings (we will examine the book of Ruth later on in the series). Our goal today is to see **Jesus in the History (Part 1)** and our theme is going to be **God's people and the problem of leadership**.

Our goals each week are to **Survey the Story**, **Study the Story** and lastly **Savor the Savior of the Story**. In other words we are learning to see the story of Jesus in all the Bible, study the Bible as it is written, and apply the Bible to our heads, hearts and hands.

As I mentioned last week, there's going to be a lot of content in these sermons. Because of the pace we are working there's not a lot of natural redundancy built into my sermons as there normally is. So I would recommend, especially if you're trying to take notes, picking up one of my manuscripts in the

back to take home or listening to the sermon on the podcast later in the week. This might help us be free to simply listen well this morning.

Having said that let's begin by **Survey(ing) the Story**.

Last week the story of scripture left on a cliff hanger with a recreated Israel standing for the second time at the doorway to Canaan, the Promised Land, faced with the decision: will they go into the Promised Land and trust God, or will they fall away once more into sin and faithlessness.

What is highlighted for us in these six books is what happens to God's people as they move into God's place (the Promised Land) and how it relates to God's presence. God's goal was that his people would be distinct from all the nations in the land and in so doing they would be a blessing to each other and to the world.

But as they move into the Promised Land their success and their blessing is short lived because their obedience and their faith is short lived. This is where our primary theme is seen: God's people and the problem of leadership.

At every step it appears that those who are charged to lead Israel have two problems: Bad leaders ruin things, and good ones die. And problems follow at each step. As the leadership fails, so too do the people. As the leadership dies, so does the people's obedience.

So instead of entering into the land and being a transformed people, they end up looking like the other nations in the land—they fail to be distinct as God's people. Instead of heeding what we saw last week in Deuteronomy 4, "Know therefore today and lay it up in your heart that the Lord is God and there is no other," the people of Israel fall away into rampant idolatry.

Just like in the Pentateuch there's a geographic and a theological progression to these books. In the Pentateuch they went geographically from Eden to Canaan. And in the history the people of Israel go from Canaan into Captivity. They progress from the doorway to the Promised Land to being carried away by the nation of Babylon.

As we track this geographic progress the theological progression is made clear. What causes them to go from Canaan to captivity is the movement of leadership from God's dominion to man's depravity. The more God's people reject God's rule, the more the problem of human sin ruin everything.

A key text for this is what was read for us earlier. It comes to us as Solomon, David's son, is appointed king of Israel and his prayer reveals the underlying concern of all these books: Who is wise enough to rule God's people? See if you can hear these themes of people, place and presence in **1 Kings 3:5-14**.

Who will be wise enough to govern God's people? Will they be able to lead God's people into God's promise and keep them there? So how do we follow this story?

This is where we need to turn to our second point: **Study the Story**.

Similar to what we looked at last week the major genre of these history books is narrative. You'll find songs and poetry in these pages but for the most part if we want to understand the meaning we need to pay attention to the story and characters.

God's Presence and His Rule

An important thing you will notice as you read this is that God's presence is often mediated by Israel's human leaders.

That's because ever since God revealed himself to his people at Mount Sinai his presence was seen in two places. The first was God's divine presence which dwelt in fire and word on Mount Sinai. That presence would travel with Israel into Canaan in what is called the Ark of the Covenant. This was where God's divine presence dwelt. Pay attention to where God's divine presence is as you read this story.

But secondly there was God's ruling presence. God was to dwell in the midst of his people as his people worshipped him, obeyed him, and began to be more and more like him in their holiness. The more God's leaders ruled God's people according to God's law, the more they experienced the nearness of God's presence.

In this way God's leaders were a sort of intermediary and representative of God's presence. They reminded God's people that God's salvation transforms his people. God rules over his people by his word. It wasn't enough for God to simply dwell in a physical way in the Ark of the Covenant, he was to dwell with them as his people were transformed to be like him! God's presence changes us.

As you'll see there are times where God's divine presence is there in the Ark, but despite that God's people don't act like God's people!

The moral of the story is that God is not a mascot. God's people are not marked off by bumper stickers or Sunday attendance. You can't simply have God in a box on your nightstand and be God's people. Why? Because God's presence is a transformative presence. He is holy and therefore those who truly dwell with him are made holy like him. They not only see God as present and real, but they seek to align the whole of their lives in accord with the God who dwells with them.

That's why the issues of leadership are so intense in these books: Who will lead God's people into God's ruling presence, who will help the people experience God's transformative mercy and therefore remain in God's covenant blessing?

God saved Israel in order to rule over them for their good! How often we forget this. We want God to save us out of the punishment of sin, but we don't realize that God has come to save us from the rule of sin by winning us to his own rule. If sin ruled, not God or his word, it would not lead back to Eden, but back to Egypt.

The Reality of Sin and Judgement

This is where I want to talk about one other thing before we move on. One thing we need to wrestle with as we read these books is the violence included as part of Israel's history. We see this in God's command for Israel to wipe out the nations of Canaan when they enter into the land, and we also see this when certain Israelites commit such grievous sins that they themselves are put to death.

To understand what is often distasteful to us in our flesh can only be understood when we have a serious and biblical view of sin. So I want to touch on a few things here.

First, as you would have read in Deuteronomy, these nations were totally depraved—sacrificing even their own children. Part of this conquest is because the wages of sin is death. Later on we will see how Assyria and Babylon's conquest of Israel was part of God's plan to judge his own people for their own sin. Therefore the conquest of the land of Canaan was not only for God to keep his promise to Israel but also to judge the land for their wickedness.

What you'll also notice as you read is that God's judgement is without prejudice. Sometimes, as you'll see in Joshua 7, God puts to death even Israelites who sin. Sin doesn't discriminate, neither does God's judgement.

This might make us uneasy, but as you read you'll also see that the sins of a single person always cause great harm to the whole community. For instance when Achan is put to death in Joshua, it's because he disobeyed God in battle and as a result 36 of his fellow Israelites were killed and Israel lost the fight.

Sin is not merely personal, it's always corporate. Sin spreads and therefore God wants to deal with it. This is true even today. While God never called Israel to do to any nation what it did to Canaan, while God's law which prescribed capital punishment for specific sins is now fulfilled in Jesus, even us as God's people today should realize the reality and danger of sin and it's need to be dealt with.

As God's new covenant people in the church, we too are to be mindful of sin when it infects God's people among us. We are not to apply physical punishment anymore because God's people are now a spiritual people not a physical one. But spiritually dealing with sin is just as serious.

Look at what Paul says **1 Corinthians 5:6, 9-12**. Rampant and unrepentant sin exists and is often ignored in the world. But such sin inside of the church, God's people, cannot be ignored. Why? Because it spreads. Like a little leaven, soon it will impact the whole loaf. This is why the Lord has prescribed even for the church the act of church discipline to deal with unrepentant sin, and the ongoing work of discipleship to cultivate repentance and growth in the face of sin.

If anyone, inside the church, or outside the church, rejects God's merciful call to repentance a death worse than physical death awaits. But God gives mercy to those who seek it.

This is what we see immediately in the story in Joshua. Despite God's revealed will to destroy, a prostitute in Jericho responds to God with faithful fear and she is spared. God's mercy makes a way through God's judgement. This shapes our discipline and this shapes our discipleship.

But the primary tool God gives us to realize this mercy is actually the cross of Jesus Christ where we realize the violence sin deserves is real. But Jesus has offered to take God's wrath in our place so that we might have mercy through faith.

Jesus is the leader we need to deal with our sins and to grant us the mercy which transforms us to live in light of God's promise of redemption. Sin demands our death, and apart from God's leader saving Israel from their sin—we are destined to repeat the errors of Israel. This idea is the big idea that we can track through all of these books.

Joshua

In the book of Joshua, he picks up where Moses left off hoping to lead God's people into the Land of Canaan. And look at what happened as the people crossed over the Jordan River: **Joshua 3:7-17**.

What do we see here? As God's people went into the Promised Land to face the nations that lived there, God's presence went before them and miraculously so. It was to prove to God's people that if they obeyed his ruling presence, if they had God's physical presence, not even the forces of nature can stop them.

The initial success in the Promised Land is astounding. God did exactly what he said he would do. Military conquest ensues. Though outnumbered and outgunned, nations fell to the people of God.

Despite fearful moments, Joshua managed to keep the people faithful to God's rules and they were really doing it. They were God's people, in God's place, being led by God's presence. But guess what, Joshua was human and we was about to die before the land was fully conquered.

So to prepare for his death Joshua issues land deeds. From Joshua 13 to 21, you might find some of the seemingly most boring literature in all of the Bible as Joshua tells each of the tribes which land they would occupy. But here's the significance of it. Even though Joshua is dying, even as the land isn't fully conquered, he giving physical receipts of God's promise saying, "I might be dying, but God's promise and presence is not. This land is your land! Take it! Trust God! Keep his word! Love him!"

The book concludes with Joshua urging God's people to trust God, **Joshua 23:2-6**.

Do you see what Joshua is doing? Though he is dying God's rule isn't. He is urging them to be ruled by God's word! To trust God's goodness and experience God's grace by allowing God to continue to remake his people.

Judges

But problems follow as the book of Joshua close and Judges begins.

We find in Judges 1 that the people don't fully conquer Canaan as they were supposed to. And this leads to problems. I want to read a larger portion of Judges for us this morning, but this encapsulates the problems of leadership and the theme of Judges for us. See if you can notice the problem of leadership in this passage: **Judges 2:6-23**.

Do you see the problem? God brought Israel into the Land so that they might serve God and get rid of idolatry, but in the end they refuse to trust God and instead break God's covenant. They become just like the nations they were supposed to displace.

Why did Israel sin so much? Because their leaders kept dying. There was no one to hold them to God's rule. So God brought judges, people who for brief moments reminded the people of God's mighty power to save. But every time a judge would die, the people would fall back into sin. The book gets worse and worse and worse until it ends with the ominous note of: **Judges 21:25**.

There was no good ruler, so everyone did what was right in their own eyes. The result: total devastation.

1 and 2 Samuel

But now we get to Samuel and Samuel is a good priest who helped restore God's presence but even as he began to die look at what God's people say to him: **1 Samuel 8:4-5**.

The people of Israel recognized the right problem: they need better leaders. But they turned to the wrong source. They wanted a king, "like the other nations," not a king like God. This is where we get insight about how we are to understand all of God's rulers—they are rulers set up by God the great ruler. They are physical representations of God's rule.

Look at what God said to Samuel even as he told him to appoint for Israel a king: **1 Samuel 8:7-8**.

Behind all the judges, behind all the prophets, stood God their king. And the people couldn't see it. Even in the good leaders, it wasn't clear enough for God's people to realize that it was God's presence who needed to rule them.

So God grants Israel the king they think they want: the strongest, tallest guy around named Saul. But his heart was not good. He was sinful he didn't lead his people into God's rule.

So God gets to appoint another king—one who was small and insignificant—one named David. But this David was a man after God's own heart and God enters into a remarkable covenant with him in **2 Samuel 7:10-16**.

God was going to rule his people forever through the line of David. He was going to be the means by which God's people, God's place and God's presence brought blessing.

But David sinned bigly. Then his son Solomon took over. The same one who prayed for wisdom and was granted it. Moreover Solomon built a temple for God to dwell in, in Jerusalem, in the Promised Land.

1 and 2 Kings

This is where the book of 1 and 2 Kings picks up. In 1 Kings 8 Solomon dedicates the temple and the Ark of God's presence is brought into the temple of God's place, and God's people are being ruled by God's good king. In fact look at how Solomon prays for his own people in **1 Kings 8:59-61**.

Solomon knows that if God's presence is to stay, then it will not only be in the temple, but among the people as they are ruled by God in their hearts.

God's people, God's place, God's presence! Was this it!? Was this the end of the story?

But a mere two chapters later we read about how Solomon himself didn't obey God's laws, taking multiple wives and then worshipping the false gods of his wives. The same man who built the temple of the one living God constructed altars to false gods in the name of love.

Solomon wasn't faithful. And the Kingdom fell apart.

The rest of the book of 1 Kings and 2 Kings track a devastating civil war. Because of Solomon's sins half of the nation of Israel splits off to form a new nation. This is the Nation of Israel and they would dwell in

the north. Solomon's kingdom would remain in the south and they would be called the Nation of Judah, and they would be the kingdom which carried the promise God made to David.

The rest of the story unfolds like this: Israel for the most part has entirely wicked kings. The kings cause great harm to their people and ultimately in 2 Kings 17 the nation of Israel is destroyed by the nation of Assyria. The failures of Israel's kings lead to the total destruction of the people and total removal from the presence, person and promise of God.

Judah, having God's promise, enjoys a bit more stability and for the most part better kings. But none of these kings are good enough to redeem Israel out of their sin and stabilize God's promise. Who would be wise enough to secure safety for God's people? We get some glimpses of hope.

By the end King Hezekiah shows great promise and reform, but even he falls to sin. Then there is Josiah, pure, beautiful and lovely. But in one random paragraph he goes out to battle and in a single sentence dies.

Who? Who will lead God's people? Apparently, another nation. By the end of the book of 2 Kings because of the failures of Judah and her leaders they are carried off into captivity by the nation of Babylon.

But in the very last chapter the King of Babylon released the King of Judah from prison, and instead of killing him, lets him live among the other Babylonian politicians.

Why is this significant? Because even though God's people had been removed from God's presence, transported out of God's place, God's left a king of Judah alive. The promise to David was not dead. The forever kingdom still stood a shot. Why? Because the Great King still ruled.

This is where we close briefly by **Savoring the Savior of the Story**.

Look at how Jesus is introduced in Luke's gospel: **Luke 1:31-33**.

This Jesus is the true king from the line of David. More than that look at what Paul say sin **Colossians 1:15-20**.

Jesus is not only the divine presence of God, but he is the divine presence of God in human form. He unites the Ark of God's presence with the King God's people needed: God's divine presence and his physical rule meet as God the Son took on flesh.

You see when you examine your own life you might, like Israel, think you need something just like the world. To bring you the promise of presence, place and personhood you grasp for tall kings, deep pockets, and broad love. But here is the King we were made to desire.

Here is a King who instead of falling and taking the stripes for his own sin, lived sinless, remaining faithful to God's law and instead took the punishment for his sinful people.

How do we respond to this King? We respond by doing what we should have done all along, we worship him!

Consider what Paul says in **Philippians 4:8**.

Who doesn't want to think about these things? Who doesn't want to stand in awe of something so exclusively pure and lovely!

But look now at what John shares in **Revelation 1:4b-8**.

Dear church, we can read of the failure of Israel's kings but will you gaze on the true King whom your sins have pierced. Will you submit yourself to his tender care and cling to his exclusive majesty?

Will you realize that here in Jesus is your hope! Here is the rest you need from the weight and wars of the world. Here is mercy. Here is the King wise enough to rule God's people. Will you be ruled by him?