

Part 5: Jesus in the History (Part 2) – The Power and Promise of God

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The sermon series we have been working through since January has been titled: "Jesus at the Center." The goal of it is to help us see Jesus at the center of the Bible as we endeavor together to read the whole of the Bible in two years as a church.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne was a Scottish pastor in the 1800s who famously put together what is called the M'Cheyne Bible Reading Plan. His plan include both family and private readings that would bring you through the New Testament and the Psalms twice a year, and the Old Testament once in a year. It requires reading four chapters a day and is wonderful plan for those who have the capacity for it.

But notice what M'Cheyne himself says about Bible reading: **"You may read your Bible, and pray over it till you die; you may wait on the preached Word every Sabbath-day...[But] if you are not brought to cleave to [Jesus], to look to him, to believe in him, to cry out with inward adoration--'My Lord and my God, How great is his goodness! How great is his beauty'--then the outward observance of the ordinances is all in vain to you."**

What's M'Cheyne's point? That to read the Bible Christianly is to encounter Christ in all of scripture. This series is a help to that end that we might study God's word diligently and daily, but also see Christ vividly on every page of the story.

Today we are closing out the Old Testament with the latter portion of Israel's history prior to the birth of Jesus Christ.

As we have done and will continue to do our aim is three fold in this series. First we are going to **Survey the Story**, then **Study the Story**, and finally as M'Cheyne encouraged us, **Savor the Savior of the Story**.

To begin, let's **Survey the Story**.

The main storyline of all of scripture is God's plan to redeem his people from their sins through the work of Jesus Christ. That's what makes the gospel so good. The gospel is the good news that God has done it, the good news that Jesus has done everything required to save sinners and restore us to God.

What we are being restored to can only be understood by this story of scripture. Perfection, what we were made for was to be God's people, in God's place, ruled by and dwelling with God's perfect presence. This is what we had in Eden, what was lost due to Adam's sin, and what is being restored by God's plan through the whole of scripture.

Last week, the wisdom literature presented a narrative break. It was a snapshot where time stood still in the kingdom of God. But here the narrative resumes where the prophets left off.

In the latter prophets we read that God's people were carried off into captivity to Babylon because of their sin. They broke God's covenant, worshipped idols, and forgot the most important truth Moses gave

to them **Deuteronomy 4:39**: "Know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on earth beneath; there is no other."

Make no mistake, exile was God's discipline on a faithless and forgetful people. But if you remember what we read in the book of Jeremiah, God was not only going to discipline Israel but he was also going to redeem them through his discipline. God would begin to change their hearts, and he would again restore them.

God told Jeremiah declare to Israel that God himself was going to pluck up and break down, to destroy and to overthrow, but also by his mercy to rebuild and to replant.

Today as we examine the books of Daniel, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles, we again see a geographic/narrative progression and also a theological one.

This is the geographic progression of these books is this: ***Replanted and Rebuilt by God's Sovereign Hand.***

As God's people are pulled out of the Promised Land on account of their sin, and ruled by other nations, God—by his sheer might—is going to use these nations to actually produce change in his people. And by the power of these nations, he was going to send Israel back to the Promised Land.

This leads us to the main theological progression we see in these history books: ***God is Faithful.***

That's it. What do we see in these passages? We see the stunning, sovereign and spectacular faithfulness of God to do all he said he would do.

What we will see most clearly today as we encounter **Jesus in the History (Part 2)** is this: **The Power and Promise of God's Word.**

Have you ever wondered how you might get out of the sin, the condemnation, or the funk that you are in? Let these pages show you that only God can do it—and how will he do it? By calling you to consider his promise and to rediscover his word.

We can see the assurance of God's power and promise in a key text of ours today. What was read earlier for us today was the context of Daniel interpreting the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon. But as I read this passage today where Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar's dream I want you to note the power and control God has over human history: **Daniel 2:36-45.**

Out of the nations, God was going to bring his nation. Out of exile, God was going to bring an eternal kingdom.

So how do we trace this? Well, let's **Study the Story** together.

The primary genre of these books is narrative, which means the power is in the story. If you understand the story, you'll understand what God is attempting to accomplish in any given passage. But one unique thing about these narratives when compared with the rest is that all of these narratives are written from the perspective of exile.

1 and 2 Chronicles include a lot of the same things you've already read in 1 and 2 Kings, but Kings record the events which lead into exile, and Chronicles records the events as a retrospect having already returned from exile.

There are two primary themes you can see all over the place in these books. The books of Daniel and Esther outline God's preservation of his people in midst of a foreign nation and foreign threats. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and to a lesser degree, Chronicles outline God's restoration of his people—that is how God is remaking his people spiritually according to his promise.

So let's begin by examining the theme of ***God's Preservation of His People***. In the books of Daniel and Esther.

The book of Daniel begins with Babylon's plan to take the best and brightest of the Jews they just captured and totally assimilate them into the Babylonian culture. With the words of Deuteronomy 4 ringing in our minds we immediately see that the purity and distinction of God's people is being threatened.

Now, in Jeremiah 29, God told his people that while in exile they are to seek the welfare of the city, they are to marry, build houses, and live as Babylonian citizens. But this was all to be done while maintaining religious distinction. They were to be in exile, fully there, fully present, but also fully distinct.

Paul picks up this really important theme in **Ephesians 1:1**. Did you see that? God's people are in Ephesus, they are Ephesian! But what else are they? They are faithful in Christ Jesus.

God's people often live amidst a mixed people, but God's people's worship, allegiance and love for God should never be mixed. But this is what King Nebuchadnezzar was attempting to do in the book of Daniel.

But while Daniel and his friends grew Babylonian knowledge, literature, politics and influence, they remained God-fearing in all things.

In Daniel 1 they refused the king's food, and grew in strength. In Daniel 3, Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego refused to worship the king's idol and they were saved even in the fiery furnace. In Daniel 6, Daniel refused to cease his prayers to the Lord and as a result he was thrown into the lion's den but delivered.

Have you ever been torn between a feeling of belonging to Christ and living in the world? As a college student do you wonder how to walk the line of being in college, but also faithful in Christ Jesus? Have you wondered what it looks like to be in workspace that seems so godless, but also in step with the Holy Spirit? To make progress in all the relational and economic benchmarks the world presents to you but also prioritize your walk with Jesus?

If you've ever felt that then I'm sure you've also experienced what Daniel shows us—the power of the forces which oppose us. The step out in faith and live out allegiance to Jesus vs. the world often puts you at odds with the powers of the world. But this is where the last half of Daniel comforts us.

The last half of Daniel is a collection of prophecies. We will talk more about how we interpret these kinds of passages in a couple of weeks. But of the prophecies are very clear and explained to us, some of

them are obscure even to Daniel as he wrestles with the weight of them. But what are these meant to produce in Daniel and in us?

Look with me at **Daniel 7:13-18**.

What do we see here? While Daniel is torn between two worlds, he sees a vision of one called Ancient of Days, and when he comes he will establish a kingdom forever. As Daniel sees visions of Babylon falling, and four other nations rising and falling, he sees clearly that God is in control. That despite all the power that may stand before you in your obedience, God will rule in the end—moreover God's saints will rule.

To be in God is to be on the right side of history. Part of Daniel's vision shows that even as God's 70 years of exile finishes, there is a season of weeks, ages, to come in which nations will rise and fall, but in the end someone named the "Son of Man," will rule over all things.

The angel Gabriel encourages Daniel at the end of the book and says this: **Daniel 12:13**. What does it mean? It means that when we face powerful opposition that threatens our faithfulness, we can walk in faithfulness to God and we will stand at the end of days. Babylon and her furnaces fell. But those who stand in God will shine like stars of righteousness forever.

We see this displayed all the more in the book of Esther. Interestingly, and perhaps famously so, Esther is the only book in the Bible where the name "God" is not mentioned. However, when you read it you see that God is everywhere in the book.

Esther was a Jewish woman taken lustfully by King Ahasuerus because she was beautiful and because he was displeased with his former Queen for her actions. However, Ahasuerus doesn't know Esther is a Jew and is simultaneously played by one of a man named Haman into signing an edict which would kill all the Jews in the land.

Haman, was offended by Esther's uncle Mordecai who refused to bow in worship to Haman. This is why Haman wanted to destroy the Jews.

Mordecai appealed to Esther to appeal to the King. But Esther new the rules of the Kingdom: if you went before the King without being called, he would kill you. So would this be the end of the Jews? Brought to a new nation, left with a mere woman who had no voice before the world's most powerful king?

Notice what Mordecai said to Esther in **Esther 4:12-16**.

Mordecai trusted in the promise of God. He knew that whether through Esther or through another, God would not allow the Jews to perish. Being reminded of this, Esther trusted God, approached the throne of the King and was extended the scepter of mercy.

In the end, Haman is killed on the same gallows he prepared for Mordecai and the Jews are given victory over the same men who sought to kill them.

In a foreign land, with no political power, no king on the throne, God worked to save his people even through the hand of a pagan king.

So here we see how God was going to preserve his people. And it's remarkably easy to miss this in our Bible reading and in our lives.

Take for instance the diet program called "The Daniel Diet." In Daniel 1, Daniel and his friends eat only veggies and water and are stronger than those who ate meat and wine. I don't really care if you want to eat that way—but to read this story and think that it was the veggies and water which made these men strong is to misread the narrative!

It was not Daniel's diet that preserved him, it was God's power through their faithfulness. It was not Esther's beauty that spared her, but God's mercy through her faithfulness. It was not Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's optimism that the flames wouldn't hurt which delivered them, but the God who stood with them in the flames on account of their faithfulness.

We never have to compromise in order to belong. We never have to sin in order to be preserved. Why? Because our God is faithful to preserve his faithful people according to his promise.

Now, the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and to a lesser degree Chronicles, focus not on merely on God's preservation of his people, but on ***God's Restoration of His People***.

Because God was faithful to sustain Israel in exile, he was faithful to bring them back. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah follow along as King Cyrus freed Israel to return to the Promised Land. But it was not enough for them to simply return, they needed to be restored.

When Babylon conquered Jerusalem in 587 B.C. they destroyed the temple and left Jerusalem in ruins. The book of Ezra chronicles Cyrus' edict for the Jews to go back and to rebuild the temple. In a remarkable affirmation of God's sovereignty over history, just as Isaiah prophesied 70 years of captivity, it was 70 years after the temple was destroyed that it was rebuilt in the book of Ezra. God is faithful.

In the book of Nehemiah, the walls of Jerusalem are rebuilt. Even though the people have been freed, many were scared to return to Jerusalem because they were exposed to the surrounding nations. But Nehemiah calls them to trust God's promise, to come and rebuild the wall and God favors their efforts even in the face of physical harm.

Here's how beautiful the story of scripture is. Do you remember what happened when God brought Israel out of exile in Egypt? He so moved in the Egyptians heart to offer their gold to the Israelites. When God brought Israel out of Babylon, Cyrus offered the people whatever they needed to rebuild the temple. When Israel stood at the doorway of the Promised Land, remember what Israel feared? The big walls and tall people in the Land. But just as Moses called the Israelites to trust God in the face of the walls that were there, Nehemiah called Israel to return in light of the walls that weren't there. God is faithful.

But interestingly enough these physical restoration projects take up less than half of both books. The remainder of the books track the real work of restoration left to be done in God's people. In order to be God's people, in God's place in God's presence they couldn't simply rebuild the walls and the temple, the people needed to rebuild their worship.

Consider Nehemiah's prayer and the problem he identifies in **Nehemiah 1:5-11a**.

Nehemiah called on what? The power of God's promise. He went back to God's promise to Moses in the law, he knew that God would redeem his people by faithfully restoring their worship and having them put their sins away.

Both books highlight great religious reform. In Ezra the people grieve over the sinful marriages they pursued and put away those idolatrous relationships. In Nehemiah the people stop oppressing the poor, the priests stop practicing for their own selfish gain, the Sabbath is upheld and people stop profaning it. There is great reform in the area of worship. God's people are back in God's place and they are starting to look like God's people again.

But what led to all of this? A rediscovery of God's word. King Artaxerxes, the King of Persia, sent Ezra back to the Promised Land to teach God's word. Look at what is said of Ezra in **Ezra 7:10**.

Can you believe that? The King of another nation sent back one of God's servants to teach God's word to God's people! God is faithful even through the hand of a godless king.

In the book of Chronicles, as we step back into time prior to captivity, we read of sweeping reforms amidst some of God's good kings—kings like Jotham, Josiah, and Hezekiah. Each reform was brought about when, somehow, God's law was brought back and read before the kings.

In Nehemiah, Ezra and others begin to preach God's word to the people and the result is total grief over their sin. The law convicted them that despite the city being rebuilt, their worship and manner of living was not. But look at what was said to the people: **Nehemiah 8:9-12**.

What's the profound beauty here? That even though the discovery of God's word brings with it condemnation for our sins, it also brings with it the promise of hope. There is deep joy in understanding not only the bad news of our sin, but the good news of God's promise to restore us in worship through faith and repentance. God's word will come to God's people and those who are struck by it will also be healed by it.

You see this is why we are committed to expository preaching here at Sovereign Hope. God works through his word. His word changes people. In Nehemiah 8 it says that Ezra read the word of God and then they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading. That's all we are doing when we preach expositionally at Sovereign Hope. We read it, we find out what it means, and we become grateful people who apply it to our lives.

If you want to be changed, if you want hope for restoration, if you want the promise of God's transformative grace, you've got to find it in his word.

But here is where the book of Chronicles introduces for us a bit of weighted optimism at the very end. For the most part Chronicles reaches back and looks at Israel's struggle before exile, tracking the good kings and bad kings. But it ends with this statement: **2 Chronicles 36:22-23**.

Why does the Hebrew Old Testament end here? Because it gives both optimism and concern. The optimism is this: God has kept his word. God was faithful to bring his people back to the Promised Land.

But what's the concern? Certainly the hero of the story is not Cyrus King of Persia? Where is God's King? God's people are going back to God's place. They are going to rebuild God's temple. But where is the King who is God's presence? Will the restoration effort work? Will worship endure?

This is where we transition to our final point this morning: **Savor the Savior of the Story.**

The Old Testament ends here with stunning portraits of what happens when God's people recover God's word and are changed by God's promise. God preserved his people by his promise and through his word he was continuing his work of restoration.

So it is not lost on us when John introduces Jesus in this way: **John 1:14-18.**

In Jesus the word became flesh. In Jesus the promise was a person. In Jesus we have hope for the receipt of what? Transformative, restoring grace. Grace upon grace.

Remember the stone, cut from the mountain by the hand of God which bring about God's eternal kingdom? Look at what Jesus says about himself in **Matthew 21:42-44.**

Just as David hurled a stone and struck down the power of the Giant. Just as Nebuchadnezzar's image and the legacy of human rulers would be smashed by the stone from the mountain of God. Jesus is the stone of David, launched by God himself to dash the power of the nations and to preserve those who would be faithful to him.

Here is the preservation of all who wonder: is God faithful?

Did you notice what Jesus said there in Matthew? Have you never read in the Scriptures? The scriptures he's referring to are the Old Testament.

You know how many times Jesus is mentioned in the Old Testament by name. None.

But he's there. Look at what Jesus does in **Luke 24:25-27.**

How does Jesus introduce himself to his people? By Moses, the Prophets, and the Old Testament scriptures.

This book is a book about Jesus the Ancient of Days, the Son of Man who comes to judge the nations and to deliver his people. Here is the Messiah who will put the rulers and powers of the world in final subjection so that God's people might one day in his kingdom flourish forever.

Here is the one who restores our hearts not by rebuilding a wall, but by tearing the curtain. By releasing the presence of God to dwell in midst of a sinful people by being pierced for their sins.

This is the story we will look at next week in the gospels.