

## **Overview of the Bible 4 – ‘Blessed is the man’: The Kingdom of Israel**

1 Samuel 16:1-13 / Psalm 1 / 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 / Luke 17:20-21

**Biblical books: 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon**

Sunday Night in the City, Bethlehem, 1 May 2022

Pastor Thomas Pietsch

*Tonight we continue our sermon series providing an overview of the whole Bible, and I will be preaching on a number of books on kingship and wisdom in the Old Testament, as well as proclaiming the four readings we’ve already heard. Let’s pray: Lord God, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth.*

### **Recap and context**

Thus far in our sermon series, we have seen people on the move. Adam and Eve expelled, Noah sailing, the first word spoken by God to Abraham being ‘Go’, his descendants Jacob and Joseph often on the move, then Israel itself in exodus from Egypt, through the wilderness for 40 years, before crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land. Last month I therefore included a number of maps.

But the focus of our sermon tonight, is on an Israel that is much more stable, at least geographically. There will be no maps. Israel has now occupied the Promised Land, so called because it is the land given to them by God, where they are to remain as his people, gathered around his holy presence in the temple, as a blessing to the nations. While there are a number of books that we want to overview tonight we can divide all these books into two main themes. First are those books concerning the kingdom of Israel, how kings arise, how they rule and what this means for Israel. And second are those books concerning wisdom, how God leads his people, including us, in wisdom. And these two themes are connected, because it is often the kings who lead the way in wisdom – thus King David sits behind many of the psalms, and King Solomon behind many of the proverbs. The teaching of wisdom is perhaps also more conducive to a stable kingdom. Of course just because our lives may be lived on the move does not mean we should forsake wisdom as a luxury for quieter times. But nevertheless, there is a connection between stability, and the flourishing of wisdom and poetry.

### **The coming of the kings: First and Second Samuel, First Kings, First and Second Chronicles**

So, to our first theme, the coming of the kings.

Last month we looked at the beginning years of Israel in the Promised Land, ruled as they were by judges. These were more like chieftains than our courtroom judges, and we saw that under their rule, Israel was marked by violence. While some judges were better than others, they tended to get worse, and so the violence also got worse to the point where Israel was on the brink of civil war. The book of Judges ends with a repeated phrase: “In those days Israel had no king and everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” Israel begins to long for a king, to restore order, to bring peace.

And that theme is picked up in the next books, First and Second Samuel. The people of Israel come to the Prophet Samuel, the Prophet who as a boy had heard the call of God three

times in the night, while doing service with the priest Eli. God had called him to be a Prophet, and so it's to him that the people of Israel come to tell him that they want a king, just like the other nations. God is much more wary. He tells them what to expect with a king: he'll put your sons in the army, he'll make your daughters work for him as perfumers, cooks and bakers, he'll take the best of your fields. But the people still demanded a king, and so God tells the Prophet Samuel to give the people what they want (1 Samuel 8:10-22).

The Prophet Samuel anoints a king, Saul, who initially shows promise, fulfilling the kind of criteria you might expect for a king – tall, strong, handsome. But pretty quickly his pride and dishonesty get the better of him, so much so that Samuel goes to Saul to tell him off, and to tell him that God is going to raise up a new king to replace him. Saul's actions have disqualified him from kingship, showing that under God a king is not a totalitarian ruler, but one subject to God. So while Saul is still alive and in power, God through the Prophet Samuel goes to work behind the scenes to anoint a new king, an unlikely king, a shepherd king. While Saul is tall, strong and handsome, we heard in our first reading tonight that when choosing the next king, God tells the Prophet Samuel: "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature... For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

At this time, Israel was at war with a group called the Philistines. They'd never fully possessed the Promised Land, and the Philistines became their chief enemy. In a battle at the beginning of First Samuel, the Israelites lose their nerve, and so decided to take the ark of the covenant into battle as a sort of magic trophy. Rather than Israel being raised up to God's righteousness, they drag down God's holiness to their own ways. They lose the battle, and the ark of the covenant is stolen. In a fascinating account that shows the power of God's holiness and the dangers of misusing it, we hear that the Philistines take the ark and put it in their temple, dedicated to their god Dagon. But without raising a sword, God defeats both the god Dagon, by having his statue crash to the floor, and the Philistines, by sending plagues on them. The Philistines know that in the ark of the covenant they are dealing with something most holy, and so expel it from their midst and give it back to Israel. What the Israelites couldn't do with swords and armies, God can simply do by his presence (1 Samuel 4-7).

And a similar kind of victory is won against the Philistines at the hands of the boy who would be king. In David's victory over Goliath and so the whole Philistine army, the Bible shows a victory not based on human strength, but on radical and simple trust in the saving work of God (1 Samuel 16-17). The mighty are brought down, and the lowly are lifted up.

For a long period, both Saul and David are alive together, with David even working for Saul as a general in his army. But as Saul gradually descends into madness and jealousy, David rises to authority, popularity and power. Saul even tries to kill David, however we hear that because of his wits, it's actually David who has the opportunities to kill Saul, but he never does, rather trusting that God will achieve his purposes, even while David has many people who are seeking to kill him. Some of the Psalms attributed to David are set in this period of his life, which express the threats around him, but ultimately his trust in God. The book of First Samuel ends with Saul dying in a battle with the Philistines (1 Samuel 31), and David even mourning the loss of his would-be killer (2 Samuel 1).

If First Samuel showed the rise and fall of King Saul, Second Samuel then shows the rise and fall of King David. David's rise is greater than Saul's, becoming the great King of Israel and model for all kings, but that just makes his fall all the greater, with the important exception that his fall is followed by repentance.

David's rise is also Israel's rise, their fates are connected. So upon becoming King, David establishes Jerusalem as a centre for Israel, called also Zion. David doesn't see Jerusalem only as a political centre, but also the spiritual. The ark of covenant, if you remember, had been returned by the Philistines, but lay in a small Israelite town. David now brings the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6) and then asks God whether he can build a house for Him, a Temple. Seeing as Israel now has a permanent home, David wants a permanent presence for God (2 Samuel 7). While God thanks David for thinking of him, instead God tells David that He, God, will be the one building a dynasty for David. So in a key passage of the Old Testament, God promises David that he will raise up from his royal line a future king who will build God's temple on earth and establish an eternal kingdom. This promise of a new king goes on to be a key theme in Psalms and among the prophets.

But no sooner has David been given such a promise than his demise begins. He falls for another man's wife, Bathsheba, impregnates her, and so arranges for her husband to be put in the front line of battle, ensuring his death. When the Prophet Nathan boldly confronts David with his sin, David repents with a heavy heart. God does forgive him, but the earthly consequences remain. David's family falls apart, as his children mirror David's own sin (2 Samuel 13), and then one of them, Absalom even mounts a rebellion to overtake his father's throne (2 Samuel 15-18). While Absalom dies, David is now a broken man (2 Samuel 19-20), and yet the hope remains for a future, messianic king to bring the blessings of God to Israel and all nations.

The promise of a king from the royal line of David who will establish an eternal kingdom hangs over the next two books of the Bible, First and Second Kings. These books show one king of Israel after another, all failing to live up to the promise that God had given to King David, with some doing a better job than others, but ultimately failing abysmally, leading to Israel's Babylonian captivity. That part of the Bible is under focus next month, when we look at the prophets especially, and so tonight we'll just look briefly at First Kings and the Chronicles. First Kings opens with David dying, passing on the kingdom to his son Solomon, and telling him to stay faithful to God and the covenant. After David's death, Solomon has an encounter with God in which he is encouraged to ask God for something, and Solomon asks for the gift of wisdom. Soon we'll get onto the books of the Old Testament that are often called the wisdom literature, the wisdom books, and in Solomon we can see this gift of wisdom personified in a king (1 Kings 3-4). Solomon then begins his reign well by enacting his father David's dream of building a home for God, a Temple. The design of the Temple is given in detail, and it's a fascinating read, showing the intentionality and dedication of building a holy place for where a holy God can dwell with his people, where heaven and earth meet (2 Chronicles 2-3; 1 Kings 5-8). But this is the highpoint of Solomon's reign. For soon he begins marrying many women of other nations, and then importing their gods into Israel, as well as behaving like a tyrant in general so much so that he begins looking more like Pharaoh than his father David (1 Kings 9-11).



been the hymnbook of the Christian church, sung in churches and in homes since the beginning, as God-given ways to praying to God.

The way in which we encounter them is often as individual and discrete works of Christian devotion. Broadly speaking, the psalms can be considered either as poems of lament or praise. Sometimes the lament is communal, sometimes individual. So too the praise is sometimes individual thanksgiving, sometimes corporate praise, as well as royal psalms dealing with kings.

But while it's good to use psalms individually, you can also read through it as a book that has collected the psalms in an intentional way. Firstly, let's think about having lament and praise psalms. One thing the Book of Psalms shows is that lament is an appropriate response to the world we find outside us but also to the sinful nature we find at work within ourselves. And in the book of Psalms, lament psalms outnumber praise psalms in the first half. But in the second half of the book of Psalms, the praise psalms begin to outnumber the lament psalms. In a way that is somewhat echoed in our liturgy, both lament and praise have a place, and yet the book of Psalms looks forward, it's hopeful, it looks to the coming king, and so lament gives way to praise.

The other key way in which the whole book of Psalms tells a story by its structure is by promoting this very hope for a coming king, the new David. 'Blessed is the man...' begins the first Psalm, who we hear 'delights in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night' (Psalm 1:1-2). Then in the second Psalm we hear about a new King, called the Son, who will come and rule over all nations, just like God promised David his descendant would. This Psalm ends by saying that all who take refuge in this King are blessed. So from the beginning of the Psalms, until the end, confidence both in the Word of God and in the coming King are proclaimed.

So when that King does come, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, it is no surprise that the psalms are seemingly always on his lips. They're quoted by Jesus more than any other book of the Old Testament, and he repeatedly shows that the Psalms are actually talking about him, the Son of God, the King whose reign will never end. They're always on his lips, even as he hangs on the cross, and so the Psalms are always on the church's lips.

### **Job and the problem of evil**

The book of Job is the next wisdom book for us to look at, and it is concerned with the problem of evil and suffering, located primarily in one man, Job, whom we hear is a blameless, upright man who honours God. But then Satan tells God that Job is only obedient because everything goes right for Job. So God allows Satan to inflict suffering on Job – his property, his servants, and even his sons and daughters are destroyed. Job tears his robe, shaves his head, and prostrates before God saying "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:20-21). In so doing, the Bible tells us that Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.

Job is then inflicted with sores all over his body, and he curses the day he was born. His wife tells him to curse God, too, and then three friends arrive all to try and help Job with common philosophies or approaching to suffering. None of these friends ultimately help.

They all work on the assumption that Job must have done something wrong to deserve this (e.g. Job 22), whereas we know that Job is innocent, and Job knows it too. Finally, Job takes up his lament with God, in angry and bitter words, asserting his innocence and demanding God explains himself (Job 29-31).

At this point, another friend arrives, called Elihu. He's a bit more sophisticated than Job's earlier three friends, saying that while Job may not have sinned, his suffering could be a way in which God is building his character, putting a silver lining – so to speak – on our suffering. But that explanation doesn't really work, either. After all the human talking is exhausted, God enters the fray and addresses Job. He first tells Job that he has no idea about God, the universe, and justice, that Job is making judgments from a limited perspective. Only God has a universal perspective (Job 38-39), and his friends have spoken wrongly about him, revealing the shortcomings of merely human attempts at wisdom (Job 42). As we heard in our reading from 1 Corinthians tonight, God has revealed the wisdom of the world to be foolish. What do they know? Instead, "the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Corinthians 1:25)

In response, Job repents, although God also adds that Job has spoken rightly about God, not necessarily in everything Job said, but rather in honestly bringing his lament before God. And this seems to be one of the keys to understanding the book of Job. When we talk about God, we can twist ourselves into knots and fall into error. But when we talk to God, in psalms, in laments, in our prayers, God reveals something – to us and to Job – that is greater than book learning, or human knowledge, because it depends on a real encounter – face to face – with God who is pure love and pure justice. The book closes, with Job's health, wealth, and family all restored to him.

### **Ecclesiastes and the vanity of life under the sun**

Ecclesiastes is another book of wisdom, and begins with the memorable word: "vanity of vanities, all is vanity," with the word "vanity" here being a Hebrew word "Hevel" – something like vapour or smoke. Everything is like vapour, or smoke and mirrors, here for a moment, even giving the illusion of permanency, but really being empty, shallow, and soon to disappear again. This word 'Hevel' is used 38 times in the book of Ecclesiastes, which gives you a flavour for the whole text. The human problem, foolishness, is that we spend our lives investing in and building things that are Hevel, that are here today gone tomorrow: a name for ourselves, a family dynasty, wealth, pleasure, football premierships, high scores, you name it. Time goes on, and erases everything (Ecclesiastes 1). We're all going to die, and death will show up the folly of all the things we've invested in (Ecclesiastes 12). And the book of Ecclesiastes goes through all sorts of options that we pursue in life, revealing them all to be Hevel.

But just as the book points out what is folly, so too it points the way to wisdom. Accepting many parts of life as Hevel is actually wisdom, too, because it frees us up to receive the good things that come our way as goods, but not gods, not idols. Rather, Ecclesiastes concludes, fear God alone and to keep his commandments (Ecclesiastes 12:13). The rest is Hevel.

### **Proverbs and the getting of wisdom**

While Ecclesiastes does have a constructive vision, the book of Proverbs is a more detailed source of this wisdom. The opening of the book tells us that the proverbs are “of Solomon”, which matches with what 1 Kings tells us, that Solomon wrote 3000 proverbs (1 Kings 4:32), although there aren’t that many in this book. While not all of the short proverbs are necessarily written by him, King Solomon does stand at the top of the wisdom tradition, with wisdom here not being just knowledge but practical skills, founded on the fear of the Lord.

After an introduction from a father to a son commending him to a life of wisdom, and warning him away from folly (Proverbs 1-9), the book progresses to give hundreds of short, one sentence proverbs. Things like this: “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses” (Proverbs 10:12); “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice” (Proverbs 12:15); “Whoever keeps his mouth and tongue keeps himself out of trouble” (Proverbs 21:23). The context of education, from father to son, points to these proverbs being used in teaching: short sentences to write out, to practice your spelling and your handwriting, while also learning wisdom, meditating on the fear of the Lord and his commands. One of the things about the Proverbs is that they’re not formulaic, or basic rules, so much as wise proverbs to digest, to meditate upon and to be formed by. So one interesting feature of the book of Proverbs that shows this, is that wisdom is personified by a woman, Lady Wisdom. These are not just instructions, but personified living, overseen by Lady Wisdom.

### **Song of Solomon and the life of love**

This personification of deep realities is also evidenced in our final book for tonight, Song of Solomon. It’s a book of love poetry, between a bride and a groom, two lovers, and we hear from them both, although mainly from the bride. The book is full of sexual desire, and romantic love, making it a popular book for readings at weddings. This desire is often played out in seeking and finding narratives, as the two lovers long for each other and delight in each other, culminating in a great proclamation of the power and intensity of love, being both beautiful and even dangerous because of its power.

Christians have sometimes wondered what love poetry is doing in the Bible. At its most basic sense the book is an affirmation of the gift of love, especially sexual and romantic love. But Christians have also read it an allegory of the love between Christ and the Church, the marriage from which all other marriages are derived (Ephesians 5:32), and the love by which we have been redeemed, embraced by Christ and covered by his grace.

### **Conclusion**

“Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you,” spoke Jesus to the Pharisees as we heard in our short Gospel reading tonight. While the kingdom of Israel may seem like an ancient, far off reality, tonight we have traced this kingdom because it hasn’t gone away so much as been fulfilled in Christ Jesus our Lord. The long-awaited king, whose reign will never end, is now seated on the throne. And his desire is for us, his church, that being filled with his love and forgiveness, we too may grow in wisdom so love the Lord with all our hearts.

*And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.*

## ***Next Month...***

### **5 June: 'Him only shall you serve': Idolatry, Exile and Return**

Biblical books: 2 Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Major and Minor Prophets (i.e. the rest of the Old Testament)

#### Recommended Pre-Reading:

- 1 Kings 12 – The kingdom divided
- 1 Kings 17-18 – The prophet Elijah and the prophets of Baal
- 2 Kings 2 – Elijah succeeded by Elisha
- 2 Kings 17 – Israel exiled
- 2 Kings 22-23 – King Josiah's reforms in Judah
- 2 Kings 24-25 – Judah exiled
- Isaiah 6 – Isaiah's vision
- Isaiah 52-53 – The Suffering Servant
- Jeremiah 1 – The call of Jeremiah
- Jeremiah 5 – Jerusalem unrepentant and judged
- Jeremiah 31 – The new covenant
- Lamentations 1 – How lonely sits the city
- Ezekiel 10 – The glory of the Lord leaves the Temple
- Ezekiel 37 – The valley of dry bones
- Daniel 5 – The writing on the wall
- Hosea 1-3 – Hosea and his wife
- Jonah 1-4 – Jonah the compassion of the Lord
- Ezra 1 – The proclamation of Cyrus
- Ezra 3 – Rebuilding the Temple
- Nehemiah 8 – Ezra reads the Law
- Esther – the whole book tells a story

#### Recommended on YouTube:

- Search for 'The Bible Project Isaiah', and likewise for the other books