

Read Through the Bible

Week 20: May 17th – 22nd

Readings: 2 Kings 12 – 25; 1 Chronicles 1 – 4; John 5:25 – 8:20

Reflections and Questions for Thought

By Ken Keller

2 Kings concludes with the predictable and inevitable destruction of the Southern Kingdom (Judah) who followed her “stiff-necked” Northern Kingdom brothers and sisters (Israel) into exile because the Israelites “did not trust in the Lord their God” (17:14). As I studied Kings, I was struck by the generations of evil, hundreds of years of disobedience to God’s laws, and the repetitive disregard for God’s Word. And yet, there were a couple of “bright spots” in King Hezekiah and his great grandson King Josiah.

How have we been “stiff-necked” with our Lord? What idols have we erected in our lives that distract us from obedience to God? Money? Fame? Work? Drugs? Sex? Alcohol? Internet? How can we be “bright spots” amidst the non-believing world surrounding us?

1 Chronicles is a retrospective narrative summary recording Israel’s past, written hundreds of years later, after the Jews had returned to Jerusalem and highlights King David, whom we studied earlier in 2 Samuel. Chapters 1-4 trace the long lineage of Israel forward from Adam. As I studied these chapters, I was impressed that Jabez stood out like a diamond in the rough and “was more honorable than his brothers” (4:9). Because he put God at the center of his life and his work, he was successful and found favor with God, despite living in a world that had essentially rejected God’s teachings. When we pray the

“Prayer of Jabez” (4:10), how can we truly trust the Lord, as the center of our world, to help us prosper in Him and keep us safe from evil? How can we develop that kind of faith?

John’s Gospel is also retrospective, written about 60 years after Christ’s death. Our passages expose the bitter division between 1st century Christians and the Jews who disbelieve their own self-proclaimed prophetic word of God, not to mention their rejection of Jesus as the Son of God. This discord is amplified by Christ’s divinity, a major theme throughout this gospel... “I have come in my Father’s name” (5:43)... “I am the bread of life” (6:35)... “Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father” (6:57)... “My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me” (7:16). In studying these passages, three things impacted me: the “stiff-necked” Jews, just like their ancestors from hundreds of years previously; Jesus’ incredible power displayed through his many miracles; and especially the infinite wisdom of our Master’s reply when He trumped the Pharisees’ trickery... “If any one of you is without sin, let him cast the first stone” (8:7).

Though we claim to be Christians, do we cast stones? When? How often? Do we even realize that we are acting like modern day Pharisees? Do we ever think to ask for forgiveness from our heavenly Father? How about from those we have stoned?

Introduction to 1 & 2 Chronicles

By Eugene Peterson, the *Message*

There is always more than one way to tell a story. The story of Israel's kings is first narrated in the Books of Samuel and Kings. Here is another telling of the same story, a hundred or so years later, by another voice and from another perspective: Chronicles. Some of the earlier narrative is omitted and there are substantial additions but it is recognizably the same story. But Israel's fortunes have changed considerably since the earlier authoritative writing (Genesis through Kings); God's people are in danger of losing touch with what made them God's people in the first place. In retrospect, from the low point in their history in which they now find themselves, it looks very much like a succession of world powers; Assyria and Egypt, Babylon and Persia, have been calling all the shots. The People of Israel are swamped by alien influences; they are also, it seems, mired in internal religious pettiness; will they be obliterated?

A new writer (it may have been Ezra) took it in hand to tell the old and by now familiar story but with a new slant. His task was to recover and restore Israel's confidence and obedience as God's people. Remarkably—and improbably, considering the political and cultural conditions of the time—this writer insisted, with very little "hometown" support, on the core identity of Israel as a worshiping people in the Davidic tradition. And he did it all by writing the book you are about to read. Israel did not finally disappear into the ancient Near East melting pot of violence and sex and religion.

Names launch this story, hundreds and hundreds of names, lists of names, page after page of names, *personal* names. There is no true storytelling without names, and this immersion in names calls attention to the individual, the unique, the personal, which is inherent in all spirituality. Name lists (genealogies) occur in other places in Scripture (Genesis, Numbers, Matthew, Luke) but none as extravagantly copious as here. Holy history is not constructed from impersonal forces or abstract ideas; it is woven from names—persons, each one unique. Chronicles erects a solid defense against depersonalized religion.

And Chronicles provides a witness to the essential and primary place of accurate worship in human

life. The narrative backbone of Chronicles is worship—the place of worship (the Jerusalem Temple), the ministers of worship (the priests and Levites), the musical components of worship (both vocal and instrumental), and the authoritative role of King David, the master of worship, who maintains faithfulness and integrity in worship.

In the way this story of Israel's past is told, nothing takes precedence over worship in nurturing and protecting our identity as a people of God—not politics, not economics, not family life, not art. And nothing in the preparation for and conduct of worship is too small to be left to whim or chance—nothing in architecture, personnel, music, or theology.

Earlier threats to Israel's identity and survival as a people of God frequently came in the form of hostile outsiders—Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, Amalekites, and others; but in this assessment of what matters, right and faithful worship turns out to be what counts most of all. The people of God are not primarily a political entity or a military force or an economic power; they are a holy congregation diligent in worship. To lose touch with the Davidic (and Moses-based) life of worship is to disintegrate as a holy people. To be seduced by the popular pagan worship of the surrounding culture is to be obliterated as a holy people.

Not many readers of this text will find their names in the lists of names in this book. Few worshiping congregations will recognize architectural continuities between The Temple and their local church sanctuaries. Not many communities have access to a pool of Levites from which to recruit choirs and appoint leaders of worship. So, what's left?

Well, worship is left—and names. Accurate worship, defined and fed by the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. And personal names that add up to a people of God, a holy congregation. Christians have characteristically read and prayed themselves into Chronicles in order to stay alert to the irreducibly personal in all matters of faith and practice, and to maintain a critical awareness that the worship of God is the indispensable foundation for living whole and redeemed lives.