

HISTORY & HOLINESS: THE BOOK OF 1 CHRONICLES

Week One: Panorama Of Early History (1 Chronicles 1)

The genealogies and other dry-looking information in 1 Chronicles put off many readers from making a serious effort to study the book. And there is no denying that much of the factual information is, in itself, of very limited usefulness to us today. So one of the challenges involved in studying 1 Chronicles is to step back once in a while, in order to see the broader purpose behind the information that the chronicler has written down for us.

The books of 1 and 2 Chronicles parallel the four-book set of 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, and 2 Kings. Yet the approach in Chronicles is different and more narrowly focused. Chronicles aims to teach us history, but with a particular emphasis on the interaction between history and holiness. The Chronicles account follows history primarily from the perspective of David's family and the tribe of Judah. That family provided the kings of the more faithful half of Israel for several centuries, and that tribe was the ancestor of the Messiah Jesus.

The book begins with a sweeping review of the earliest names in the Bible (1 Chronicles 1:1-27). Some of these persons are still famous, while others have been forgotten and ignored since the day that they passed from this earth. But all of them were part of an important story, and all of them mattered to God. By reciting the names even of obscure persons with no obvious spiritual significance, God emphasizes that he seeks relationships with everyone he has created, whether the world considers them to be important or not.

Then comes the family of Abraham, who holds so much significance both historically and spiritually (1:28-34). An additional reason for following Abraham's family line is to see how God fulfilled the many special promises that he made to the patriarch. Abraham's family started at a time when most men would have been unable to have children, yet his descendants became "as numerous ... as the sand on the seashore". Each of them in turn inherited at least some of the holy promises to Abraham himself.

It may seem odd for the chronicler to make such a lengthy digression to cover the genealogy of Esau's descendants (1:35-54). Although the Edomites (Esau's descendants) followed in Esau's own faithlessness, they were still descendants of Abraham and brothers of the Israelites. They inherited many of the same promises, because God's promises come by grace. And so for centuries God preserved the kingdom of Edom and protected it from harm - sometimes even from Israel. God's promises to the Edomites were holy, even when the Edomites chose not to be.

This bare-bones list of names gives us a sweeping panorama of early Bible history. Some of these names remind us of interesting stories, or of great acts of faith, or sometimes of shameful acts of folly. Two overall lessons stand out above the rest. God's intentions on this earth have always revolved around his desire personally to know the humans that he created and put here. Every soul, whether believer or not, is precious to God. And God's promises are trustworthy. He can point to these names of real human beings to show how his promises have been heard, accepted, passed along, and enjoyed through the centuries.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2012

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Week Two: A Holy Family (1 Chronicles 2:1-4:23)

The books of Chronicles are especially concerned with David's family and the tribe of Judah. This was a holy family, not because of superior morality or outstanding achievement, but because through this family that God would provide leadership, national and spiritual, for so many believers over the centuries. Amongst other lessons, this family helps us understand that holiness has nothing to do with moral superiority, but simply means to belong to God.

After a fast-paced genealogy stretching from Adam all the way to Abraham's grand-children, the chronicler now slows down to describe Judah's descendants in considerable detail (2:1-54). Afterwards he will continue to go through the other tribes of Israel, but Judah gets the first place in his account. As a young man, the tribe's patriarch was an insensitive brute like most of his brothers; yet he grew in maturity and in compassion to the point that his sacrificial love for others moved Joseph to tears.

As with Abraham's family, the names in Judah's line are significant in themselves, whether or not they are known for any personal characteristics or exploits. Judah was the tribe of the kings David and Solomon, and then of the royal line of the more faithful (southern) half of Israel in the following centuries. Even more importantly, Judah's line served as the human ancestors of the Messiah Jesus. All of this makes Judah's genealogy another important reminder of God's faithfulness to his promises.

The line of David also holds special importance, for numerous reasons (3:1-24). David inherited and embodied the promises made to Abraham and to Judah. David lived at times as a king and at times as an outcast, as a rough shadow of the life of Jesus, his distant human descendant.

On the other hand, David's messy family situation, with his numerous sons by various women, reminds us of David's human side, and his complete dependence on God's grace. Even with the Bible's graphic depictions of David's many faults and crimes, we have a tendency to mythologize David instead of realizing how much grace God had to pour out on him. The genealogical record provides at least one reminder of what David's life was really like. David was holy not because he had some special level of righteousness, but because he belonged to God and rejoiced in it.

The other branches of Judah hold lesser importance for the chronicler, but the names of their descendants too are preserved in the chronicle (4:1-23). Alongside David's descendants, the kings, and Jesus' family, there lived many other descendants of Judah, unimportant to us but still precious souls to God. The genealogy here reminds us that the famous and prominent are but a small proportion of the souls in this world. God does not want us to forget Judah's more obscure descendants, and he does not want us to forget anyone alive today, no matter how little the world values him or her. Every soul can be holy, because any soul can belong to God.

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2012*

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Week Three: Generation After Generation (1 Chronicles 4:24-8:40)

The book of 1 Chronicles opens with an extensive genealogical table connecting Adam with Saul, and surveying many centuries of God's efforts to seek humanity. It gives particular prominence to Judah, which produced both the original royal lineage of Israel and also the human ancestry of the Messiah Jesus. While the lengthy lists of unfamiliar names in these chapters may seem pointless, the chronicler is reminding us of the importance to God of every generation and person.

After the account of Judah, the genealogy Israel continues with Simeon, Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh (4:24-5:26). The order of the genealogy deliberately varies from the birth order of the tribal patriarchs. Simeon, the second-born, comes after Judah, and only then comes the first-born Reuben. God was never bound by human rules of inheritance, for he gives everything by grace, not by law. Joseph's two sons were given the family rights of the first-born, while it was Judah whose descendants would lead the nation.

The table for the tribe of Levi has a different focus (6:1-80). For centuries, the Levites shared all of the responsibilities for worship and sacrifice in Israel. The Levites had no land, and no physical inheritance like the other tribes. Instead, each clan and family held certain responsibilities, ranging from sacrifices to preparations to singing and more. Generation after generation, the Levites faithfully served in ways that were often unnoticed and unappreciated. The chronicler names many of these anonymous servants, as a reminder to us of how many faithful believers in every era do things that we may not notice, but that God appreciates.

The remaining tribes are covered more briefly (7:1-40). The chronicler doesn't ignore them, but he has also made the points he wanted to make. All of these tribes were full of men and women whose souls mattered to God whether we know their names or not. Many of them were faithful, many were unfaithful. They all heard God's Word and his promises, and made up their minds whether or not to believe in their hearts. From God's perspective, he sees all this clearly; so he does not overreact to short-term developments the way that we do.

The chronicler does return to provide more detail for Benjamin, the tribe of Israel's first king Saul (8:1-40). Benjamin had a tumultuous history, having nearly become extinct in the time of the Judges. In some respects Saul was typical of his tribe, strong but prone to self-destructive impulses. We do not know much about the other Benjamites listed here, but we do know that they played their small part in Israel's history by preparing the way for Saul.

Generation after generation, new souls came and went on the earth, as they come and go today. The first few chapters of Chronicles record only a fraction of their names. It does not matter to God whether we think these chapters are "boring", for he cared about the faithless and the faithful alike. We cannot see the broad picture the way that God does, but we can remind ourselves once in a while that the world is always full of human beings and their spiritual needs.

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Week Four: Looking Back & Looking Ahead (1 Chronicles 9)

The book of 1 Chronicles starts with a genealogical overview of history up through the time of King Saul, and then proceeds with a more detailed history beginning with David. In the two books of Chronicles, the chronicler will continue this history through the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Although this is the main focus of the books of Chronicles, 2 Chronicles finishes with a brief statement about the return to Judah that began in 538 BC. Here in 1 Chronicles 9, the chronicler provides a transition into his main history by looking both backwards and forwards.

The people of Judah had been taken captive by the pagan Babylonians so that they could rebuild a spiritual identity and a new sense of belonging to the living God; and then they were allowed to begin coming back home (9:1-2). As we read Chronicles, it helps to have an awareness of what will happen over the course of the books. God is well aware that his people will alternate times of faithfulness and times of spiritual struggle - he loves us just as much either way, and he simply plans accordingly for our own good.

When the chronicler lists the families of those who lived in Jerusalem, it is ambiguous whether this is the generation that was exiled or the generation that returned (9:3-9). This could be deliberate, because one of the themes of Chronicles is a spiritual continuity, a continuing holiness of God's people, that transcends generations and events. It is not of special importance whether the particular individuals named in these verses went into exile or returned from exile, because either way they served a worthwhile purpose in God's eyes.

We too can learn from this. Too often we want to believe that there is something especially dramatic or exciting that is in store for our generation, for our own time and place. This is the flesh speaking, not God. Quiet faithfulness is of far greater value to God than it is to humans. Whether it is patient endurance during difficult times or humble gratitude during good times, God appreciates and rejoices over those who faithfully accept their calling.

The next section details the particular Levites who were given various duties, ranging from the priesthood to gatekeeping and many other responsibilities (9:10-34). This echoes the similar details recounted in chapter 6 - over the centuries the various families of Levites each had their particular responsibility, many of them rarely seen or appreciated by the community as a whole. The little bit of recognition that they get in 1 Chronicles, though, is nothing compared with the joy God has in knowing that these families did their jobs year after year, generation after generation, out of simple faith.

To complete the prolog of the book, the Chronicler repeats the genealogy of Saul that was previously given in chapter 8 (9:35-44). The redundancy brings us back to the situation at the start of the book's main narrative, and it re-emphasizes the troubled spiritual situation of the nation during Saul's reign. Centuries of history are already behind, but much more lies ahead.

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Week Five: A Time Of Transition (1 Chronicles 10:1-11:3)

After the extensive genealogies and other historical information, the chronicler now turns to his main historical narrative. Passing over the turbulent reign of Saul, he focuses only on the king's death and the ensuing time of transition for Israel. The chronicler is less interested in the mistakes for which God removed Saul from the throne than he is in the way that Saul's life fits in with God's overall plans and hopes for his holy people.

Saul's tormented life and disappointing reign both end on the field of battle against the Philistines (10:1-7). Sensing his doom, Saul kills himself rather than giving "these uncircumcised fellows" the satisfaction. His sons also die, abruptly ending Israel's first royal line. The terrified Israelites near the battle zone flee, abandoning their homes to the advancing Philistines. It looks as if the once promising era of Saul is ending in disaster - but in reality, it is the start of a better time.

Even after death, Saul's body is subjected to abuse and indignity (10:8-12). The victorious Philistines take both his armor and his head as trophies, using them to decorate the temple of one of their "gods". This kind of barbarous act was considered normal in its time, yet we should not smugly assume that we are superior. Today's "civilized" nations also have a long history of humiliating defeated foes, in ways that are merely a little less bloody or obvious.

Although Saul could be the subject of extensive commentary, the chronicler makes only one terse comment to explain his disastrous end (10:13-14). Saul made no huge strategic mistakes, and he did little that most believers today would consider to be especially sinful. But "he did not keep the word of the Lord" and "did not inquire of the Lord".

Saul simply acted based on the expediency of the moment. The book of 1 Samuel identifies two incidents that led to his removal as king: impulsively offering a sacrifice instead of waiting for Samuel (1 Samuel 13:7-15) and keeping some of the plunder from the Amalekites instead of offering it all as a sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:1-23). Both times, Saul's mistake was to misuse holy things - things that belonged to God. This may not seem as bad as David's acts of murder and adultery, but to God it is a more fundamental problem. God seeks humility above perfection, and in his own holiness he says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6).

Meanwhile, God has already long before arranged for the start of a new era in Israel by preparing David to become king (11:1-3). David had numerous flaws of his own, but he understood the meaning and importance of holiness. He would never doubt that he belonged to God, and when confronted with his sins he would acknowledge them and confess them.

To the Israelites, David's significance came from his famous defeat of Goliath and from his other military exploits; but even though they looked only on the surface, at least this time they were in accord with God's will. David is made king at Hebron - Jerusalem did not yet belong to Israel; but in fact this would be one of David's early accomplishments. A new era was beginning.

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Week Six: The Era Of David Begins (1 Chronicles 11:4-12:40)

Saul's death in battle against the Philistines was a temporary setback for Israel, but it prepared the way for a new era. God had already prepared David to become Israel's new king, and the new ruler got off to a fast and successful start. David proved popular with all kinds of different persons, and the early years of his reign held considerable promise.

One of David's most legendary successes was to capture the fortified city of Jerusalem, which had been held by the Jebusites since before the time of Joshua (11:4-11:9). The Jebusites had seen many generations of Israelites prove incapable of dislodging them from their stronghold, and so they had become self-confident and boastful. But David ignores their taunts. Using both strength and strategy, he takes the city and makes it the new royal residence (replacing Hebron). Like so many other humans, the Jebusites are let down by their own pride.

Part of David's influence as king stemmed from the famous "mighty men" who surrounded him and added to his mystique (11:10-47). The chronicler details some of their most renowned feats of strength and bravery; and one anecdote in particular tells us a great deal about their relationship with David.

Once when David had been fighting near Bethlehem, he expressed an offhand wish to drink from a familiar old well. The three most famous "mighty men" take this as a special commission, and risk death to bring him a cup of water from the well. For his part, David is so moved that they risked their lives for him that he does not feel right drinking the water - instead he pours it out on the ground as a unique type of sacrifice. Even though most of these "mighty men" were mere roughnecks with little appreciation for David's spiritual qualities, David's ability to form such devoted friendships undoubtedly came in large part because of his own closeness with God.

In fact, even before David became king, he had attracted a sizable entourage of warriors and adventure seekers (12:1-22). Even when David was officially declared an outlaw because of Saul's jealousy, large numbers of men from around the kingdom preferred to follow David rather than the king. Many of them came from Saul's own tribe of Benjamin, doubly emphasizing the level of mutual respect that David was able to establish with those who met him.

Once David was made king, he drew an even more impressive measure of support (12:23-40). The chronicler gives the numbers of men who came from each tribe, emphasizing the widespread acclaim for the new king. Most of these fighting men came to Hebron without prompting, solely because what they knew about David made them ready and eager to see him made their king.

To be sure, both then and now military strength is overpraised. But a great deal of David's ability to command such loyalty does seem to have come from something deeper than physical strength or even military accomplishments. Whether they realized it for what it was or not, a lot of these persons seem in their own way to have sensed the presence of God in David's heart.

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Week Seven: Joy & Responsibility (1 Chronicles 13)

King David often addressed situations that Saul and Israel's other leaders had ignored. Decades previously, the Philistines had captured the ark of the covenant; and though the Philistines found the ark too much to handle and returned it, it had been left unattended in Kireath Jearim. So David's decision to bring it back was widely applauded - but the time of joy would be brief.

David's focus on holy things motivated him to bring back the ark (13:1-3). While other Israelites saw the ark as a lucky charm or a mysterious relic, David knew that it represented the presence of God. David was no theologian, and his understanding of the ark was purely personal, not doctrinal or even historical. A more complete awareness of God is of course desirable - and we shall see that David overlooked some important things. But David was a 'man after God's own heart' because to him God was above all personal.

The Israelites celebrate the occasion unrestrainedly (13:4-8). They are having a great time, and they are doing so in the name of the Lord - yet in their excitement they are ignoring the responsibilities that come with being holy. Joy in itself is never bad, for God likes his creations to enjoy and appreciate the blessings he gives them. The problem is not with expressing joy, but in doing so without taking the corresponding responsibility.

Indeed, an unexpected disaster occurs (13:9-11). One of the men guiding the cart holding the ark sees the ark start to slip and reaches down to steady it. It seems like a helpful thought - yet he is instantly struck dead for touching the holy ark. The excitement and fun stop abruptly, replaced with fear. It seems unfair, but it happened for a reason; and it holds lessons for us.

Later (chapter 15), David realizes what they did wrong: the law prescribed a specific way to transport the ark, and this would have prevented the mishap. But note that they were not 'punished' for 'breaking a rule'. The directions in the law for transporting the ark, like everything God tells us, were designed to make sure that God's presence can be a blessing and a joy to us, rather than a threat. Making and following rules for rules' sake is pointless, but living as God calls us to live protects us from unnecessary spiritual risks. Holy things require respect.

Even though David has made a mistake in letting his joy cause him to forget the responsibilities that come with holiness, he nonetheless sees the situation clearly, and he realizes what matters most (13:12-14). He is disturbed that he may not be able to bring the ark any closer, because he knows that with the ark God's presence is nearer. And indeed, while David rethinks what to do with the ark, the family with whom it resides is blessed just because it is near them.

God's presence brings both joy and responsibility. Today we do not have to worry about disaster coming from touching the wrong thing. But we carry around with us the presence of God, and it should not be taken lightly. What happened to Uzzah reminds us of the importance of acting and thinking with the grace of Christ, not to fulfill our own agendas or to satisfy our own desires.

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Week Eight: King David (1 Chronicles 14)

David was a man of contrasts. He killed many men in battle, yet he valued God's holiness above all. He could be insensitive and selfish, especially towards women; yet he could also notice the subtlest signs of God's presence. He could make grave errors of judgment, yet express the deepest and most spiritual thoughts in his psalms. Throughout his reign, there is often little consistency, with one important exception: he was always aware of God's presence in his life.

David's renown spread even to neighboring kingdoms such as Tyre (14:1-2). The king of Tyre has little awareness of God's presence, yet he lavishes valuable gifts on David because of David's earthly successes. Significantly, David understands the real reason for this, and he does not make the mistake of seeing himself in worldly terms. He knows that his personal fame is only a means for God to bless all of Israel - God's blessings are meant to be shared.

Despite his spiritual qualities, David frequently took objectionable liberties in his personal life, a habit that later would cause considerable harm both to him and to the nation (14:3-7). For the moment, David's numerous wives and children are a source of pride to a nation that seeks its king primarily in worldly terms. The chronicler does not repeat the children David had before becoming king - those were listed in 3:1-4 (14:4-7 parallels the list in 3:5-9). As with all of us, famous and obscure, it can take years before the full impact of our spiritual flaws becomes clear.

On the other hand, David's ongoing campaign against the Philistines illustrates why God was so eager to make him king in the first place (14:8-17). While the Israelites (and for that matter their enemies) saw only David's victories, to God what mattered was the way that David so carefully sought out God's guidance in everything that he did. Each time that the Philistines attack Israel, David does not react angrily or impulsively. Instead, he discusses the situation with God and allows God to determine his course of action.

On the first occasion, God simply tells David to go into battle with the promise of victory. But the next time, God tells him to pursue a plan different from David's original intention. Both of these examples will find parallels in our own experience when God answers our own prayers. When we ask God for guidance, it is best to allow him to choose whether to attend to the details or simply to give us a general indication of which way we should go.

Nor is it important for us to know how God 'spoke' to David; for both then and now God has many ways of making his will known. What matters is for us to seek God's will and to pray to him, allowing him to answer when and how he pleases. God does not expect it always to be simple for us to discern his will. The process of becoming attuned to God's words, of listening for his gentle whisper, is in itself of even greater value than the earthly help he provides.

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Week Nine: The Ark Finally Comes Back (1 Chronicles 15 & 16)

After David's first attempt to bring back the ark of the covenant ended in an abrupt disaster, the ark sat idly for several months. But David did not forget about it. Holy things were important to him, and he understood the ark's importance in a way that most other Israelites could not. He is now ready to try again, and this time he has learned some valuable lessons about holiness.

It appears that David had never lost the intention of bringing the ark to Jerusalem (15:1-2). Since the calamity with his first attempt, he had been busy with other construction in Jerusalem; but now that he has completed his other projects he is eager to resolve the ark's status. And in the meantime he has developed a better understanding of the ark's significance. Apparent spiritual failure never has to be the end. There are always things we can learn for the future.

David's more careful plans this time show what he has learned (15:3-15). He has taken the time to learn the properly prescribed way of carrying the ark, but the rule in itself is not the key to understanding the situation. God does not make rules for rules sake, either then or now. Rather, the things God tells us to do (or tells us not to do) are for the purpose of keeping us spiritually safe. They help us to avoid a lot of dangerous situations.

When we follow what God teaches us, it makes it much easier for him to remain close to us and to protect our hearts. We may still end up in danger from worldly threats, but our souls are always safe - and moreover, when we are in the habit of humbly following God's will, it also makes it much easier for him to alert us even to the worldly hazards. On the other hand, when we choose to ignore or reject God's words, he does not punish us for this. But we needlessly endanger ourselves when we don't pay attention to God.

And so this time, because they have been more careful with their plans and have allowed God to guide them rather than merely indulging their emotions, the occasion can now be one of undiminished joy (15:16-29). David's improved understanding also brings joy to others participating in the celebration. He makes sure that a prominent role goes to Obed-Edom, in whose home the ark had remained after the first return was abandoned. The only negative note is that one of David's wives, Saul's daughter Michal, resents the joy that she sees. We too should always remember to "rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn."

With the ark now in its own place, David next arranges for an ongoing ministry of praise and thanks (16:1-6, 16:37-43). The king also offers his own special praise for this special occasion (16:7-36). While the sentiments he expresses are at first glance somewhat generic, they also represent a constant awareness of God's presence, which in itself is more important than any other specific blessing. And David has seen to it that the praise will continue beyond this special occasion. We should not need a special occasion or a motivational talk to help us to appreciate God's presence, because knowing him is in itself a constant blessing of immeasurable value.

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Week Ten: David's Relationship With God (1 Chronicles 17)

Because of David's persistence in learning about holy things, the ark of the covenant finally came to Jerusalem after a long period of neglect. Yet David sensed that there was still more that should be done. As it happens, his dream of building a temple was not what God desired. David accepted this, and we can see in his acceptance another aspect of his relationship with God.

David wishes to build a temple to house the ark, and his reasoning is simple (17:1-2). He sees the contrast between his own luxurious palace and the simple tent that holds the ark; and though God will direct him otherwise, David's focus on holy things again reminds us to pay more attention to spiritual reality of than to the ways that events affect our interests in this world.

The story takes a twist when God reveals to the prophet Nathan that he has a different plan in mind for the temple (17:3-10a). God mentions some things that neither of these faithful believers had thought of. Although God appreciated their eagerness to take good care of the ark, God himself had never asked for lavish housing for it. God's presence does not dwell only where there is luxury and wealth; so God never minded having his ark sit in a humble tent.

Then also, God's plans for David were specific, and they did not include David being the one to build a temple. God used David to strengthen Israel and to force Israel's enemies to respect the young nation - but this required the use of force, which in itself is something God does not enjoy. And so, as is confirmed in 1 Chronicles 28:3, all the blood that David shed made it inappropriate for him to build a temple to God, even though David had done this in service to God. God has always used different believers for different purposes, and not even a David can do everything.

Any disappointment David may feel is tempered by the further news God gives him about the future (17:10b-14). God plans to give no lack of blessing both to David and to David's family. And to answer David's specific desire, God assures him that his own son will be a man of peace who will be well-suited to erect the temple that David dreams of. And that will only be the start, because long after Solomon there will be much more waiting for David's descendants.

When David hears the prophet's report, his response is worthy of someone called "a man after God's own heart" (17:15-27). He is able not only to accept the fact that God will not allow him to fulfill his original dream, but also that the greatest blessings for his family will not be poured out until many years after David himself is gone from this earth. Both his humility and his long-term perspective are greatly needed in today's church of Jesus Christ.

All too often we fixate on our personal 'dreams', and we assume that God wants them because we can support them with human logic. David's example reminds us that we only know one certainty about God's will for us personally - he wants us to know him and to live in his presence. Anything else we must accept by grace, and we should be willing to adapt as God wills us to.

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Week Eleven: David's Years Of Success (1 Chronicles 18-19)

With the ark established in Jerusalem, God's numerous assurances about the future, and nearly universal popular support, David's situation could hardly be better. He has success in everything he does, whether in war or in peace. He continues to enjoy God's blessings as he continues to do the work God had desired for him, which in turn brings God's blessings to all of Israel.

God gives David a long string of victories, not merely to bless him but because the victories bring needed discipline to oppressors and blessed relief to the oppressed (18:1-10). The region had long endured a chaotic situation in which the Philistines, Moabites, and other aggressive kingdoms had made a habit of raiding and distressing their more peaceful neighbors.

Although God has just told David (in the previous chapter) that he was not the man to build the temple, primarily because David had shed so much blood, God nevertheless used David's combination of faithfulness and military skills to redress some long-standing injustices and other ills. We can see here (verses 9-10) one example of a neighboring king who showers David with thanks because David has brought relief the other king's people.

Moreover, David made sure to keep his perspective, sharing the glory of victory and reminding himself that his success was due to God alone (18:11-17). He dedicates the profits from his battles to God; and he also takes numerous steps to see that all the responsibilities of the kingdom, ranging from the administrative necessities to the details of worship, are handled by responsible persons and are managed in an appropriate manner.

But a difficult challenge arises in the form of the aggressive Ammonites and their allies the Arameans (19:1-7). David had carefully established good relations with the Ammonites, but now a new Ammonite king deliberately insults David and Israel by needlessly humiliating David's emissaries of goodwill. The Ammonites did this to signal their hostility to Israel, as a prelude to amassing a large army in preparation for attacking Israel.

Yet what shaped up to be an epic struggle turns out to be an easy victory for Israel, by God's grace (19:8-19). David's commanders are careful not to be drawn into battle prematurely, and they turn the impulsiveness of the Ammonites and the Arameans against them. The Arameans, in particular, are so distressed by the defeat that they make a permanent change in their policy, turning away from their alliance with Ammon and instead seeking peace with Israel.

Sadly, just after this things will start to go downhill for David, as his own character flaws come out in some very harmful ways. But during his years of success, God was able to use David, just as he was, to benefit both Israel and others. Long after David's reign had taken a wrong turn, the nation still remembered these good days, and honored their famous king.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2012

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HISTORY & HOLINESS: THE BOOK OF 1 CHRONICLES

Week Twelve: David Goes Astray (1 Chronicles 20-21)

How often does someone seem to have everything one could desire, and yet just then make an enormous mistake. This now happens to David - he makes two awful blunders that turn his reign from a golden era into a time of trouble. The chronicler focuses on one particular mistake that caused considerable suffering and loss in Israel; yet we are not meant to condemn David - it is one of Scripture's reminders of human frailty and of our universal need for God's mercy.

David's trouble begins when he sends his army off to battle while he himself remains safe in his palace (20:1-3). The campaign is successful, but this time David gladly accepts the plunder and glory without taking any of the risk. Whatever we may think of David's eagerness to engage in war, he usually took exactly the same risks that he asked his men to take. But this time he acts like many present-day 'leaders', grabbing credit and reward for what others, not he, have done.

The chronicler does not mention - possibly because his audience already knew - that during this campaign David committed adultery with Uriah's wife and then conspired to have the loyal Uriah killed (compare 20:1-3 with 2 Samuel 11:1 and 12:30-31). For whatever reason, this was a time of spiritual deterioration for David, and his selfish behavior regarding the spoils of battle was really only a symptom of the more serious sins he had temporarily concealed.

Yet God continues to use David to protect Israel (20:4-8). David and his trusted associates continue their feats of bravery whenever Israel is threatened. God does not "make David lose"; for God cares about all the people. At the same time, David's success does not justify him - for God can continue to work through us even when we too are struggling. David's successes (like ours) are an act of grace upon the people, not an unqualified endorsement of David personally.

But now David makes an even bigger mistake, with his insistence on taking a detailed census of his subjects (21:1-15). His presumption in wanting to measure the exact force at his command is distasteful even to his brutish army commander Joab. David is taking a holy thing - God's people - and turning it into a source of human pride. His mistake is also a caution to us.

Other censuses of Israel were taken with God's approval, but they were for different purposes. Under the Levitical system, the need for regular redemptive sacrifices sometimes involved balancing the counts of other tribes compared to the Levites, or the counting of the firstborn of Israel so that they could be redeemed by sacrifice. But David's census - like so much of the fixation with numbers in today's churches - was motivated solely by curiosity and/or ego.

Too late, David sees his mistake and is spiritually crushed by the realization (21:16-30). Because David, the Lord's anointed, has debased a holy thing, Israel is struck with a deadly plague. Yet David does soon realize what he has done - he responds with humility and accepts the responsibility. Great damage has been done, but at least he will no longer view his kingdom as a means to fulfill his personal ambitions and desires.

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HISTORY & HOLINESS: THE BOOK OF 1 CHRONICLES

Week Thirteen: Preparations For The Future (1 Chronicles 22)

Even as King David tries to recover from his own foolish and harmful blunders, he is thinking of the future. He has derailed his personal life by committing adultery and murder, and he has caused great harm to the nation with his prideful insistence on taking a census - but true to God's description of him as "a man after God's own heart", David now returns to God while also thinking of what he can do for others.

Now thinking about the good of others rather than fulfilling his own desires, David realizes what a precarious situation he might leave for his son Solomon, and he takes important steps to help his successor (22:1-5). Knowing that it is God's desire for Solomon to build the temple, David makes several practical arrangements so that Solomon will have a head start when the time comes. David stockpiles some necessary materials and hires workmen to stand ready.

Then David passes along to Solomon what God had told him about the desires God held for Solomon's coming reign (22:6-13). The old king explains that he has been a man of war, largely out of necessity, and that he thus is not the right choice to build the temple. Solomon's call is different - God wants him to be a man of peace who will lead the nation in a time of rest.

David knows that practical arrangements and spiritual principles are always intertwined in the real world. By having so much of the project prepared in advance, he is allowing Solomon the chance to develop a relationship with God that will help him keep a spiritual focus on the temple construction as well as his other responsibilities. We can apply the same principle in our own ministries, for it is often necessary to help others with purely practical needs before they can be asked to turn their focus to developing a better awareness of God's will and God's presence.

The arrangements that David has made will help Solomon get off to a good start when the time comes for him to build the temple; but they will also confer a responsibility on the future king (22:14-16). It will be a reminder of God's presence and providence, while also reminding Solomon that he has been given this responsibility to fulfill with all diligence. "From the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48). It is a call for us also to notice the responsibilities that God has conferred on us through his lavish blessings.

Moreover, David has not left Solomon to undertake this project all by himself; for David takes pains to prepare the rest of the nation for the things God has called Solomon to do when he becomes king (22:17-19). No one person can ever do all that God asks; and even our own individual ministries depend on the help of others more than we usually acknowledge. God desires Solomon's reign not to be a time when a single great king is exalted, but rather a time when the nation works together in peace and in gratitude for God's blessings.

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HISTORY & HOLINESS: THE BOOK OF 1 CHRONICLES

Week Fourteen: The Levites & The Priests (1 Chronicles 23-24)

The tribe of Levi has conducted ministry amongst the Israelites for centuries, yet David recognizes a need for a confirmation and elaboration of their specific responsibilities. There is a natural tendency for needs to change and new problems to arise over time, and David also foresees how the building of the temple will bring with it some changes in Israel's worship.

David's makes a basic distinction between the Levities who will be involved with the new ministries of the temple and those who will assume or continue in other responsibilities (23:1-5). There was nothing wrong with the existing arrangements, but David realizes that the new temple will bring with it many new responsibilities and will change some of the old ones. And so it simply makes sense to take a new look at the Levites and their ministries, with the future in mind.

Even in making changes to the Levites' responsibilities, David preserves the centuries-old plan of organizing the Levities by clan, based on Levi's three sons (23:6-23). For many generations, the Gershonites, Kohathites and Merarites had followed the examples of their ancestors, knowing what their general responsibilities were and what they would be in the future. Since this has always worked smoothly, David sees no reason to alter a worthwhile and comfortable practice.

At the same time, David and the Levites both recognize that there were some basic differences between the original Levitical ministry and the (then) present, when the ark of God had found a permanent resting place in Jerusalem (23:24-32). Even while waiting for the temple to be built, they can already adapt their ministry based on the ark now remaining in one location - for example, no one has to worry about transporting the ark any longer. When things change, we too do well to re-evaluate our outward practices, for we shall often find better ways to serve God.

Another part of the re-organization of Levi involved the priests who would be entering inside the new temple (24:1-19). The basic responsibilities of the priests will be exactly the same - the interesting step that David takes is to have their updated responsibilities assigned by lot. When the temple is built, there could easily arise a sense of competition or entitlement with regards to the ministries centered on the temple. David heads that off before the temple is even built, relieving his son and the Levites themselves of some potentially thorny disputes.

Lots are also used in assigning responsibilities for the rest of the Levites (24:20-31). In this we see both David's foresight and the humble acceptance of the Levites. Modern Americans tend to scoff at or be offended by such things, but without good reason. In our competitive pride, we equate position and authority with talent and ability; and we think that leaders have 'earned' (or should 'earn') their positions - but where did those talents come from?

Our talents and abilities themselves were distributed by God's grace. None of us earned them, and we deserve no special reward for them. There is no reason not to enjoy these blessings, but we should also share them freely rather than seeing them as a sign of superiority.

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HISTORY & HOLINESS: THE BOOK OF 1 CHRONICLES

Week Fifteen: Praise & Protection (1 Chronicles 25:1-27:24)

Besides carefully re-organizing the responsibilities of the Levites and priests, David has other things he wants to do before he goes. In his earnest desire to leave his son as stable a realm as possible, David arranges for the defense of Jerusalem and of Israel. Moreover, in keeping with his role as the great writer of psalms, he takes steps to institute an ongoing ministry of praise and song. To a large degree all this reflects David's own distinctive role in Israel's history.

In his next steps, David works to ensure a healthy ongoing ministry of praise and prophecy (25:1-31). The chronicler describes these plans in surprising detail, enumerating the many persons involved and indicating that David once again assigned specific responsibilities by casting lots. "Young and old alike, teacher as well as student, cast lots for their duties." As with the duties of the priests and Levites, these will all be given entirely by grace.

Next, the king devotes the same detail-oriented care to the assignment of gatekeepers for Jerusalem (26:1-19). This is a more important responsibility than it may seem at first, because in an ancient city the gates were the key both to defense and to commerce. A good gatekeeper had to use good judgment and to remain alert at all times.

The chronicler tells us not only the names of the gatekeepers but also the plans they devise to ensure that each gate will be thoroughly watched at all times. David plans for them to work in small groups rather than as individuals, to maximize their watchfulness and coordination. These arrangements again can provide us with a spiritual example to consider in our own ministries.

The same care needed to be applied in the management of Israel's treasury and other material goods (26:20-32). When God used David to protect Israel and to bring discipline to powerful nations who tried to oppress others, Israel's victories often brought in considerable plunder. Most of the time David faithfully devoted this to God's service, and apparently a large treasury has now built up from the unused portions.

In the description of David's arrangements for administering Israel's material wealth, the chronicler also tells us that David took note of the wealth accumulated under Samuel and Saul, and that the king made sure that everything belonging to the nation was put under a common administration so that God's will would be considered in every decision made with it.

Then David also uses this occasion to re-organize the officers in Israel's army (27:1-24). One of the recurring problems during David's reign - described in much more detail in 2 Samuel than in 1 Chronicles - was that Joab and some of the other army commanders often took matters into their own hands, making rash or violent decisions that harmed others and the nation. This was in large part due to David's own weakness, but now he seems to have realized the need for reform. The re-organization of the army decentralizes the command and establishes a more regular rotation for leadership, wisely limiting the influence of any one person.

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HISTORY & HOLINESS: THE BOOK OF 1 CHRONICLES

Week Sixteen: Preparing For The Future (1 Chronicles 27:25-28:21)

In his later years as king, David never stopped thinking about what things would be like after he was gone. He continued to do everything possible to leave Solomon with a stable kingdom and with well-defined spheres of responsibility: in building the temple, in worship, in the city of Jerusalem, and throughout Israel. David's own path to the kingship was dangerous and difficult, but he is determined to make things much easier for his son.

The wide range of tasks that David pursues shows how thoroughly he has thought about the coming reign of Solomon (27:25-34). The chronicler's latest summary focuses on agriculture and economics, showing us David's awareness that even such mundane aspects of life depend on God's grace, and thus call for us to accept some spiritual responsibility. The detail in some of these assignments also show us how well the king has come to know his kingdom.

Next David wants to make sure that not just Solomon himself, but also the whole nation, is aware of God's plans for the next king (28:1-8). He assembles the people and reminds them of their history and of their many blessings. He is grateful for his own blessings, and he never forgets where they came from.

David humbly repeats to the nation God's decision that he will not be able to build the temple because of his military involvement. He describes God's desires for Solomon's reign, and he calls upon the people to do their part. He confirms that Solomon is God's choice both to rule the kingdom and also to direct the building of the temple. Therefore their support of Solomon as king will simply be part of their faithfulness to God himself.

David's charge to Solomon himself emphasizes the need above all to stay close to God personally (28:9-10). Solomon will be blessed with an enviable position. Unlike David, he will start off with a united, prosperous nation behind him. His father will leave him with everything he needs for success. None of this is because Solomon is better or more spiritual than anyone else - it is an expression of God's grace and love, both for the young king and for his people. The best way for Solomon to show gratitude for his blessings will be to stay close to God, to listen to God, and to let God guide him. He already knows much of what God will ask him to do.

When the king proceeds to detail for his son the advance arrangements he has made for building the temple, David continues to keep things firmly within the context of serving God and seeking God's will (28:11-21). In particular, he repeatedly reminds the future king of the source of all the material wealth that will be used for the temple. The materials David has stockpiled have been given to God for his purposes, and are not ever to be used for Solomon's personal benefit.

Even though David will have done everything possible to give his son a head start, building the temple will still be a big job. And so David continually exhorts Solomon not only to work hard, but also always to remember whom he is really working for.

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HISTORY & HOLINESS: THE BOOK OF 1 CHRONICLES

Week Seventeen: Another Time Of Transition (1 Chronicles 29)

In this world, change in itself is neither good nor bad - it is merely inevitable. The time has now come for David to pass from the scene, and for a new era to begin, for better or for worse. The old king knows this, and he even seems in a sense to be looking forward to it, for he knows that until he passes away the temple cannot be built. And so he spends his last days looking to the future and leaving behind whatever a new generation might be able to use and learn from.

As a final practical step for the building of the temple, David inspires the Israelites to follow his own example in donating valuable metals and other useful materials (29:1-9). The temple will be both holy and practical. It will belong to God, yet in a sense it will belong to the whole nation. By encouraging everyone to give something for the building of the temple, David is not only taking a practical step, but is also helping the people to develop a personal connection with it.

In David's final appearance before the nation, he reminds them to keep their hearts focused first and foremost on God (29:10-20). He broadens the perspective, looking far beyond his reign and even beyond Solomon's reign. The building of the temple and other contemporary matters, no matter how newsworthy or important in their own time, fade into insignificance when compared with the spiritual benefits of a lasting relationship with God.

David's final message reminds everyone of God's extraordinary grace and compassion. David's own blessings, the blessings the nation would have under his son, the blessings we have today, all come by grace alone from the hand of a God who loves to show his people that he cares for them. None of our blessings can ever be earned or deserved - and if we can accept and understand this, then we won't be so tempted to compare ourselves with each other or with those of other times and places - we can simply and humbly enjoy what God has graciously given us.

With God's blessing and with his father's practical arrangements in place, Solomon can begin his reign with an outpouring of support and with expectations of a promising future (29:21-25). For the time being, Solomon has inherited not only David's throne but also the enormous reservoir of goodwill and respect that David had built up from the people. It will now be up to Solomon to remember that his blessings came by grace, not because he deserved them.

And so it is time for David to pass from the earthly scene forever (29:26-30). Ahead lie all kinds of events both good and bad. Solomon will have some great moments, and he will make some awful mistakes. The nation will at times love and revere him, and will at times hate and resent him. Both Solomon and the nation will learn a lot about each other, about themselves, and about God. David will no longer have any influence or control, and he knows this. Each of us can only do so much, and then we must allow divine grace to make up for the failings of human free will as the future relentlessly unfolds.

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