

God keeps his promises...and how to get better at keeping ours

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First a reminder of how to read, interpret and apply the Historical books of the Bible

- Condensed advice from How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth
- The Old Testament narratives record what happened
- Not necessarily what should or ought to have happened
- They do not teach doctrine and frequently do not state applications
- WE are supposed to be able to do that from explicitly teaching passages – and in this lesson I'll make suggestions of applications
- In the stories leading up to the exile, we saw how the people broke their covenant with God and the Bible assumes that we have read the specifics of it in the books that record God's Law
- "In the final analysis, God is the hero of all biblical narratives."
- The central characters always have flaws (some more obvious than others), but God's plan and His grace prevails

After lessons of judgement, finally we come to one of Joy!

- Psalm 126 NLT, written to commemorate the return from captivity sums it up well:
- ¹When the Lord brought back his exiles to Jerusalem,
it was like a dream!
- ²We were filled with laughter,
and we sang for joy.
And the other nations said,
"What amazing things the Lord has done for them."
- ³Yes, the Lord has done amazing things for us!
What joy!
- ⁴Restore our fortunes, Lord,
as streams renew the desert.
- ⁵Those who plant in tears
will harvest with shouts of joy.

⁶They weep as they go to plant their seed,
but they sing as they return with the harvest.

Story told in Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther

- Ezra and Nehemiah, originally one book
- Main author Ezra, though obviously parts of Nehemiah were first written by him
- Book of Ezra starts before Ezra is personally involved and later as the book of Nehemiah shows, he and Nehemiah worked together
- What we don't see in our English Bible is that Esther takes place in the middle of the book of Ezra (we'll discuss the details later)
- Here is a great chart for that

Let's look at the history in more details

- First punishment, with a limit
 - *This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.*
 - *"But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt," declares the Lord, "and will make it desolate forever.*
Jeremiah 25:11-12
- And after the 70 years were over (which Daniel realized reading Jeremiah) ,
Babylon was destroyed and the people returned to their land

But the prophecies were even more exact

- 150 years earlier, the Prophet Isaiah said:
- I am the Lord,
the Maker of all things,
.....
- who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,'
of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be rebuilt,'
and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,'

²⁷ who says to the watery deep, 'Be dry, and I will dry up your streams,'
²⁸ who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid."'

Precisely on schedule.....

- **Story told in Ezra & Nehemiah**
- In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing:
- ² "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:
- ***"The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. ³ Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. ⁴ And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem."* Ezra 1:1-4**
- Freedom to go back and the money to do it
- Plus he gave them the items from the Temple that had been taken

Not only Biblical account

Cyrus cylinder

Records his decree to rebuild

So the people return (but not all)

- Leadership
- Zerubbabel—descendant of David, would have been king
- See him mentioned later in the lineage of Joseph in Matt. 1:13
- Priestly leader Jeshua

They get to the land

- And soon after begin to build the Temple
- It was a scary situation, still surrounded by enemies
- They started to build, worshipped, reinstated sacrifices
- "Despite their fear of the people around them"
- But when the foundations were laid Ezra 3:11-13 New International Version (NIV)
- *With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord:*
- *"He is good;*
- *his love toward Israel endures forever."*
- *And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. ¹² But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. ¹³ No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.*
- Ezra 3:11-13 (NIV)

Application moment

- REALLY.....
- God did an extraordinary work, prophesied 150 years earlier
- People allowed to return to their land and given silver, gold, all that had been robbed from them
- Still had legitimate leaders
- And what is their response of some—whine and complain
- "It isn't what they had before; isn't what they expected."
- Ingratitude is a terrible sin; so is voicing disappointment over God's gifts
- But God gracious and patient
- Challenge to us: Think about it—how hard it is for us when we aren't thanked and what we give so small
- How sad when we don't overflow with thanks to our God who gives us EVERYTHING!
- So STOP whining and be thankful!
- It is something we can train ourselves to do

Perhaps in part because of that ingratitude

- Enemies threats get the best of them and the work stops
- Enemies write to the king to get the work to stop
- And not only does Darius respond and remind the enemies of Israel that the Kings decree to rebuild stands, but he requires them to pay for it!
- And yet 15 years go by....the people get distracted.....
- Haggai and Zechariah begin to preach (their messages in the following weeks and they are good ones)

And now, like a movie the scene shifts

- Though you wouldn't know it from the order of the books in our Bibles
- We are now back with the people who have been taken captive, but the scene shifts to Susa capitol of Empire of the Medes & Persians
- Shows the Jewish people had scattered throughout the empire, settled, and were quite comfortable
- Many did not go back to the land of Israel
- But God didn't forget them as we see in the book of Esther

Book opens with an extravagant banquet

- *This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush^[b]: ² At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, ³ and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.*
- *⁴ For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. ⁵ When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa. Esther 1:1-5*
- The king orders Queen Vashti to appear, she

refuses and loses her position as queen
The king's attendants then suggest that a search for "beautiful young virgins" be undertaken and that the one who pleases the king most be made queen

Time for reality check

- The story of Esther, neither a romance or feministic fable
- The Ruler Xerxes, incredibly powerful, would have had a large harem of wives, concubines
- Esther not a modern-day woman with a freedom of choice
- Some very bad commentaries on this that ignore history
- Shows how in the most challenging of circumstances, one still has opportunities to obey and be used of God

Her story

She is an orphan, raised by her uncle Mordecai
⁵ Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, ⁶ who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. ⁷ Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died. Esther 2:5-7
Was his ANCESTOR who was taken to Babylon in second deportation when Ezekiel was taken (597) otherwise Mordecai would be over 100 years old when story starts
Esther is seized as part of the round up of beautiful woman, she didn't volunteer
When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. ⁹ She pleased him and won his favor. Esther 2:8-9
Favor—reminds us of Daniel

She also found favor with the King and he made her Queen
Royal women of the time would have had their own living area, servants, wealth—but no freedom

Esther is now Queen and a Villain comes on the scene

Esther is queen Mordecai stays close and overhears a plot against the king
He tells Esther, who gets a message to the king, while giving credit to Mordecai
Now.....the Villain—
Haman was an Agagite and the son of Hammedatha. Haman was likely a descendent of Agag, king of the Amalekites, long-time enemies of the Jewish people. God had told King Saul to destroy the Amalekites centuries earlier (1 Samuel 15:3), but Saul failed to obey the command. His disobedience led to the loss of his kingdom and, in Esther's time, the threat of annihilation for all Jews. (from Got Questions)
Application note: the results of incomplete obedience can be greater than we can imagine

Haman hates it that Mordecai won't bow to him

So he decides to not only kill him, but all his people
He goes in to talk to the king about it and the king foolishly agrees
Mordecai tells Esther and gives her this challenge:
"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴ For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

God determines the time and places of our lives

From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. Acts 17:26
We are living where we are and at the time we

are for God's reasons

Our challenge, what does He want us to do here and now?

Her response

¹⁵ Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶ "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."
She goes to the king and he holds out his Golden Scepter
She invites him and Haman to a banquet

Haman's plot foiled

At a second banquet Haman's plot is disclosed
He is executed
The Jews can fight for their lives and are victorious

Origin of Jewish festival of Purim

Esther 9:20-22 New International Version (NIV)
Purim Established
²⁰ Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, ²¹ to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar ²² as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.
Celebrated today as a joyful holiday
BACK to the story....

After this another group returns to Israel under Ezra

Perhaps some realized they weren't as safe as they thought they were in Persia
Ezra leads a group back
Ezra was sent by Artaxerxes (Ruler after Xerxes and the king of the book of Nehemiah also) with silver, gold, provisions to govern and to

teach

And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them. ²⁶ Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment. Ezra 7:25-26

Goes to Jerusalem

Finds that the people had sinned by intermarriage with pagans
The same sin that got them in trouble in the first place
Needed to be made right.....
But before that
Another leader comes on the scene

Nehemiah

Cupbearer to the king Artaxerxes
Hears that the people in Jerusalem are in “great trouble and distress”
The walls of the city are broken down
His heart is touched and he asks the king to do something about it

Application

He was comfortable
He was far away from the problem
But he felt he had to personally do something about it
And he did
Prayed, asked and then took specific actions
FOR US: it isn't enough to simply feel bad about situations and though we can't personally do something about every situation, we can always pray and do something more actively if God asks us to

He did so much more than rebuild the ways

- For 12 years served as governor
- Fearless in the sight of continuous opposition, physical threats
- Rebuilt the wall in 52 days, but stayed
- Rebuilt the spiritual and social lives of the

people

- Made sure there was social justice and economic equality among the people
- He personally modeled care for the people and not benefitting from his position
- Encouraged revival with the teaching of Ezra
- Over saw the dissolution of the marriages to pagan wives

Many great lessons, one of my favorites

In the process of rebuilding the wall, lists different people doing different things and then this:

*Above the Horse Gate, the priests made repairs, **each in front of his own house.** Nehemiah 3:28*

Application: as we work to build up the Kingdom of God, we can each do work on what is right in front of us

Don't worry about winning the world, but work hard to win your neighbor

The people hear the words of the law

Chapters 8 & 9 they confess their sins
Among the sins they promise to forsake are intermarriage with pagan nations
Supporting the temple with tithes and offerings
They then make a corporate promise to obey these commands and others
“The rest of the people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand— all these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord. Nehemiah 10:28-29

Nehemiah returns to Susa—a great work accomplished

Some time later, he returns

Finds the people had neglected the Temple, priests had to go back to farming

People were intermarrying with pagan nations—reminds them that this is what caused Solomon to fall from his position of God’s greatest king and in many ways started the cascade of disobedience that destroyed the nation

When he sees them committed again, he is horrified and forces them to repent

We will see the commentary of the Prophet Malachi on this

Most important lessons from these books

God keeps his promises

His faithfulness is not dependent on our unfaithfulness

However

No matter how serious the sins or the consequences—people will tend to repeat them

Israel did with marriage to pagan women

We can’t judge them too harshly because we do the same

Application Challenge to us—this issue of “besetting Sins”

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, (just finished talking about the heroes of the faith in Heb. 11—a comment we might also make after studying Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther) let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us”

Hebrews 12:1 King James Version (KJV)

“Lay aside” these sins that slow us down or make us less effective in living a life of discipleship— known as “besetting sins”

Many commentators say, these aren’t always “major” sins (if continual committing those, need to evaluate salvation)

Nobody was killing or sacrificing babies anymore; and we most likely aren’t either BUT, what sin holds us down, what keeps us from being, doing our best for the sake of the Kingdom?

Has to do with habits, people, patterns—our default modes when we aren’t fighting them Israel went back to old sins and it is so easy for us to do that, how to conquer it?

Joh Pipers, who during a Sabbatical, decided to spend time examining his life, some excerpts

<https://www.epm.org/blog/2018/Oct/12/piper-identifying-fighting-besetting-sins>

As I tried to be very specific in identifying my characteristic sins, it became evident what they were — namely, an ugly cluster of selfishness, anger, self-pity, quickness to blame, and sullenness.

Selfishness is virtually the same as pride and is at the heart of what Paul calls *indwelling sin* ([Romans 7:23](#)) — sin that remains in me as a believer. It is the corruption of my heart that is at the bottom of all my sinning. I see my selfishness function as a reflex in these **five ways (and the following verse how this is contrary to scripture)**

I expect to be served ([Philippians 2:2–3](#)).

I feel that I am owed ([Ephesians 4:32](#)).

I want praise ([Romans 2:29](#)).

I expect that things will go my way ([1 Corinthians 4:12–13](#)).

I feel that I have the right to react negatively to being crossed ([Romans 12:19–21](#)).

The reason I use the word *reflex* to describe these traits of selfishness is that there is **zero premeditation before they happen. When these responses happen, they are coming from my fallen nature, not from reflection and resolution. I don’t sin out of duty. I sin spontaneously. They are the reflexes of my original, unmortified sinfulness.**

Children of Selfishness –what he then did to overcome them—had to name them first

Now, what happens inside of me when this selfishness is crossed? Can I name these effects and describe them specifically and explicitly? Vague generalizations are usually evasions. ...Here are the four effects of my selfishness being crossed:

Anger: the strong emotional opposition to the obstacle in my way. I tighten up and want to strike out verbally or physically.

Self-pity: a desire that others feel my woundedness, and admire me for my being mistreated, and move to show me some

sympathy.

Quickness to blame: a reflex to attribute to others the cause of my frustrating situation. Others can feel it in a tone of voice, a look on the face, a sideways query, or an outright accusation.

Sullenness: the sinking discouragement, moodiness, hopelessness, unresponsiveness, withdrawn deadness of emotion.

(We all express our sins in various ways, helps to be specific about them or we can't change them)

<https://www.epm.org/blog/2018/Oct/12/piper-identifying-fighting-besetting-sins> (SKIPPED IN PODCAST AND LESSON, but in notes)

Passivity in the pursuit of holiness is not what Paul teaches. Paul piles up illustrations of how this works. I look back now and wonder: How had I become so passive?

Three of Paul's Pictures

Here are three of Paul's pictures of how the death of Christ cancels my sin and leads to effort.

1. In the death of Christ, *we died* to sin.

Therefore, actively put sin to death.

We have been united with him in a death like his. ([Romans 6:5](#))

Therefore:

You also must consider yourselves dead to sin.

([Romans 6:11](#))

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body.

([Romans 6:12](#))

2. In the death of Christ, *we were bought*.

Therefore, actively glorify your new owner.

You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. ([1 Corinthians 6:19–20](#))

Therefore:

Glorify God in your body. ([1 Corinthians 6:20](#))

3. In the death of Christ, *we were forgiven*.

Therefore, forgive.

God in Christ forgave you. ([Ephesians 4:32](#))

Therefore:

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted,

forgiving one another. ([Ephesians 4:32](#))

my conquered sin is *my empowered will*.

But here's what I had been missing: in each of these three cases, the link between the cross and my conquered sin is *my empowered will*.

. . . "Let not sin . . . reign in your mortal body."

"Glorify God in your body." "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another." Those commands are addressed to me. They engage my will.

In other words, God intends that part of my experience of sanctification be conscious, willed opposition to specific sins in my life. I had applied that to lust. But for some reason, I had failed to apply the same brutal intentionality of sin-killing to my selfishness, anger, self-pity, quickness to blame, and sullenness.

His application story

On a recent Sunday evening, it was cozy and snowy, and my wife and daughter and I were home alone. I was looking forward to something we would all do together. But my fourteen-year-old daughter came in from the dining room and said, "Mommy and I are going to watch *Supernanny* on the computer." They set it up and started watching — without me. Now, as insignificant as this incident seems, in that moment the temptation for selfishness, anger, self-pity, blaming, and sullenness was as dangerous to my soul as any sexual temptation. So, with new intentionality and ruthlessness, I immediately said to those rising sinful feelings, *No!* — not out loud, but to my sinful soul. Then I quietly went upstairs, consciously renouncing any body language of woundedness (though I was feeling it).

In my study, I waged war. **Effort!** I turned my mind and heart toward the promises of God, and the surety of the cross, and the love of the Father, and the wealth of my inheritance in Christ, and the blessings of that Lord's Day, and the patience of Jesus. And I held them there in my mind where I could see them.

I cried to the Lord for blood-bought help, and ***consciously, intentionally (not passively!)*** beat down the anger and self-pity and blaming and sullenness, as utterly out of character with who

But here's what I had been missing: in each of these three cases, the link between the cross and

I am in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 5:7). And I kept beating until they were effectively dead.

My application—losing weight

I like to eat without thinking, it's fun, a comfort
Gained a lot of weight—not healthy and the bodies we have are tools we need to use to serve the Lord
Needed a plan, I couldn't do it on my own
Weight Watchers—lots of parts, food list, meetings, tracking
Daily struggle
Down 25 (it has taken 8 months) and more to go
What is interesting to me, that learning to say no in one area, does seem to make it easier to say no in other areas—though no change is ever easy
Realizing the importance of as Piper says be active, conscious and fight changes in my life that lead to growth as a follower of Jesus

Final application

It is easy without thinking or planning to fall into sins
Remember definition of sin=missing the mark
Of not becoming all Jesus wants us to be
Follow Piper's example
Search heart and define sin—where do I fall short without even thinking about it?
He tackled a lot at once, for most of us one at a time works better
Come up with a plan

A tiny comparison with the challenges of the exiles or Esther

But in light of these books and the wise advice of those like Piper, we all need to:
Consciously take responsibility for our Christian growth
Return to where God wants us to be
Rebuilt what has been broken
And celebrate God's work in us as we do!
The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. Prov. 4:18