

“THE GOOD BOOK – 5: LEARNING FROM THE PAST”

Romans 15:4

Giving evidence in a libel trial in 1919, Henry Ford famously declared, “*History is bunk*”. Many of you probably feel the same way if history wasn’t a particular favourite of yours at school. You may have sat there drawing maps of Mesopotamia under Sargon or labelling the parts of a Roman soldier’s armour or trying to understand the reasons for the Hundred Years’ War or struggling with the underlying causes of the student riots in 1968 and wondering just what the point was. (The point, as we all know, was not to learn about history, but to learn to pass history exams and so help your school move up the league table, but we won’t get bogged down in that this morning!)

Well, history helps us make sense of the present by trying to understand the past. Just one example from very recent history. Why do people from the United States have such a different response to terrorist outrages from people who live in Britain? Look at recent history. The British lived through the horrors of the Blitz and through three decades of Irish Republican terrorist attacks. North Americans had no real experience of bombs and other terrorist activity on their own soil until the awful events of September 9th 2001. Their shared history had not prepared them for such things so their response was quite different from those who had had experience of such things.

Unfortunately, although history can seem to be moving along on a continuous cycle (repeated first as tragedy and then as farce, as Karl Marx famously observed), we don’t often learn from it. George Bernard Shaw – the father of the soundbite – wrote, “*Hegel was right when he said that we learn from history that men never learn anything from history*”. And Steve Turner, in one of his shorter poems, said, “*History repeats itself/ It has to/ No-one listens.*”

So what do we make of the history that we find in the Bible? You’ll recall that we’re spending a few weeks looking at the Bible as a whole, rather than simply taking a short passage to reflect on each week, as we usually do. We’re trying to think about the ways in which approach the very different kinds of writing that we find in the Bible – the Law, the books of Wisdom or philosophy, the letters of the New Testament. And we’re also going to look at poetry and prophecy. But quite a sizeable chunk of the writing in the Bible is history – or narrative: telling stories about the past and the people who were part of it. In fact, forty per cent of the Old Testament is narrative, and in the New Testament we find the book of *Acts*, which deals with the first thirty years of the life of the Church, and the Gospels, which are probably more biography than history, but which follow much the same pattern. History is obviously a very significant part of the overall library of biblical books, so we need to take it very seriously and ensure that we are not misreading or misusing it.

First of all, we need to bear in mind one or two things that are key to the way in which we read any historical accounts. It is important to realise that the writer has been **selective**. He or she has had to edit their account of what went on and choose which things to include and which things to leave out. They simply cannot include everything. John concludes his gospel with these words: “*Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written*” (*John 21:25*). So John has chosen to include the things that help him make his points about Jesus and who he is.

And the reason for that is that the writer starts off with a set of **presuppositions**, certain things which he or she assumes and believes everyone else will accept too. There’s a context in which the story is written and that context includes things that are pretty well taken for granted. One example would be that there is no clear teaching in *Acts* about the way in which baptism was administered, which has been a source of frustration to many people. It would be great if there were a clear indication that baptism should be of believers by total immersion – or, if you take the other view, that baptism should be of young infants by a bit of sprinkling. The reason it’s not there in *Acts* is that Luke, who wrote the book, assumed his readers

would be familiar with the way baptism was carried out, which we know from other contemporary documents was of believers by immersion.

And we must also bear in mind that the writer of the history had a clear **purpose** in mind as he or she wrote the book. So David Irving's history of the Second World War is clearly coloured by his desire to prove that the Nazis did not try to exterminate the Jews. And there are some wonderful examples in the Old Testament. The writer of the books of *Samuel* and *Kings* has a different agenda from the writer of *Chronicles*. Each of them, inspired, we believe, by the Holy Spirit, was addressing a different group of people in a different context and trying to convey a slightly different message. Look at *2 Samuel 24:1*, where God's sovereignty is clearly paramount, and *1 Chronicles 21:1* where the writer is concerned more about the holiness of God.

You can see all those things most clearly demonstrated when history is revisited (which is really what the writer of the books of *Chronicles* was doing). Someone called Theodor Haecker once wrote, "*The historian cannot choose his villains, like the poet, nor invent them.*" That's true, to some extent: the narratives of the Bible are littered with stories of people who were much less than perfect. Even the greatest heroes – such as David, Moses and Samson – had great flaws. But you can still do your best to dig the dirt, as is seen on television regularly as much loved children's writers turn out to be Nazis or paedophiles and previously revered politicians are shown to be bullies or weaklings.

But back to the Bible itself. How do we approach the narrative, the history contained within its pages, in books such as *Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah* etc.? Well, our presuppositions will have some bearing on that as well. Depending on our own beliefs, our own views on history and on God, we will read the history with an attitude somewhere between complete and unquestioning acceptance and outright cynicism and scepticism. We'll see it either as an eyewitness account such as we'd find in a newspaper or as a series of myths and fables concocted by someone with a very large axe to grind. Let me come clean, then, so you know where I'm coming from (as they say). I believe that these books were written by fallible human beings, with a limited understanding of what was actually going on, but under the clear influence of God's Holy Spirit. They were inspired to write these accounts and I believe that, as the old Sunday School slogan had it, that "*History is His story*" – an old cliché, I know, but none the less true for that.

I've mentioned the book *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth* several times recently, and in that book Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart suggest that there are three levels on which the history in the Bible is written. I've adapted them very slightly, but what they say is basically this. We can see that there is first of all the **universal plan of God**, the overarching story of God at work in the world he made. It's not very fashionable to look for such stories, such universal stories which can help to give some kind of structure and meaning to the world and to life. Jean-Francois Lyotard, one of the granddaddies of post-modernism, says that we should be "*incredulous of metanarratives*", by which he means that we should discard anything that seems to provide an overall universal plan to our lives, because it's probably been thought up by someone who really wants to control the way you think. But I would want to take issue with that and suggest that life loses any meaning if you start down that track.

In the Bible, the aspects of history which would be at this level are the creation, the fall, the spread of sin and evil, and the gift of redemption (through the grace of God in the Old Testament and the sacrifice of Jesus in the New). It's the big themes, the bits that seem to recur again and again – especially with regard to sin and redemption. Theologians, who like to keep their distance from the common herd in the pews by using long and often foreign words, call it "*heilsgeschichte*", which is German for "*salvation history*" (most great theologians are, as Bill Hybels observed, dead Germans).

The second level at which we can look at history in the Bible is as the **story of God's people**, which, in the Old Testament particularly, is the story of Israel. This is the kind of thing we see if we look at the great events such as the covenant with Abraham, the Exodus, the idolatry and sin of the Israelites, the exile and the return from exile. In such events we can see how God is at work, sometimes well in the

background, but he uses the events of history to bring about his purposes for his people, sometimes in very surprising ways. For example, the people are finally brought back to their own land after their deportation to Babylon by the Persian King Cyrus, a pagan despot whom God nevertheless refers to in terms usually reserved for the Messiah.

And the third level is that of **individual stories**. These are the bits we love, the stuff of Sunday School stories and children's books. Here are the bits we can identify with – stories of heroes and villains, of adventure and intrigue, of love and war. These are the stories of Joseph and Ruth and David and Elijah. There are clear goodies and baddies – we cheer Gideon and boo Ahab; we love Esther and hate Saul. Yet when you read them carefully you see that even the heroes were flawed and fallible. Jacob was a cheat and a con-man. Samson was a lecherous womaniser. Noah was a drunk. David was an adulterer and murderer. Solomon was an idolater. You see, these are not ideal characters and that's why the stories are so much fun.

The difficulty is that, because the individual stories are the most accessible, the most fun to read, we concentrate on them and end up reading the history in the Bible in the wrong way. We come at the stories with our own assumptions and presuppositions, and try to focus on them at the expense of the bigger picture – which is exactly what this series is all about. Trying to draw lessons from one episode in the life of Joseph or Gideon or Ruth or Paul means that we cannot see the wood for the trees. And we can also get into terrible tangles with our view of God because some of the details don't actually make sense.

We must resist the desire to draw great truths out of each and every detail of the stories. You may remember that when we have talked about the parables that Jesus told we have said that we cannot assume that every detail has some deep meaning – each parable is intended to make one point and that's it. So with these historical accounts – they're all part of the bigger story so sometimes we cannot work out why, or indeed how, something happens.

And that should help us resist the temptation to personalise the individual stories. By that I mean that we should not see them as examples we must imitate or as blueprints for God's action in our lives. I have heard people wax lyrical about the "business plan" for the Early Church that we can supposedly derive from *Acts* and apply to our own church situations today. You can read of the "*Seven Steps to Power and Influence*" that are based on the life of Joseph, if only you adopt his outlook on life. Friends, that is not what this is all about. These are stories about how God brings about his purposes, not about how we can climb the corporate ladder or deal with distress at the death of a loved one. To be sure, there are principles which we can see at work in these stories, but they are stories which illustrate the amazing activity of God rather than provide us with foolproof plans for our own individual lives.

When you come to these stories, you need to try and see them in their wider context, to ask the question "What does this tell me about God?" rather than "What does this tell me about the allocation of resources during a time of famine?" or "What's the best way to seduce a king?" You see, in the big picture God said "*Do not commit adultery*" and the story of David (among many others) illustrates what happens when you ignore that. God said, "*Don't waste your time and resources on worshipping other things*" and the whole story of Israel illustrates the folly of disobeying that. What I'm saying is that the history in the Bible – and, I believe, history in its wider sense – is all about what God is doing, about his purposes. Oliver Cromwell is quoted as saying, "*What are all histories, but God manifesting himself.*"

If we look only at the close details, it's difficult to see what's going on, difficult, often, to understand. But when you look at it as a whole, it begins to make a bit more sense. You can read the works of Balzac or Trollope or Marquez or Terry Pratchett book by book, and they're an entertaining read. But if you read the whole series of their stuff, you get a much bigger, fuller picture of what they're trying to say because of the way they fit together. You can listen to a movement of a symphony by Beethoven or Mahler or whoever, and it's nice music, but if you listen to the whole work, it's a far more fulfilling experience. There were pictures in the local paper this week of an exhibition at a gallery on the Chase. The artworks on show were of huge portraits of well known figures made up of coloured postage stamps. If you stand

close to the portraits, you just can't work out what on earth they're supposed to be – it just seems to be a series of pictures of the Queen! But once you stand back, the overall picture becomes apparent. That's a bit like trying to interpret the stories of the Bible.

And once you cotton on to that you can see why Paul wrote what he did in that reading we had just now. In *Romans 15:4*, he writes “*For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*” It's all there for a purpose – not simply to entertain or to impress, but to “*give us hope*”. In a way we're back to the cyclical thing again. The Roman Christians were struggling with some issues and there was an increasing threat of persecution. They needed some encouragement. Well, says Paul, there's plenty of it in the Bible. God's people have had it hard before and God's seen them through because he has a bigger purpose in mind.

Throughout history it has been obvious that God has been at work. There have been ups and downs. There have been times of great evil and God's people, too, have been down the road of apostasy and disobedience. But we have a great God – look what he's done! We have a God who moves things forward, who shows mercy, who offers redemption, who dispenses grace. If you want to see an illustration of that, have a look at the way he has led his people down through the centuries – firstly the Jewish people, then those who followed Jesus and took him seriously. And if even that is too much to take in, read the story of Joseph or Ruth or Elisha or Peter. He's done it for them: he can do it for you.

What the stories, the narrative, the histories of the Bible are all saying is basically this: Look, there's a great God at work in this world. He's made it. He loves it. He's watched it get messed up and he wants to put it right, so through Jesus he's provided a way to redeem the situation and put things on the road to recovery – a recovery that will eventually mean a gloriously joyful eternity for everyone who takes him seriously. Now that's a huge concept to try and get your head round all at once, so just look at what he's done in these situations: look how his plans have been working out in the past. And if you still can't grasp it, well try looking at these characters who found their lives transformed by God's activity. He can do that for you, where you are, however wretched you feel, however difficult your circumstances seem to be, however much you're having to endure. There's hope. There's encouragement. Give it a go!

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Much of the writing in the Bible takes the form of history (or narrative, or story). Forty per cent of the Old Testament is narrative – *Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles* etc. And in the New Testament we have the four gospels and *Acts*, which are mainly narrative.

As with any history, we need to remember that the accounts were written by people with a particular agenda – there is no such thing as unbiased history – and we read it with our own presuppositions. The writers have selected certain things to include and left out other things (see *John 21:25*).

The old cliché says that "*All history is His story*" and that is our starting point for reading the biblical historical accounts. There are three levels at which we read them:

- **The universal plan of God** – the overarching story of creation, fall, redemption and grace which affects all creation.
- **The story of God's people** – the great covenants with Abraham and Moses, the exodus, exile: the ways in which God has worked through his people.
- **Individual stories** – stories of heroes and villains: Joseph, Ruth, Elijah, Peter and so on, through whom God's purposes are worked out.

Once again, though, we must resist the temptation to focus only on the details. All these stories need to be read and interpreted in the light of the whole Bible, in the context of the bigger story of God's work. We should not try to draw from the stories more than is actually there and we should not be tempted to apply their lessons to our own lives too directly. The stories of the Bible are there to **illustrate** God's workings in the world. Oliver Cromwell said: "*What are all histories, but God manifesting himself.*"

When Paul wrote to the Roman Christians he reminded them that the stories of the Bible ("*everything that was written in the past*") was there not to entertain or to impress, but to give us hope for the future. God has a plan for humanity and a plan for each life. That should give us a sense of hope as we look to the future. It may well be the case that history repeats itself – if so, we need to learn from it. And the most important thing to learn is that God is ordering the affairs of men and women.

Questions for discussion

1. Why is it so important to read the history books in the context of the whole of Scripture?
2. Would you agree that "history repeats itself"? If so, give some examples, both from the Bible and from world history.
3. How do you reconcile the apparent discrepancies in the different biblical accounts of history?
4. How is it possible to see the overarching plan of God in the Bible stories?
5. What are the dangers of applying lessons from individual stories to our own lives?
6. What kind of hope do the biblical narratives give us?