Chronicles

Let us pick up where we left off in the last lesson. We talked about Samuel and Kings in the last lesson, and now we will look at a part of the Hebrew Old Testament that recounts the same story. It is good for us to ask why this story is told again. One of the things that we want to talk about is how the author of the Chronicles used his primary source. We do not know the name of the author of Chronicles. Some people use the term “chronicler,” so for convenience’s sake I will use the chronicler. We will talk about how the chronicler used Samuel and Kings, among other sources that he refers to. He tells much the same story as Samuel and Kings, only it is very clear that he tells it in a different way.

Before we get into that we want to talk briefly about who the chronicler was. Traditionally people have thought that Ezra might have been the author of Chronicles or at least the editor and compiler. We can see if we look at the end of 2 Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra that they share the same ending and starting point. Second Chronicles ends and Ezra begins with the edict from King Cyrus of Persia. This edict makes it possible for those in exile in Persia who had been taken away into exile under Babylon to return to the land of Judah and rebuild the temple of the Lord in their land. Some have taken that shared ending and beginning as an indication that the two belong together. We also see in Chronicles over and over again the centrality of the temple. That is a very big part of Ezra-Nehemiah as well. The centrality of the temple and the shared endings make a case for Ezra as the primary author or compiler of Chronicles.

We have to consider the differences between the emphasis of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah as well. They clearly share the emphasis of the temple, its operation, and its centrality to the life of Israel and the returning community. One of the things that is very different is that Chronicles clearly emphasizes Davidic kingship and leadership and the importance of the role of the king in relation to the temple. Ezra and Nehemiah do not emphasize this. There is not an emphasis on the king’s role at all. There is clearly an emphasis on the temple and more of an emphasis on the operation of the priests and of the importance of the law in regulating the life of the people of God. What is interesting about this is that the books of Chronicles and those of Ezra-Nehemiah have a different role. They have a little bit of a different voice in terms of their role in shaping the identity of the covenant community at two different times in their history. Chronicles has this major focus on the house of David that suggests its important support for Zerubbabel, who is the Davidic leader returning with the people of God right at the time of the Cyrus edict. This was in 538 BC, and he was instrumental in rebuilding the altar and the temple. We see that the chronicler omits some aspects of David and Solomon’s downfall. He has a purpose to support Davidic leadership. On the other hand, Nehemiah appeals to Solomon’s interreligious marriage as a negative example. We have some differences in these books that merit our attention. Even though there is a great overlap in the importance of the temple and reestablishing its place for the returnees from exile, there are some differences that we should appreciate. That is about the chronicler. I do not think we can really say who this person was or definitively say that it was Ezra. We do hear a distinct voice coming through the book of Chronicles, both in relation to Ezra-Nehemiah and in relation to the books of Samuel and Kings.

As we think about dates for these things, the Cyrus edict happened in 538 BC. Persia had conquered Babylon, and God’s people returned. It makes a lot of sense that around 530 or 520 BC is when the book of Chronicles was written to speak to the covenant community, supporting the leadership of Zerubbabel and the early returnees. Then were the reign of Darius, the completion of the temple, and the reigns of Xerxes and of Artaxerxes. It was not until 458 BC when Ezra returned to Jerusalem. Soon after him, about 12 years later, Nehemiah returned. Ezra-Nehemiah and their ministry, along with the ministries of
the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, happened around 440 BC, which is about 100 year after the first returnees. If I had to place the writing of the books of Chronicles, I would put it with the early returnees around the time that they came back and rebuilt the temple.

There are a few things that the readers of Chronicles will notice immediately as they think about the differences between Samuel and Kings and the books of Chronicles and the way they tell the same story. We can see that there are many different changes. There are some omissions, there are some additions, and there are some things that are moved or changed, and they bring about a different emphasis. They are not altered in a way that would misconstrue the facts, but they include facts and omit other facts for the pastoral purposes that the chronicler has. These are different from the pastoral purposes of the writer of Samuel and Kings. By way of review, remember that Samuel and Kings speak to the people of God in exile and highlight the ways of David. David is a man after God’s own heart, whom God has clearly raised to a position of kingship and made a promise to his household. Even David violated the covenant, though, and it caused much trouble in his own household and in the house of Israel. His son Solomon furthered that difficulty in the way in which he ignored the law of God. That brought about the division of the kingdom. We see that the history of the people of God is evaluated covenantally. In light of the covenant in Deuteronomy and through Moses, we see these various kings evaluated in relation to David or Jeroboam. Those who walk after David do right in the eyes of the Lord. Those who walk after the ways of Jeroboam do evil in the eyes of the Lord. The primary pastoral purpose of Samuel-Kings is to explain why the exile happened. As a result, one would understand why these terrible tragedies that happened in the life of David and Solomon would be included in that telling of the story. Also, the writer of Samuel-Kings wanted to say to the exilic community that the best hope for Israel was still in the promises that God made to David.

Once the people had been in exile and prepared to return from exile after the Cyrus edict, the pastoral purpose of the chronicler was quite different. His purpose was not to explain the exile but to motivate God’s people to reestablish their place in the land. He wanted them to rebuild the temple and follow the house of David and Davidic leadership. That contrast between the various pastoral aims that the chronicler had over against the pastoral aims of the author of Samuel-Kings helps us to understand why it is that the chronicler omitted these stories about Bathsheba. We see various emphases in Chronicles, including the omission of the story of Uriah and Bathsheba and the addition and expansion of David’s activity on behalf of the temple. We also see David’s prayers and preparations of the temple and various expansions. There are other omissions, including the whole pre-Davidic history and the whole confrontation with Michal, his wife, the daughter of Saul. David’s concern for Saul’s house and all the troubles in David’s house are also omitted. It is not that these things did not happen or God’s people did not know they happened. They had Samuel and Kings to know this history. But Chronicles is written this way because the author had a different purpose. He wanted to encourage God’s people to remember the promise to David and David’s house and to understand David’s support for the temple and its building. He wanted them to use that as a primary pastoral motivation for God’s people to follow Zerubbabel in the rebuilding of the temple.

The purpose and outline of the books of Chronicles was to encourage and direct the returnees in reestablishing God’s kingdom after the exile with special emphases on rebuilding the temple, Davidic leadership, and the reunification of all Israel, north and south, represented in Jerusalem. It is interesting that it emphasizes the message to the returnees. We are told in the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles the genealogies of all the families that returned. Before we go back in time to tell the story of David and Solomon, we are in the present time, the time of those who returned from exile. This message is for them. The genealogies of God’s people in 1 Chronicles 1 through 9 reestablish the identity of those who support the temple. There is a special emphasis on the temple. The story of the united kingdom, David,
and Solomon is emphasized in 1 Chronicles 10 through 2 Chronicles 9. The story of the divided kingdom when some southern kings are delivered by their participation in the temple is told in 2 Chronicles 10 through 28. Then there are visions of reunification of Israel, particularly under the reigns of Josiah and Hezekiah, talked about in 2 Chronicles 29 through 36.

We talked already about the idealization of David’s reign. It is very interesting to think about the fact that David and his house dominate the story of Chronicles. Chronicles begins with the genealogies from Adam. The whole story of Israel and the Earth is recapitulated in these genealogies. There are 650 years from the reign of Saul to the Cyrus edict, which is the main part of the chronicler’s story. Of those 650 years, it is the 33-year reign of David that absorbs a third of all the material. It is very hard to miss the chronicler’s focus on the house of David. The primary interest in David, Solomon, and the other Davidic rulers in Judah like Asa, Josiah, and Hezekiah is clearly their support for the temple and the way in which the law or the covenant regulates the worship at the temple. It is an expression of covenant faithfulness and the identity and mission of the covenant community.

We have said a good bit about the omissions of David’s trouble and the way in which the chronicler used the story of Samuel and Kings. Let me point out a few things about expansions or additions that he made. Many people read the genealogies as boring, but the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 1 through 9 emphasizes Judah, David, and the Levites. It talks about their roles, including this expansive list of musicians in the temple. The way in which a family history is articulated or drawn in and of itself tells an important story. It tells the story the way in which the chronicler wanted to emphasize the story. This is a story about God’s promise to David and the importance of the temple in reestablishing the identity of God’s people, who have been in exile. Look at 1 Chronicles 18, and let us think about the way in which the chronicler emphasizes the use of those things that David won in his warfare. It has a particular use for the chronicler if you look at verses 8 and 11. First Chronicles 18:8 says, “From Tibhath and Cun, towns that belonged to Hadadezer, David took a great quantity of bronze which Solomon used to make the bronze sea, the pillars, and the various bronze articles.” Verse 11 says, “King David dedicated these articles to the Lord as he had done with the silver and gold that he had taken from Edom, Moab, the Ammonites, and the Philistines in Amalek.” We see in the way the chronicler tells of David’s military victories the emphasis on how these things support the temple. The plunder that David wins in war will serve the temple.

We can see another emphasis of the chronicler in 1 Chronicles 18:14. That is what is sometimes called the pan-Israel or all-Israel emphasis of the chronicler. It says, “David reigned over all Israel doing what was just and right for all his people.” We will see as we go along that this “all Israel” theme runs throughout Chronicles, even after the division of the kingdom. That is an important thing for us to see.

David’s prayers and preparation for the temple are extensive. We will see in 1 Chronicles 22 that David makes all this provision for the building of the temple by way of building materials. He acknowledges that God has chosen not him but his son Solomon to build a house for the Lord. He acknowledges at great political cost to himself that he must not undertake this but that his son will. We see in the way the chronicler tells the story that David provides everything. It is almost like Solomon does not have to do a whole lot because his father David had mapped out everything for him. He has purchased all the building materials and drew up the plans. This is evident not only in what David gives and wins for the temple but in all the lists of personnel that we see in the lasts chapters of 1 Chronicles. There are singers, gatekeepers, and divisions of priests and Levites who staff the temple. In 1 Chronicles 28:10 we see that David develops plans for the temple and charges his son Solomon, “‘Consider now, the Lord has chosen you to build his temple as a sanctuary. Be strong and do the work.’ Then David gave his son Solomon the plans for the portico of the temple, its buildings, its storerooms, its upper parts, its inner rooms, and
the place of atonement.” David prepares materials, plans, staffing, and everything for the erection of the temple. That is the emphasis in the way in which the chronicler tells the story of David.

The story of Solomon is told in a very similar way. If you compare the way the chronicler tells the story of Solomon with the way in which the author of Samuel-Kings tells the story, we notice some omissions, additions, and expansions. There are also some movements and changes in the telling of the story of Solomon. We see that Solomon’s bloody struggle for power that is recorded in 1 Kings 1 and 2 is omitted. Delaying the building of the temple to build his palace is not referred to. The emphasis of the chronicler is on the building of the temple. The chronicler omits the presence of Solomon’s foreign wives as the reason for the division of the kingdom as is told in 1 Kings 11. The story of Solomon’s Egyptian wife is moved to a different place in the story. We clearly see that there is an expansion from the chronicler’s perspective in Solomon’s grandeur and zeal for the temple. Second Chronicles 3 through 8 focuses on how Solomon’s grandeur and power undergirds his support for the temple. The high moment of this is in Solomon’s prayer and dedication for the temple in 2 Chronicles 6 and 7. This is not only important to the chronicler’s telling of the story of Solomon, but also Solomon’s prayer and support of the temple will be a pattern. Even the very language that he uses in his prayers will be a pattern for the later kings in the divided kingdom to follow. We see even in the divided kingdom that the kings of Judah who support the temple, return to it, seek the Lord of the temple, and humble themselves at the temple use the language of 2 chronicles 7. If they pray in this way and support the temple in this way we see that they are blessed and their reigns are blessed. In 2 Chronicles 4 we have all the furnishings that Solomon provides for the temple.

In chapter 5 we see the bringing of the ark to the temple. Verse 2 says that Solomon summons to Jerusalem the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes. There is a gathering again of all Israel to bring up the ark of the Lord from the city of David. And all the men of Israel come together to the king at the time of the festival in the seventh month. That is the feast of tabernacles. When all the elders arrive, the Levites take up the ark, and they bring the ark and the tent of meeting and all the sacred furnishings. And King Solomon and the entire assembly of Israel that had gathered about him were before the ark sacrificing so many sheep and cattle they could not be recorded or counted. Then we see a reference in verse 10 to the copies of the covenant that are kept inside the ark. These provide the important pattern for how the function of the temple should be undertaken. When we come to 2 Chronicles 6 we hear the prayer of dedication similar to 1 Kings 8. We see that Solomon acknowledges that the temple can in no way contain the presence of the God who made heaven and Earth. His prayer in 2 Chronicles 6:18 says, “Will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple that I have built. Yet give attention to your servant’s prayer and his plea for mercy. O Lord my God, hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence. May your eyes be open toward this temple day and night, this place of which you said that you would put your name there.” That echoes the provisions of Deuteronomy 12. God’s people are to worship at the place where He puts His name. Solomon’s prayer develops, and even after God’s people are taken away by enemies they are to turn and pray toward the place of the temple, and God will hear them and bless them. He will bring them back to the land that He gave them according to 2 Chronicles 6:25. We can see how important Solomon’s support for the temple is for those returnees who hear the chronicler’s telling of this story. They too are to support the temple, pray toward the temple, and seek the Lord at the place of the temple. The presence of the Lord is at the temple.

We have come to a good memory verse. I try to select verses that get at the heart of what the books are about and what their unique canonical voice is about. I have chosen a verse that in some ways is much misused, at least in American Christianity. The verse is 2 Chronicles 7:14, which is a very familiar passage, “If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face
and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” Here we have the Lord responding to Solomon’s prayer of dedication. The Lord appeared to Solomon at the beginning of his reign where Solomon asked for wisdom. Now the Lord appears to Solomon again at the temple now that it is complete. He says, “I have heard your prayer. I have chosen this place for myself. When I shut up the heavens that there is not rain or I command the locusts to devour the land or send the plague among the people, if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” “I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.” Let us talk about what this verse is about and what it means to humble yourselves, to seek the Lord, and to turn from your wicked ways. All of these verbs build on each other, and they all have a very specific reference for the chronicler as he reports this event of the Lord’s appearance to Solomon.

How is it that one humbles oneself? Time and time again we have heard Solomon say, and now we hear the Lord say, that God’s people will forsake the covenant and will be punished. They will be chastised and suffer the curses of the covenant. Their crops will suffer; they will suffer in their offspring, and their children will suffer. They will even be carried away to a foreign land, and their enemies will be successful against them. They must humble themselves, and they do that by offering prayers of repentance toward a particular place. They are to be made toward the temple. If they are to seek the Lord, the kings of Israel must come to the temple. All of these verbs in 2 Chronicles 7:14 have to do with either praying toward or coming to the temple.

What is turning from their wicked ways about? Instead of going to other worship sites and worshiping other gods, Baal and the Ashtoreths and Malaak, they should forsake those high places. They should come only to the temple of the Lord and worship Him and serve Him only. As we think about this in light of Christ and the New Testament now that Christ has come, He is our temple and the place where God has put His name. He is the one to whom we must repent and have faith. The centrality of worship now is centered in the Lord Jesus Christ. If we are to humble ourselves, seek the Lord, and turn from our wicked ways, we as God’s people must come to Christ and Christ alone for that forgiveness.

Some of us wonder what “I will heal your land” means. We have seen time and again that the land is a symbol of God’s provision for His people. The land of Canaan is a symbol of the whole world, just like Eden was a symbol of the whole world. In many ways it is a part that represents the whole where God’s people are to live in covenant faithfulness. God will bless their enterprise, offspring, and crops there. He will keep them safe from disease, famine, and enemies. God will bless their enterprise and their economies in their faithfulness to the covenant. We can see that, not in a simplistic, mechanistic, health-and-wealth Gospel sort of way, but we can have confidence because God is the God of all the Earth. His purposes have always included the entire Earth, so this promise to heal our land is not just about America. God’s people are scattered throughout all the nation-states of the world, throughout the entire world. What this means is if God’s people will humble themselves and pray and seek His face and come to Christ in repentance, faith, and completely loyal worship to King Jesus, then God will bless their enterprise. He will bless the work of their hands. He will use them as a blessing to others as they share their wealth and give to others. That is a good way for us to understand it, not in some nationalistic way that God will just bless America if the Christians will repent. God will bless the enterprise of His people wherever they are if they will be faithful to the covenant and to Him.

This prayer, as I hinted at earlier, informs the language of the prayers of the kings of Judah after the division of the kingdom under Jeroboam and Rehoboam after Solomon’s death. We can see this immediately beginning in 2 Chronicles 12 with Rehoboam. Verse 1 says, “After Rehoboam’s position as
king was established and he had become strong, he and all Israel with him abandoned the law of the Lord. Because they had been unfaithful to the Lord, Shishak the king of Egypt attacked Jerusalem in the fifth year of King Rehoboam.” In verse 5 we see the prophet Shemaiah comes to Rehoboam and to the leaders of Judah and says, “This is what the Lord says, ‘You have abandoned me, therefore I now abandon you to Shishak.’” Listen and hear the language that the chronicler uses: “The leaders of Israel and the king humbled themselves and said, ‘The Lord is just.’ And when the Lord saw they humbled themselves this word of the Lord came to Shemaiah, ‘Since they have humbled themselves I will not destroy them but will soon give them deliverance. My wrath will not be poured out on Jerusalem through Shishak. They will, however, become subject to him and learn the difference between serving me and serving the kings of other lands.’” Verse 12 says, “Because Rehoboam humbled himself the Lord’s anger turned from him, and he was not totally destroyed. Indeed there was some good in Judah.” Even with the wicked king Rehoboam we see the echo of the language of humbling oneself. That means that he prayed and worshiped properly in the temple.

Then we see other examples of people humbling themselves. Abijah does this in 2 Chronicles 13:14. Now Jeroboam, king of Israel in the north, sent troops, and he was going to ambush Judah. Verse 14 says, “Judah turned and saw that they were being attacked from the front and the rear. They cried out to the Lord. The priests blew their trumpets, and the men of Judah raised the battle cry. At the sound of their battle cry God routed Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah. The Israelites fled before Judah, and God delivered them into their hands.” We see in the prayers of these kings the language of humbling oneself, crying out to the Lord, and praying toward the temple. They prayed in the temple and worshiped properly in support of the temple, according to the covenant. These are the means of grace, and this is the way to blessing. In 2 Chronicles 14 we see Asa, and we begin to see a building on this. Verse 2 says, “Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord. He removed the foreign altars and the high places. He smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He commanded Judah to seek the Lord.” There is that language again from Solomon’s prayer. We begin to see that this humbling, seeking of the Lord, and turning from wicked ways has to do with exclusive loyalty to Yahweh in temple worship. Verse 11 says, “Asa called to the Lord, ‘Lord, there is no one like you to help the powerless against the mighty. Help us, O Lord, for we rely on you and in your name we have come against this vast army. Lord, you are our God. Do not let man prevail against you.’”

Let us turn from Asa and skip ahead a little bit to King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 18, 19, and 20. Look at 2 Chronicles 20:1 where Jehoshaphat is able to defeat Moab and Ammon. “The Moabites and the Ammonites, with some of the Meunites, came to make war on Jehoshaphat. Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, ‘A vast army is coming against you on the other side of the sea.’ Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord. He proclaimed a fast for all Judah. The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord. Indeed they came from every town in Judah to seek him.” It is very clear in verse 4 that what it means to seek the Lord is to go to Jerusalem and the temple. It is to worship the Lord exclusively in the temple. Jehoshaphat says in verse 9, “We cry out to you. Hear us and save us.” We see in verse 18 that Jehoshaphat bows his face to the ground and all the people of Judah and all of Jerusalem fall down in worship before the Lord. Jehoshaphat’s success against Moab and Ammon is granted in response to his prayers. He prays rightly and in the way that God’s kings should pray, in accord with the covenant and the centrality of worshiping only the God of Israel. They are to worship only in the place where He has put His name.

There is one final way to emphasize this and to emphasize the other theme that the chronicler brings out. He emphasizes Davidic leadership for the returnees to support Zerubbabel as a son of David. He also emphasizes assistance in the rebuilding of the temple that is so central to the telling of the story of David, Solomon, and even the divided kingdom. This theme of all Israel and of the reunification of
Israel is seen even late in Chronicles in the stories of the divided kingdom. We see it particularly with Josiah and Hezekiah in the reforms under Josiah and the example we will focus on as we come to a close, the example of Hezekiah. We find in 2 Chronicles 30:1 that Hezekiah sends word to all Israel and Judah. He writes letters to Ephraim and Manasseh. Ephraim and Manasseh are the northern tribes, so he invites the northern tribes “to come to the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover to the Lord, the God of Israel. The king and his officials and the whole assembly decided to celebrate the Passover in the second month. They had not been able to celebrate it at the regular time because not enough priests had consecrated themselves, and the people had not yet assembled in Jerusalem.” We see that throughout Israel and Judah letters go out. In verse 6 we see what the letters say, “People of Israel, return to the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel that he may return to you who are left who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria.” Verse 9 says, “If you return to the Lord then your brothers and your children will be shown compassion. He will not turn his face from you if you will return to him.” We see Hezekiah’s emissaries carrying out these letters of invitation to the remnants of the northern tribes. It tells us that to return to the Lord means to return to Jerusalem. The Lord is in Jerusalem and in His temple. To return to the Lord means to return to exclusive worship of Yahweh, and you cannot worship Yahweh in the high places in Dan in the north. You must return to Jerusalem, the place of exclusive worship before the Lord, for these appointed festivals of Passover, First Fruits, and of tabernacles.

As a side note, it is interesting the emphasis on “all Israel” that is so important. King Hezekiah exercises a provision of the law under Numbers 9 that allows for them to celebrate Passover at a different time because those who travel might come in contact with the dead or with unclean food. It is a way for them to go through a purification process and even worship at a time other than the appointed time. What is important is that they be together, so the other emphasis that we see in the chronicler is this emphasis on all of Israel working together.

For those returning the way that Chronicles ends is with the story of the king of Persia, Cyrus, releasing those to return. Those whom the chronicler had identified in his first nine chapters were returning, and then sandwiched in between is the retelling of the story of David, Solomon, and the divided kingdom. He tells it in a way that calls the returning covenant community to follow Davidic leadership, to rebuild and strongly support temple worship in an exclusively loyal way, and to be serious about their own unity together as the various tribes. They are to be united and to represent all of Israel in the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple. The chronicler has a very different pastoral purpose than the writer of Samuel-Kings, and that purpose is revealed in the way that he tells the story.