

Post Exile

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Preacher: Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] Today we come to the final part of the study that we've been doing on Sunday mornings on the story of the Old Testament. In this series we've been looking at some of the big moments that take place in the Old Testament.

We're trying to learn more about what happened at these big moments. We've been trying to explain how they fit together, and above all, we've been trying to see how they are all pointing forwards to the coming of Jesus Christ in the new.

Today I hope that we'll be able to bring everything together, and our title is Post Exile, and we can read again from Malachi 4 where it says, Behold, the day is coming, like burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evil doers will be stubble, the day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.

But for you who fear my name, the Son of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings, you shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.

Usually I begin these sermons by asking the question, what's the story so far? But we've reached the end of the Old Testament, so the story so far is actually the whole story.

[1 : 15] And so instead of going through everything again in detail, I want to offer you a summary of the story of the Old Testament using four key headings, Homeland, Family, Community, Kingdom.

If you go all the way back to the beginning of the Old Testament in Genesis, God establishes each of these. He created this amazing universe as a beautiful homeland for humanity.

He created Adam and Eve, joined them as husband and wife, and told them to build a family. He established a wonderful community with appropriate rules, responsibilities and morals, and he himself came to dwell with them, God and humanity together.

And in that he gave humanity a leadership role with delegated authority from God over creation.

And although the term kingdom isn't used in Genesis, it's clear that the world is God's territory.

Humanity is to be his people and his rules and commands are to be followed. So the Old Testament begins with a beautiful homeland, a loving family, a wonderful community, and a righteous kingdom.

[2 : 35] But all of that is broken because humanity rebels against God. And in Genesis chapter three, humanity deliberately disobeys God's command and rejects his lordship.

As a result, the homeland is cursed, the family is divided, the community is hostile, and the kingdom of evil claims authority over humanity.

And because of that, we've said several times throughout this series that now the world and humanity are beautiful and broken.

And that's why if you look at any period of history or if you look at anything that's happening in the world today, you'll see a lot that's beautiful and you'll see a lot that's broken.

But the story of the Old Testament is that God does not give up and he responds to all of this by initiating a plan of salvation. That plan is centered on promises.

[3 : 42] These promises take the form of covenants and covenant is really the concept that holds the whole Bible together. In fact, when we say Old Testament and New Testament, what we mean is Old Covenant and New Covenant.

And it would probably actually be a wee bit better if those were the terms that we used. And the covenant promises that God gives relate to these four headings that we've selected.

So in terms of homeland, God calls Abraham out of his homeland and promises him a new one.

Moses leads the people out of Israel into that, towards that land.

Joshua enters that land and conquers it. David secures the borders of the land. Family, God promises Abraham a child and after many years, Isaac is born.

Isaac, father Jacob, Jacob had 12 sons and from these a huge family nation arises. Jacob was given a new name, Israel.

[4 : 43] So the Abraham, Isaac, Jacobite family are known as the Israelites. Community, that great family was organized into a society where they were to live as God's people.

A wonderful community governed by God's law and a community where God himself would come and dwell with them in the tabernacle and then the temple.

It was a community to be characterised by justice and togetherness and it was to stand out from the rest of the world. And kingdom, eventually God raised up David to be king and he promised that David's family would be a royal line.

David secured the homeland, the family nation could now flourish and the community of God and his people together could thrive.

And so God's promises related to all of these things and with these promises came wonderful blessings. So the homeland gave people liberty. They were free from oppression and exploitation.

[5 : 51] The family gave them unity. They were all part of one great family nation. The community gave them identity. They were God's people living in his way, different from everyone else, shining as a light for the nations.

And the kingdom gave them security with David on the throne, they were strong, safe and prosperous. These were the great moments of the Old Testament.

These were the high points. But as we've seen over the past few weeks, none of it lasted. It's easy, I think, to assume that the Old Testament is a story of heroes and successes and sometimes our impression as children can be that.

And there were many great moments. But the truth is the Old Testament is a story of failure.

Despite all the great promises that God gave, the people continually rebelled against him.

That's why we've been saying that you can depict the Old Testament history with a diagram like this. That's got some upward spikes. These are the high moments of Abraham, Moses, David and others.

[7 : 10] But overall, the trajectory is downward. The story is one of failure. And by the end of the Old Testament, all four of these headings have been lost.

So the homeland is conquered. The capital city Jerusalem lies in ruins. The family is totally divided. First of all, it splits into two nations.

Now there's a diaspora of ethnic Jews scattered all over the place. Many have mixed with other peoples and there's only a tiny weak remnant left in the land.

The community has crumbled. So the temple, the ark, the family nation living as God's people and the presence of God himself are all gone.

And the kingdom is finished. That under foreign rule, the line of David has come to an end. And as we saw a couple of weeks ago, and all on the last couple of weeks, the story of the Old Testament reaches its lowest point when the people are taken into exile in Babylon in 586 BC.

[8 : 25] And they remain there for 70 years. And they lost their liberty, no longer able to thrive. They lost their unity. They were bitterly divided. They lost their identity.

They'd forgotten who they were and who they were meant to be. They lost their security. They were at the mercy of the next emperor to rise up and take control.

And what I hope you can see is that when we use terms like liberty, unity, identity and security, what I hope we can see is that the story of the Old Testament has been repeated many times in history.

And it's still getting repeated today. People today are longing for liberty. In Western Europe, that might not be political liberty, but it's definitely the case for many other parts of the world.

But even here, many people are enslaved. Enslaved to addiction, drugs, alcohol, gambling. Enslaved to the restrictions of poverty.

[9 : 26] Or to the pressures of success, to the attraction of wealth, to the lure of power. Others are imprisoned by guilt and shame. Others are in bondage to the slave master of what other people think of you.

People today are craving for unity. So if you look at the news, people are dismayed by inequality.

People are hurt because of hostility. And if you look around us, people are suffering in isolation.

People are heartbroken because they've been rejected by others. People today are searching for identity. So, so many people are trying to figure out who they are, what their purpose is, what's right and wrong, what we should put our energy into so that our contribution will be recognised.

And it all comes back to the fact that we long to be special and we long to be part of something. And people today are longing for security.

Maybe in terms of finance or a job or a relationship. And in the last year, definitely in terms of health, we're all desperate to be safe.

[10:37] We're scared of bad things happening. All around us, we see people who are enslaved, divided, searching and vulnerable.

And if we're honest with ourselves, I think we have to recognise that these things are so often through of us too. So, I put pressure on myself to succeed.

So, I'm enslaved to what other people think of me. I can so easily judge other people as a threat rather than seeing them as family.

I long to be special. I don't want my life to be worthless or pointless. I want it to achieve something. And so often the outward impression that I give is masking a whole pile of insecurities on the inside. And it's reminding us that the story of the Old Testament isn't just ancient history. We can see it all around us.

[11:39] And I can see it in my own life as well. So, the story of the Old Testament is a downward slope. Despite all of God's amazing promises, the people continually failed.

But at the very end of the Old Testament, there's a glimmer of hope. I don't know if you noticed that, but I deliberately put just a wee tiny upward slope at the end of our diagram because there's a glimmer of hope.

And that upward slope at the end is the post-exile period, and we read two passages from that period, one from Ezra and one from Malachi. Just for information, if you look at the Old Testament books, there's a full list of the Old Testament books.

The ones in red come from the post-exile period. So, the books of the Old Testament are not in chronological order. So, you've got a little bit in the middle, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.

The three books at the end, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, they're all written from the post-exile period. I've put two question marks beside Joel because we don't really know exactly when Joel was written.

[12:46] So, some people do think that it was written in the post-exile period, others don't. We don't know for sure. It's one to think about, one to research if any of you want to do that. But certainly, the other six are definitely from this period.

This is the period between 538 and around 400 BC. The Jews started coming back to Jerusalem and they gradually rebuilt the temple and they gradually rebuilt the city.

And Ezra and Nehemiah are the books that tell us the most about what happened. At that time, two things were happening. One, the people were looking back.

So, we read about that. Philip read that for us in Ezra chapter 3. They laid the foundation for the temple in order to rebuild it. So, if you imagine that St. Columbus got hit by a bomb and the building had fallen down.

And we all fled Edinburgh. 70 years later, we came back and we're like, right, we want to rebuild our building. Foundation is laid. They're getting started. And there was great rejoicing.

[13:55] But the older people who could remember what things used to be like wept. We saw that in these verses and the sound of joy and the sound of weeping was intermingled into this great noise together.

And it's reminding us that we must never forget that at the end of the Old Testament, the people of Israel were very, very bruised. So, their recent history had been hard.

The high points of the Old Testament were a distant memory. And they looked back and they saw many mistakes. And now they carried many regrets and many bruises.

The people were looking back. But the second thing that was happening just now was that God was looking forward. And we read about that in Malachi where it says, a day is coming.

God is sending his messenger. God himself is going to come. He is coming, says the Lord of hosts. So in the midst of all the bruises and brokenness of the post exile period, God is looking forward.

[15:05] And he's promising a day when he will come. And of course, all of that is going to be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ. As we've been saying through the whole of this series, the high points of the Old Testament are signposts towards what Jesus is going to do.

And there's so many amazing things that we've seen. There's so much I wish we could look at today. I just want to focus on one thing that Malachi talks about in chapter four, because there he

tells us what God is going to bring with him when he comes.

Malachi 4 is saying a day is coming. God himself is coming and he's going to bring something with him. What is he going to bring? He is going to bring healing.

The son of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. In a world that's beautiful but broken and for a people who are so badly bruised, healing is exactly what they need.

And if you look at what the New Testament reveals, you see that Jesus has come to bring healing in all the areas that we've been speaking about. Jesus is coming to heal the homeland.

[16:25] He's broken sins, grip on creation. He's defeated the power of death on the cross and he's going to restore the whole universe into a new heavens and a new earth.

And it will be a beautiful homeland again. And that's giving us amazing liberty. We can be free from death's power and we can thrive now and for eternity.

Jesus is healing the family. He's calling people from all different nations to come and be brothers and sisters and to know God as our perfect Father.

He's removing this divide between Jew and Gentile that's existed through the Old Testament. And he's uniting us together as one body, one family and that gives us beautiful unity.

We can be part of something amazing now and for eternity. He's healing the community and so he's teaching us to love one another. He's establishing a society where broken people are helped, where people who've made mistakes aren't judged and where people who've gone down the wrong path are shown a better way.

[17:32] And he himself has come to dwell with us by his spirit and that gives us real identity. As unique individuals and as a great community together we can be something really special now and for eternity.

And Jesus is healing the kingdom. He is now risen and exalted. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He's our ruler, our defender and because of everything that he has done we can have security now and forevermore.

Jesus is the Son of righteousness who has risen with healing in his wings. And for the bruised people at the end of the Old Testament and for people like you who are bruised by life today, that's exactly what we need.

But the most amazing thing of all is that in order to accomplish that healing, Jesus was bruised in our place.

As he approached the cross he took all the bruises that the Kingdom of Evil could throw at him. On the cross he took all the bruises that our sins deserve.

[18:55] And if you go back to the very beginning of the Old Testament you discover what? You discover that that was the plan all along. God said at the very beginning when humanity sinned, I'll put enmity between you and the woman between your offspring and her offspring.

He shall bruise your head. You shall bruise his heel pointing towards the great plan of God that was being worked out. In Genesis chapter 3 God's beautiful creation was broken.

In Malachi chapter 4 God says, I am coming to bring healing. And it is all because God does not give up.

We have covered a lot of ground over the past few weeks and yet having done so we've only just scratched the surface of the story of the Old Testament.

I want to close our sermon today and our series with four massive lessons that we learn from the story of the Old Testament. Lesson number one, people are incredibly stupid.

[20:16] Now that's quite blunt language but it's definitely true of the people in the Old Testament. And I don't think that we can deny that there's plenty evidence still around today to show that this conclusion is valid.

In the Old Testament people repeatedly thought that they could do things their way. That basically that they could set the terms of their relationship with God and that they knew what was best. So they ignored God's warnings. They disregarded God's teaching and they thought that instead they could do things their way. They could do what they wanted. And that kind of behavior is seen in various ways in the Old Testament.

So sometimes people thought that they could mix their faith in God with other beliefs. That's the term for that is syncretism and it was very, very prevalent at certain times in the Old Testament. People would be like, well, yes, we do want to follow God but we're going to mix that with what we see in the world around us. It was a kind of, we believe in God but we also want to be like

everybody else approach.

[21 : 29] Does that still happen today? At other times people were just half-hearted towards God. They kind of went through the motions of outward religion but their hearts weren't in it.

And as a result they didn't do anything to help people who were in need. And if you go to chapters like Isaiah chapter one or even to Malachi chapter one or two, it talks about half-hearted approaches to God.

Does that still happen today? At other times in the Old Testament people thought they could live a double life. So honouring God one day, committing awful sin the next.

Even David fell into that trap. The people in the Old Testament thought they could live a double life. Does that still happen today? And other times people in the Old Testament just thought, it's fine. Oh, it's fine, it's fine. And there were prophets at various times even in the Exas saying, look it's fine, it's going to be over soon. It was so easy for people to think, well we don't really need to do anything, it's fine.

[22 : 34] Does that still happen today? All these things, syncretism, that mixing of beliefs, half-heartedness, double life, it's fine.

They are repeatedly done in the Old Testament and they are still done today. But if you think of that key word in Malachi, the word healing, what happens if you apply these things to medical healing? So imagine you're ill, you're given a prescription and you say, oh well I think I'll take part of this but I'm going to mix it with the drugs that other people are taking. Or imagine you thought to yourself, well I'll just turn up for my appointments, I'm not really going to listen to what the doctor says but I'll just make sure I show face.

Or imagine that you were going to the doctor saying, yeah I'm going to do what you say, I'm absolutely going to follow your instructions, I'll take this medication, but then when no one's looking you abuse yourself with all sorts of harmful substances, just for a moment's pleasure.

Or imagine the doctor gave you a serious diagnosis and you responded by saying, ah it's fine. All of that thinking would wreck your chances of healing.

[23 : 55] And if I did that, and to be honest at times I have done that, so a month ago I was sledging and I hurt my finger, this finger, and I thought, ah it'll be fine.

And a month later my finger is still really sore and I think I've actually damaged it quite badly, but I ignored it because I thought it's fine. What was I? Incredibly stupid.

If that is true of medical healing offered by a doctor, is it true in regard to the spiritual healing that God is offering to you?

The second massive lesson though is that people are incredibly precious. So although the people in the Old Testament were foolish, they were incredibly precious. And we've been seeing the story of the Old Testament is that God does not give up and the reason he doesn't give up is because humanity, even though humanity deserves to be abandoned, humanity is too precious for God to give up on them.

And we see this when we highlight some of the most famous verses in the Old Testament. There's four of the most famous verses in the Old Testament. We've seen Jeremiah 29 a couple of times the last couple of weeks. Lamentations, the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

[25 : 16] Sam 32, one of my favorite verses, you're a hiding place for me. Isaiah 55, come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. That great, great invitation. These verses give amazing promises from God.

They're like the big, awesome, wonderful verses of the Old Testament. They have all got one thing in common. They were all spoken at times when people had totally stuffed things up.

And possibly my favorite version, the whole Old Testament is Hosea 11 verse 8, written at a time when God's people were an utter mess.

And God says, how can I give up on you? How can I hand you over?

My heart recoils within me. My compassion grows warm and tender. The Old Testament makes it so clear that in God's eyes, people are incredibly precious.

[26 : 24] And when people are around us, stuff up, we need to show them that they are precious. And if you have stuffed up, God is saying to you, you are still so precious.

The third lesson is that the Bible is seriously cool. One of the things I hope that you've seen during this series is just how the Bible fits together so amazingly.

We've been saying that these high moments in the Old Testament are signposts pointing towards Jesus. That diagram is not quite accurate because really it should look something like this. There's just tons of awesome connections between the Old Testament and the New. And it's just mind-blowing how it all fits together. It is so cool. And I wish I could show you this more clearly. I want to just try and give you one example.

Here are the words that John the Baptist's father spoke when John was born. Now I'm not going to read through it all because it's a long passage. I'm just going to highlight and read the Old Testament connections.

[27 : 30] There they are. Right through it. Talks about the God of Israel, redeeming his people. David, prophets, fathers, covenant, Abraham, holiness and righteousness. That's points to the law. Prophets are the most high.

To prepare his ways, that's Malachi language. To give a sunrise, that's Malachi language. To give light to those who sit in darkness. The whole thing fits together so perfectly.

When Zachariah announces the coming of John the Baptist, who's going to announce the coming of Jesus, the words he speaks are just saturated with what the Old Testament has been talking about. The Bible is seriously cool. But the last thing of all and most of all is that the story of the Old Testament tells us that God is utterly awesome.

The Old Testament is saying to us, God will not give up. The New Testament is saying God did not give up.

[28 : 36] And he actually did everything that he promised. His plan has worked. He's kept his word. He's actually fixing things and now we can have healing.

And it's all because God is just so, so good. And the result is that we can have a new start. Or in the language of Malachi, we have a son of righteousness rising on a new day.

The healing that God brings in Jesus is like the sunrise of a new morning, a fresh start, a new day, a new hope. And the result is that we can be like calves, leaping out of the barn on a beautiful morning.

How cool is that? Do you think of how you've mucked up your life, how things have been hard, how things have been difficult? God is saying, I can give you a fresh start that's just like a calf leaping out of the barn on a morning.

If your life feels dark, if you feel bruised and broken, if you feel weary and rubbish, God is saying to you again, I'm not giving up on you.

[29 : 50] And if you're not yet a Christian, God is saying to you, I am not giving up on you. And the whole of the Old Testament proves it.

God is not giving up on you. So, you know the story of the Old Testament now. You've seen all the bonkersness in it of people rejecting God.

None of that. Just go for it. Follow Jesus. You will never regret it. Amen.

Father, we thank you for everything that you have revealed to us in the Old Testament. We thank you that you are the God who promised not to give up.

And now in Jesus we can see that you kept that promise. You did not give up. We pray, O God, that we would all follow you today and every day.

[31 : 01] Amen.