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A world stage

Please read 1 Chronicles 1:1-54

Washington D.C. is a city of many monuments. One of the most interesting is the black marble memorial to the 58,156 Americans who died in the Vietnam War. It takes the form of a simple marble wall and only as you approach it do you see what makes it so striking. The names of all the American servicemen and women who died in that war are engraved onto the marble, and the list of names seems to stretch into the distance. There is a solemn atmosphere at this memorial as visitors scan the wall for the name of a friend or loved one and memories flood back.

The book of Chronicles (I say 'book' because although we think of two books of Chronicles, they were originally penned as one) is a monument to the battles of a spiritual superpower. Although the nation of Israel was never large by the standards of today, she was loved by God and occupied a special place in his

purposes of grace (see Deuteronomy 7:7–8). Her laws disclosed God’s holiness; her prophets foretold a great deliverer; her kings hinted at an everlasting kingdom; and her priests pointed to a sacrifice that would bring an end to all blood-shedding. This history book is a monument to the triumphant grace of God.

As the book of Chronicles charts the development of God’s gracious plans it introduces us to many human players in the drama. We shall find long lists of priests and Levites, sons and daughters, wives, workers and kings. This is especially true of the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles. As we begin our study of this book we are struck by its rather unusual introduction. The book begins with a list of names: ‘Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, Noah’ (1:1–3).

To people from Western cultures this might seem a rather off-putting introduction to a book, more reminiscent of an electoral register than of Scripture. Yet for cultures with a stronger emphasis on family roots such lists have a ready message. As we read through these lists, it is as though we are visiting a relative and are led into the best room to find that it is well stocked with family photographs. Along with each of those familiar faces there are memories to be cherished, lessons to be learned and debts to be acknowledged, and the cumulative effect is a sense of belonging and blessing.

When we read the list of names in this chapter we read our own family tree—whatever our racial origin. This is not exclusively Jewish; it is also universal history. Adam and Noah are fathers of us all. The families of Noah’s three sons are listed in verses 4–27. The last-mentioned and most famous of Shem’s descendants was Abraham (1:27). His family is listed in 1:28–37, in three sections according to his three wives, Hagar, Keturah

and Sarah. Abraham is the spiritual father of all those whose faith rests in the Lord Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:29). Among Abraham's physical descendants were some who did not share his faith in God, and in 1:38-54 the Edomites, or the descendants of Esau, are listed.

As well as the godly, the ungodly are mentioned in this chapter. As well as the great men, there are the otherwise unheard-of men whose lives are brought to bear upon our own by this inspired historian. Let us consider what lessons these lists contain for us.

People are important

As we read through the lists of names in chapter 1, some of them grab our attention. There are the great figures of Old Testament history, like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Esau and Israel. These men are like milestones in the history of God's dealings with men and women, marking out failures and new beginnings. Adam was the first man, and in Genesis 2:15-17 we read of God entering into a covenant with him. Adam broke the covenant (Hosea 6:7), but that fall into sin became the occasion when God unveiled his gracious promise of a Saviour (Genesis 3:15). Noah was the man who saw God destroy the human race by a flood. God preserved only Noah and his family, and then re-established his covenant with all creation (Genesis 9:8-17). Noah is an appropriate figure to refer back to in this chapter because God's covenant with him reminds us that God is Lord of the whole earth, and not just one nation. As we have seen, Abraham was the father of the faithful and when God renewed his covenant with Abraham he gave the promise of many descendants and a fruitful homeland (Genesis 12:2-4).

As well as these 'fathers of the covenant', this chapter

mentions some who live on in the names of the nations they established. There is Javan (1:5), who was the father of the Greeks, and in 1:7 we read of Tarshish (Spain) and Kittim (Cyprus). Then there are Cush, or Ethiopia (1:8, 9, 10), Mizraim (1:8, 11), whose name is the Hebrew word for Egypt, and Canaan (1:8, 13). Some of the names mentioned called for special comment, such as Nimrod (1:10), Peleg (1:19) and Hadad (1:50–51). Most, however, were just ordinary people about whom we know little more than that they existed. The only other reference to them in Scripture is in the genealogies in Genesis from which our Chronicler most probably derived his information (Genesis 5:1–32; 10:1–32; 11:10–27; 25:1–26; 36:1–43). Yet God the Holy Spirit worked in the mind and heart of the Chronicler to preserve their memory like that of many ‘unknown warriors’.

Scripture has much to say about the worth of people created by God (Genesis 1:26–27; 2:15; Psalm 8:3–8; James 3:9). God made men and women as individuals, giving them personality, individuality and dignity, and giving their service significance within his overarching purposes. Even in heaven, when all God’s people are gathered together, they will be remembered by name (Revelation 2:17). This chapter also teaches us that God places people in a community where they are bound by ties of kinship which bring privilege and responsibility. John Donne made this point when he wrote that ‘No man is an island.’ Our Chronicler makes the same point as a historian, with his emphasis on family lists.

All humanity is God’s stage

Notice how the focus of the chapter narrows as we read it. The chapter begins with Adam, the father of all men, and finishes by focusing on the family of Israel. Along the way it has passed

several important forks in the family tree. The first came in the time of Noah, when the flood reduced the whole of mankind to three families, the descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth (Genesis 6:5-8). Of these three families, the family of Shem is the one that most occupies our attention because Abraham came from that family. Abraham's sons are listed in 1:28-34, but only one was the son of promise, and that was Isaac. Of Isaac's two sons it was Jacob who received the blessing. As we follow these forks in the family tree we are able to trace the covenant line of blessing.

Our focus narrows because God sets his love on an elect people. This is one of the great themes of biblical history. The God of the Bible is a sovereign God and his free choice determines who will be among his redeemed people (Genesis 18:18-19; Deuteronomy 14:2; Amos 3:2; Malachi 1:2-3).

In the New Testament the apostle Paul responded to the complaint that it is unfair of God to choose one and pass over another: 'Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?' (Romans 9:21). As we read through the history of Israel and Judah we shall see that in every age God has chosen some whom he will preserve for himself. At times this was a very small remnant, and at others it was a large empire. Throughout every age in history God is the Lord of all, and all humanity is involved in his plans to display his power and mercy. The centre of this history is not the affairs of one nation, but the doings of the God who made and governs all. That is why it starts, not with David, Moses or Solomon, but with Adam.

Hostility faces God's people

Just because the Lord is sovereign does not mean that his

people will always have an easy life. The picture that this history gives of the covenant people should disabuse us of that naïve suggestion. This first chapter, and especially verses 38–51, reminds us that the people of God were surrounded by enemies.

Isaac's rejected son was called Esau and even though he did not appreciate his birthright as the elder son (Genesis 25:29–34), he resented losing it to his deceitful younger brother Jacob (here in 1:34 referred to by his God-given name of Israel—see Genesis 27:41; Hebrews 12:16–17). Esau's jealousy left a legacy of bitterness that was to be directed against Israel for generations to come. The Edomites (as the descendants of Esau came to be known) attacked the Israelites when they came to possess the promised land (Numbers 20:14–21). They gloated as Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and even struck down the terrified fugitives as they escaped (Obadiah 10–14). The Edomites certainly merited the vengeance of God (see Psalm 137:7–9).

The sons of Esau are listed in 1:35–42. They also became known as the people of Seir—Seir being one of Esau's descendants who gave his name to the mountain strongholds where his people lived. This rival kingdom was well organized. It had kings long before a king ruled in Israel (1:43). These kings had cities, which were a sign of wealth and power, and they were able to dominate their neighbours—including for a time the people of Israel. As a testimony to the power of this kingdom, the Chronicler lists the succession of Edomite chiefs (1:51–54).

Although this rival kingdom had stolen a march on the people of Israel and for a time was able to threaten the covenant people of God, we must note its frailty. The Chronicler draws his information about the Edomite rulers from Genesis 36, but he

adds a note of his own telling us in verse 51 that ‘Hadad also died.’ Powerful though he was in his day, Hadad was only a man whose kingdom was built on the strength of flesh and blood. Just as Hadad died, so too did his kingdom. All other earthly kingdoms will face the same fate, but God’s kingdom is an *everlasting* kingdom. Let us therefore remember the words of Psalm 47:7-9 when we face hostility from those in the world amongst whom we live and witness:

For God is the King of all the earth;
sing to him a psalm of praise.
God reigns over the nations;
God is seated on his holy throne.
The nobles of the nations assemble
as the people of the God of Abraham,
for the kings of the earth belong to God;
he is greatly exalted.