

**The Rise and Fall of Israel**  
5 of 11 in *The God Story* series

Feb. 2, 2025  
Selected Old Testament passages:  
(Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, etc.)

We're moving right along in *The God Story*, a sermon series designed to provide you with a high-level overview of the story of the Bible.

Your learning and growth throughout the series will be greatly enhanced if you read the chapter that corresponds with each week's message in the book [The God Story](#), by Alain Emerson and Adam Cox.

We've been talking about how the story of scripture— The God Story— is the overarching story which shapes our lives. Therefore, the more we come to understand and appreciate the main contours of the biblical story— its key themes and its important characters— the more meaning, purpose, orientation and direction we will find for our lives.

Because your story and mine— and the story of Cornerstone as a local church— are not self-contained stories. Our stories are sub-plots in a far greater story. Our stories are eternally significant extensions of the grand narrative of The God Story.

Along these lines, we've dedicated this year to discerning what God has in store for Cornerstone's next chapters. 2025 is all about **Finding Our Way in God's Story**. What are the next major missional moves God would have us make as a local church?

Church consultant and author Will Mancini says that the biblical story is like a GPS system that will help us find our way into the future God has in mind for us. He explains that:

Only from God's Word can we accurately understand our origin, mission, and destiny. We are not seeking a perspective at three thousand feet or thirty thousand, but an infinite vantage point from outside time and space— God's positioning system. To put our immediate pursuit of vision into perspective, it is imperative that we hit the pause button to take a fresh look at the panoramic view of redemptive history [as revealed in Scripture].<sup>1</sup>

That's precisely what we're doing in this sermon series.

In today's installment of *The God Story*, we're going to explore The Rise and Fall of Israel.

By way of brief recap, we began our journey by looking at the story of creation, and the fall of human beings into sin. In spite of this, God still longs for human beings, who bear his image, to *partner with him* in his mission to restore and bless the world, that it may flourish. To this end, God calls Abraham, and promises to make a great nation out of his descendants, who would become the people of Israel.

Last Sunday we saw how through the leadership of Moses, God miraculously rescues the people of Israel from four centuries of slavery in pagan Egypt. God makes Israel his own special people, so that he may dwell among them and lead them into the Promised Land. But the task of taking the ingrained pagan ways of Egypt out of Israel proves even harder than taking Israel out of Egypt. Because of this, the generation that had witnessed God's mighty deliverance at the Red Sea would rebel against God, and

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<sup>1</sup> Will Mancini, *Church Unique: How Missional Leaders Cast Vision, Capture Culture, and Create Movement*, p. 135.

forfeit their inheritance, wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Before he dies, Moses prepares the next generation to take their place, passing the baton of leadership to his protégé, Joshua. The task of leading God's people into the Promised Land would now fall to him, and this is where today's installment of The God Story begins.

This is one of a couple messages in this series that covers a vast amount of biblical ground. To state what is perhaps obvious, I won't be able to cover the full story of the rise and fall of Israel today. For this reason, I do encourage you to read chapter 5 of *The God Story* book. Doing so will help fill in some parts of the story that we can't get to today.

To bring some focus to this message, I'd like to look at the story of the rise and fall of Israel through the lens of one of scripture's central themes— **the presence of God**. Following this thematic thread will lead us to a core lesson for our lives as we seek to find our own way in God's story.

Moses has died, and the hopes and dreams of a generation of God's people now rest squarely on the shoulders of Moses' successor, Joshua. Back in Exodus 33, the text describes how God would meet very powerfully and personally with Moses in a special structure called the tent of meeting. The text also indicates Joshua was given some degree of access to those profound experiences of God's presence. It says that in that tent:

The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent. <sup>2</sup>

The young apprentice would linger in God's presence after Moses left the tent. Perhaps it's here, more than anywhere, that Joshua learns that if he has the *presence of God*, anything's possible.

And so, imagine what it's like for Joshua— with Moses now gone, and a new mantle of leadership responsibility weighing heavily upon him— to hear these words from God:

As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them. Be strong and courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." <sup>3</sup>

God is calling Joshua to step up and lead. Now is his time to walk in the footsteps of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. He has massive shoes to fill, and faces a daunting task, which is why God says to him no less than three times, "Be strong and courageous."

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 33:11 (NIV)

<sup>3</sup> Joshua 1:5-6, 9 (NIV)

What will make Joshua successful? This passage makes it abundantly clear that it is God's *presence*— along with obedient devotion to God's written Word— the Book of the Law— that will make possible for Joshua, and for the people of God, what would otherwise be impossible: "I will be with you," God says.

Every generation needs women and men who respond to God's call to be strong and courageous by stepping up to lead. I wonder how many of you God will call to do so in some capacity— whether here at Cornerstone or elsewhere. Perhaps, even as I say this you feel a stirring in this direction, even if you don't know the specifics about what it will mean for you just yet. If God calls you to step up and lead, how will you respond?

Your best response is to **pursue God's presence above all else**. Because the strength and courage you need not only to step up and lead, but to be faithful, fruitful and effective as someone who leads others into God's purposes, can only ever come from learning to live into the fact that God is with you wherever you go.

Indeed, the pursuit of God's presence above all else is the core lesson from the story of the rise and fall of Israel that I'd like to continue to highlight as the rest of the message unfolds.

Forty years after the previous generation had crossed through the middle of Red Sea on dry ground, the next generation of Israel would experience their own miraculous parting of waters. In Joshua chapter 3, the people cross the river Jordan as its waters stand up in a heap. Finally they enter the Promised Land. <sup>4</sup>

At the front of this great procession are priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant on long poles. The Ark— this wooden chest overlaid in gold— represented the focal point of *God's presence on earth*.

We see the Ark of God's presence again as Israel faces a series of foreboding enemies in their efforts to take possession of the Promised Land. The battle for a city called Jericho particularly stands out in this regard. <sup>5</sup>

It is not the might of their army, or the brilliance of their tactics— but *God's very presence*— the Ark of the covenant being carried in their midst as they march around the city's walls—that makes them successful in possessing not only Jericho, but also many other Canaanite strongholds throughout the Promised Land.

Do you tend to rely more on what you can accomplish through your own strength, your own efforts, your own tactics? Or is your reliance on the presence of the God who is with you; who will never leave nor forsake you?

The Promised Land is ultimately parceled out among the twelve tribes of Israel. Joshua makes it clear that the land had been granted to them not for personal gain, but for the sake of God's purposes— that they might fill it with the culture of God's loving rule and reign, for the sake of God's ultimate mission to bless and restore all nations, all people, the whole earth. Remember, as descendants of Abraham,

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<sup>4</sup> Joshua 3

<sup>5</sup> Joshua 6

they— and we, through Christ— have been blessed to be a blessing. That is God’s purpose for you, for me, for Cornerstone.

Before he dies, Joshua renews God’s covenant with God’s people, passionately charging them with these words:

... choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. <sup>6</sup>

The same choice lies before us today. Will we pursue God’s presence and purposes above all else? Or will we bow our hearts and bend our knees to the allure of the prevailing culture and its idols?

In Israel’s case, the text says that they “served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua, and the elders who outlived him...” <sup>7</sup> But this hopeful note is quickly dashed as we come to the book of Judges, which begins with these words:

... another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel... They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. <sup>8</sup>

In their book *The God Story*, Emerson and Cox observe that here:

The God who had always longed to be known is now completely unknown by a generation who have disconnected themselves from their story. <sup>9</sup>

Are you living your life disconnected from The God Story? Are you living your life disconnected from God’s presence and his purposes for you? Listen carefully: Can you hear it? Can you hear God’s loving invitation to let your story be reconnected with his?

Sadly, this period of Israel’s history— one of its darkest— is marked by a vicious 300-year cycle: The people would rebel against God, and suffer oppression at the hands of their enemies. In desperation, they would then repent, and God would send special leaders called judges to rescue them— only for the people to return to their rebellion against God, starting the whole cycle all over again. It was like the instructions on your shampoo bottle— *lather, rinse, repeat*— except no one ever got clean.

The author of Judges sums up this depressing situation with these words at the book’s end:

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit. <sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Joshua 24:15 (NIV)

<sup>7</sup> Joshua 24:31

<sup>8</sup> Judges 2:10b, 12a (NIV)

<sup>9</sup> Alain Emerson and Adam Cox, *The God Story: Encountering Unfailing Love in the Unfolding Narrative of Scripture*, p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Judges 21:25 (NIV)

It seems the plot of The God Story has completely unravelled. Once again, God will look for a willing human partner at a crucial juncture in the narrative. Enter Hannah, who we read about in the opening chapters of 1 Samuel.<sup>11</sup>

Heartbroken over her infertility, Hannah pours out her longing to God. She asks the Lord to give her a son, promising to dedicate him to the service of the Lord all the days of his life. Emerson and Cox write that:

Hannah's genuine surrender becomes a receptacle for the dreams of God. God grants Hannah the desires of her heart. The story of God will be catapulted forward again through the prayers of a barren woman.<sup>12</sup>

Show of hands: How many of you are following Jesus today because of the fervent prayers of a parent, grandparent or a parent-figure in your life? Those of you who are parents, grandparents and parent-figures of this congregation— how might the story of God be catapulted forward through your fervent prayers on behalf of the young people in your sphere of influence? Perhaps at this very moment, God is calling you into such a ministry of prayer— a ministry in which you spend time God's presence, interceding for the generations of God's people that will follow after you.

Hannah's son Samuel is born into a period of religious apathy and spiritual malaise among the people of Israel. When Samuel comes of age, Hannah, true to the promise she made to God, brings her boy to the house of the Lord to be mentored by the elderly high priest, Eli.

Samuel's innocence and hunger for the presence of God stands in stark contrast to Eli's laxness and irresponsibility, not to mention Eli's sons, who were downright corrupt. We see that Hannah's faithfulness has formed in Samuel a love for the presence of God. The text tells us that:

The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord... Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called Samuel.<sup>13</sup>

Here is young Samuel, ministering and even sleeping before the ark, which is to say he spent his days and nights lingering in *God's very presence*. God's message to Samuel is that Eli's time is up. In his place, Samuel would grow up and lead Israel as the last of the judges and the first of the prophets. And his life will serve as a bridge into a new era of The God Story.

For a time, Samuel's ministry fills the void of godly leadership in Israel. He introduces spiritual reforms, calling the people to repentance, renewing them in a life of authentic worship in God's presence. But this doesn't last, and it isn't long before the people ask for a system of rule just like their pagan neighbours. They ask to be ruled by a human king. Samuel is crushed by their request, but with heartbroken resignation, God bends to accommodate the desires of his people.

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Samuel 1:1 – 2:11

<sup>12</sup> Emerson and Cox, *The God Story*, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Samuel 3: 1a, 3b-4 (NIV)

And the LORD said to [Samuel], “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.”<sup>14</sup>

In spite of the fact that the people don’t share Samuel’s heart to pursue God’s presence, God graciously orchestrates things so that Israel’s new monarchy could get off to the best possible start. Their first king, Saul, is impressive— gifted and anointed by God. But as Emerson and Cox explain:

For all his qualities, Saul has a “divided heart”. He obeys halfway. He is insecure. He seeks the acclaim of the people too much... Saul hasn’t allowed himself to be truly “formed” in the presence of God and the fault lines deep in the structure of his identity come to the surface in the form of jealousy, pride and competitiveness.<sup>15</sup>

Things come to the point where God has had enough with Saul.<sup>16</sup> Although an everlasting kingdom could have been Saul’s, that promise would now be passed on to the next King of Israel— David— a man after God’s own heart. Here was someone with a desire to pursue God’s presence above all else. Listen to what David prays in Psalm 86:

Teach me your way, Lord,  
that I may rely on your faithfulness;  
give me an undivided heart,  
that I may fear your name.<sup>17</sup>

In a world filled with countless distractions, will we become people of divided hearts, like Saul? Or, will we allow God’s grace to form us into people with increasingly undivided hearts, like David? God will form us into people of undivided, singlehearted devotion to him *as we spend time in his presence*— time in both public and private worship, and especially time in prayer.

David will have to wait 15 long years from the time he is first anointed by Samuel to when he is actually appointed King of Judah, in the south of Israel. Another 7 years will pass before David finally becomes the King of nation of Israel, uniting all twelve of its tribes.

And most of you know that for all his accomplishments, David also has some shocking failures— moments of compromise, where his heart does become divided, leading to serious consequences in his own life, in his family, and in the nation that God has called him to lead.

Knowing our own proneness to wander from God, we join David in praying, “Lord, give us an undivided heart.”

Mercifully, David has a deeply repentant heart, and despite his sins and shortcomings, what ultimately shines through in David’s life is his pursuit of God’s presence.

In the middle of your Bible, you’ll find the book of Psalms, and most of the psalms are of course attributed to whom? To David. Emerson and Cox explain that:

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Samuel 8:7

<sup>15</sup> Emerson and Cox, *The God Story*, 83.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Samuel 13:14

<sup>17</sup> Psalm 86:11 (NIV)

Placing David's Psalms alongside [the biblical] narrative of his life helps us discover the secret of David's rise to become Israel's greatest leader ever. His passionate pursuit of God's presence had unlocked the blessings of God on his life and those he led. <sup>18</sup>

The psalms are, for the most part, written as prayers— prayers that the people of God have used for millennia to pour out their hearts to the Lord. Indeed, the psalms have been referred to as the “prayer book of the Bible.”

What does your prayer life say about your pursuit of God's presence? We know that David pursued God's presence above all else, because in the psalms, we have a record of his prayer life. The verse that perhaps best captures David's heart in this regard is Psalm 27:4, in which he says:

One thing I ask from the Lord,  
this only do I seek:  
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord  
all the days of my life,  
to gaze on the beauty of the Lord  
and to seek him in his temple. <sup>19</sup>

Ah, the Temple.

King David's greatest accomplishment would be the establishment of a culture of worship built around God's presence at the centre of Israel's national life. But David was troubled by the fact that though he himself lived in a palace, the Ark of God's presence was still being kept in a tent. And so, a great desire, a great vision is born within David's heart to build a house for God— a Temple in Jerusalem where God's presence could dwell in the midst of his people. <sup>20</sup>

God's response to David's desire is remarkable. Through the prophet Nathan, God reminds David that he's never really been that much into buildings. God has always moved freely among his people. At the same time, God hears the echo of his own heartbeat in David's request, because from the beginning of creation, God has always longed to dwell with us, to make his home with us, to be present with his people, if we would but have him.

David's desire has become one with God's desire. David wanted to build a house for God, but God declares that he will build a house for David, as it were. With the following words, God binds his plans and purposes for humanity to David's life and legacy forever. God says to David:

“Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.” <sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Emerson and Cox, *The God Story*, p. 86.

<sup>19</sup> Psalm 27:4 (NIV)

<sup>20</sup> 2 Samuel 7

<sup>21</sup> 2 Samuel 7:16 (NIV)

In the the New Testament, we learn that this promise is ultimately fulfilled through Jesus, the Messiah, David's ancestor, who will forever reign not just over one nation, but over the entire creation as King of all kings.

But God tells David that he will not be the king to build God's temple in Jerusalem. That task will fall to David's son and successor, Solomon.

It seems like Solomon's reign as king of Israel could not get off to a better start. He prays for wisdom to lead the people of God, and God lavishly bestows it upon him.<sup>22</sup> Solomon proves to be a skilled decision-maker and is anointed by the Holy Spirit to author outstanding pieces of biblical literature: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. His writings comprise the "wisdom" section of The God Story.

Solomon builds Israel into an incredibly prosperous nation, the envy of all its neighbours.

He also focuses on his divine assignment to construct the Temple in Jerusalem, bringing his father David's dream to build a dwelling place for the presence of God to reality.<sup>23</sup>

Upon the completion of this massive project, Solomon dedicates the Temple by kneeling in prayer, declaring the promises of God over this new holy space, and over God's people.<sup>24</sup>

Picture the scene as God fills the Temple with the cloud of his glorious presence.<sup>25</sup> The people fall face down in worship, as God promises Solomon that if he stays true to God's covenant, the same blessing that was bestowed on his father David would also be bestowed on him.

So, things are really good with Israel! What could possibly go wrong?

Tragically, just about everything. Starting in 1 Kings 11, we read of a shift in Solomon's reign. It becomes clear that as much as he may have loved God, he loved himself more. His life and leadership increasingly swing away from the pursuit of God's presence, as his heart becomes divided through a dual obsession with wealth on the one hand, and women on the other.

Sadly, God's hand of blessing upon Solomon's reign is removed, and the kingdom of Israel begins to crumble. A once-united nation splits into two kingdoms— the northern kingdom of Israel, and the southern kingdom of Judah.

The rest of 1 and 2 Kings tells the story of Israel's divided monarchy, and the lives of each of their kings. Most of these kings will not be interested in pursuing God's presence above all else, and accordingly, the 500 years of Israel's story after Solomon become a sorry tale of idolatry and indulgence, of evil and ego.

Emerson and Cox sum it up with these words:

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<sup>22</sup> 1 Kings 3

<sup>23</sup> 1 Kings 5-6, 7:13-51, 8:1-21

<sup>24</sup> 1 Kings 8:22-65

<sup>25</sup> 1 Kings 8:10-11



Israel had been called to change the world, but ultimately, they weren't prepared to change themselves. The mighty oak Israel had become under David had been so damaged by sin that it would need to be cut down to a stump. Only a holy seed would remain.<sup>26</sup>

Today, we've seen that the rise of Israel was a result of their pursuit and prioritization of God's presence— especially that of their leaders. The fall of Israel, on the other hand, was connected to their divided hearts, leading to the neglect of God's presence.

And so, let's be reminded of our core lesson from the story of the rise and fall of Israel: We must **pursue God's presence above all else**. We must do so in our personal lives, and in our life together as a church family. We must pursue God's presence in our Sunday services. In our small groups. In our prayer lives. In our everyday lives. Because only as we pursue God's presence above all else will we find our way in God's story.

To put it another way, **God's presence WITH us makes it possible to fulfill God's purposes FOR us**.

For this reason, it is vital that we prioritize the pursuit of God's presence, as we seek to discern God's longer-term direction for Cornerstone as a local church. To quote church consultant Will Mancini again:

As you work to discover... and articulate a [fresh] missional vision [for your church], the pursuit of God must come first... the necessity of pursuing the God who makes us visionaries cannot be overstated.<sup>27</sup>

For this very reason, in the months to come you can expect focused teachings on prayer, along with special prayer gatherings and prayer initiatives here at Cornerstone. Will you join us, as in these ways, we seek to pursue God's presence above all else as a local church family?

In doing so, be reminded that our pursuit of God's presence is always a response to his desire to be present with us. To dwell with us. To abide with us. To *commune* with us...

## **Communion**

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<sup>26</sup> Emerson and Cox, *The God Story*, p. 91.

<sup>27</sup> Will Mancini, *Church Unique*, p. 141.