

The Bible and History



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Ps. 104:1–9, Rev. 1:1–3, 2 Pet. 1:21, Daniel 2, Rev. 12:7–17, Rom. 16:20, 2 Cor. 5:17–19.

Memory Text: “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,’ says the Lord, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty’” (Revelation 1:8, NKJV).

Key Thought: Our God works in and through history, and in and through history He has given us powerful evidence for faith.

Is human history a meaningless series of events, or is there a central direction toward a specified goal, all according to a plan? The Bible makes it clear that the latter is true. Bible writers in both testaments insist that God directs history and reveals Himself in it.

Yet, not all history reveals God's will: humans are free to make bad choices, choices that influence history. The point is that just because God works through history doesn't mean He causes all that happens. What it means, instead, is that, despite the machinations and evil of human beings, God is there, working out His ultimate will and that He will bring human history to a grand and glorious close.

Biblical Christians believe that the Bible writers operated within the framework that God had revealed and that He inspired them to record the most significant events in human history. God often even provides the interpretation of these events so that we can understand what they mean.

This week we'll explore a little of how God has worked in and through world history.

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 3.

The Past and the Future

World history is usually taught as the history of civilizations. The significant facts are generally the ones that have had a bearing on the development of those civilizations. Some people argue that human affairs are, like the rest of nature, essentially cyclical in character, moving endlessly through the cycle of birth, growth, maturity, decay, and death in a series that does not have a beginning or any significant end.

The circular dial of a watch can be deceptive; as the hands revolve around and around, they can give the illusion that time recurs in a cycle. But this is not reality. The fact is that human life runs in a line, not in a renewing circle. Time, according to the Bible, is a one-way street.

What do biblical writers assert regarding human history's beginning and end? *Gen. 1:1; Job 38:1–7; Ps. 104:1–9; Rev. 1:1–3, 19; 21:1–6.*

Human history is not an unending series of repeated cycles. It had a definite beginning. It faces a glorious future. Human history has a point, a goal. Normally, you cannot be sure what the point of a story is until you have reached the end. There can always be surprises at the end, and in the best stories there often are. How, then, can we, who are still in this cosmic story, know the point? In our case, we know because God has, through His prophets, revealed it to us.

We are talking, of course, about divine revelation. Our Lord knows the future, knows all the possible choices humans can and will freely make, and He has told us how it will turn out in the end, whatever choices we make in the meantime.

How is this revelation explained in the New Testament? *2 Pet. 1:21.*

Unless we distrust the Word of God and what it says about itself, we can know that the Lord knows the end and has revealed it to us. He's not only the God of the past and the present, He's the Lord of the future, as well. Thus, we can trust that the future will unfold as He has said it would.

How easy is it to predict the future? How often have you gotten it wrong? The good news is that God does know the future, does know all that will happen. How can you draw comfort from the realization that a God of love knows about all that comes our way?

The Prophets as Historians

All through the Bible, the prophets use the phrase, “The word of the LORD” (or an equivalent “Thus says the LORD,” etc.). In short, what they are saying is, I am not speaking these truths to you; it’s God speaking them through me. So, you’d better listen.

How is this idea revealed in the following verses? *Jer. 1:14–19.*

The reader is allowed to see the painful historical process by which the capital city Jerusalem is to be handed over to Babylon, in fulfillment of God’s predictions of Israel’s fate.

Human kings, of course, rarely believe that history works this way. They imagine that their governing decisions shape public life. They think that they, ultimately, are in control. But Jeremiah (and other prophets) assert otherwise. Israel’s rulers discover that the historical process is leading the nation toward devastation and then exile. The book of Jeremiah is a stunning reminder of the power of God’s Word to be fulfilled in historical events.

How do Isaiah and Nahum testify to this similar point? *Isa. 14:24–27, Nah. 1:5–10.*

This infinite power of God seen in human history is also exhibited in nature. Psalm 104, for example, describes the processes of nature not as a self-contained, autonomously functioning mechanism, but rather as processes in which God is acting at every moment. The Bible doesn’t portray God as having created the world and then leaving it on its own in complete subjection to natural laws. Natural laws are, indeed, part of how God sustains the world, but all of these laws are there only because He created and sustains them.

Many scientists declare that the world began by accident and that it will end that way, as well. Hence, there's not much meaning to all that comes in between (how could there be?). Why, deep down, do you know that this view can't be right?

Daniel 2 and the Providence of God in History

In the 1700s, a Frenchman, an atheist, speculated that because all of the universe, including human actions, were predetermined by natural laws—then, ideally, if someone could know all of those laws and all the positions of all the particles in the universe at a given time, then that person could know everything that would happen.

Of course, humans do have free will, free choice. God made us that way. As beings who can love, we had to be given free choice, because love that is forced cannot be love. To make us capable of love, God had to make us free. And yet, God's power is so great that, even with human free will, He knows the future perfectly, regardless of the free choices that we make.

Review the prophecy of Daniel 2. In what ways is this one chapter powerful evidence, proof even, that God knows the future, and far in advance, too?

This chapter was written more than twenty-six hundred years ago. Look at how history has unfolded exactly as God predicted. In one sense, this prophecy should be more meaningful for us today than for those who lived millennia ago. And that's because we, today, looking back at history, can see exactly how these empires came and went, just as predicted. If you had read this prophecy during the time of Media-Persia, you wouldn't have seen the rise and fall of the empires that followed. Today, looking back, we can see much more than someone from long ago could see. Thus, the prophecy holds a power for us that those in the past couldn't appreciate.

The amazing thing is that despite these millions of people, all with free will, who lived during the long epochs depicted in Daniel 2, the Lord knew exactly what was going to happen, what kingdoms would rise and fall. And He knew it way in advance.

The prophet Daniel was right about the rise and fall of all those kingdoms: Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece, and Rome, including the breakup of Rome into smaller powers that still exist today. From where we stand in history, the only kingdom left is the last one, God's eternal kingdom (Dan. 2:44). If he was right about all the ones so far, how foolish would it be not to trust him about the last one?

The Great Controversy and History

No matter how apparently chaotic, how seemingly out of control, human history is not unfolding in a vacuum. There's a story behind it, a drama, a struggle between two radically different principles. We're talking, of course, about the great controversy. Only with that background can we even begin to get an understanding of human history and what it all means.

How do these texts help us to understand world history? *Rev. 12:7–17; Job 2:1, 2; Isa. 14:12–14; Gen. 3:15; Eph. 6:12; Rom. 16:20.*

Satan is real, the battle is real, and only at the Cross was he defeated and his destruction made certain.

“Heaven viewed with grief and amazement Christ hanging upon the cross. . . . Yet there stood men, formed in the image of God, joining to crush out the life of His only-begotten Son. What a sight for the heavenly universe! . . .

“Satanic agencies confederated with evil men in leading the people to believe Christ the chief of sinners, and to make Him the object of detestation. . . .

“Satan saw that his disguise was torn away. His administration was laid open before the unfallen angels and before the heavenly universe. He had revealed himself as a murderer. By shedding the blood of the Son of God, he had uprooted himself from the sympathies of the heavenly beings. . . . The last link of sympathy between Satan and the heavenly world was broken.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 760, 761.

Why was Satan not destroyed then?

“The angels did not even then understand all that was involved in the great controversy. The principles at stake were to be more fully revealed. And for the sake of man, Satan’s existence must be continued. Man as well as angels must see the contrast between the Prince of light and the prince of darkness. He must choose whom he will serve.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 761.

What the Bible teaches, and Ellen White, too, is that events here on earth are linked to the wider conflict, the great controversy between Christ and Satan. This controversy forms the background motif for all that happens here, whether in our individual lives or in the larger course of human history. Everything unfolds in the context of the great controversy. And the good news is that, after the Cross, Satan’s defeat was guaranteed, and this controversy will end, and with it all the pain and suffering and violence and fear and uncertainty that fill human history.

The Cross in History

Have you ever noticed that world history is divided by one event? That event was not the rise or fall of some major empire, as one would expect. Nor was it the discovery of a new continent. Instead, world history has been divided by the birth of a single itinerant rabbi living in a relatively obscure part of the vast Roman Empire. Considering the vast number of Jews born at this time, it's even more revealing that this one birth, among so many, should be the marker that has divided world history into its two largest epochs.

That birth, of course, is of Jesus.

In the context of God and history, we can better appreciate the significance of salvation. For here, at the Cross—with the obvious failure of all humans, and thus, human history—is where the background and also the deepest meaning of world history unfold. The Cross tells us that, by forgiving us and making us His children, God has opened up a new future for us, a future in which we no longer need to drag along with us the enormous guilt of our past or of our personal history. This guilt has been taken away by One who “has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (*Isa. 53:4, NKJV*).

The whole doctrine of salvation can be expressed in this one sentence: God cancels our hopelessly stranded history and in its place puts His history. Through Him, the history of slavery to sin is ended in our life. Through Him, the stains of the past should not rise up to accuse, torment, and mock us. Our personal history, which would condemn each one of us, is replaced with Jesus’ perfect history. Thus, in Him we find not only liberation from our past but the promise of a wonderful future. At the Cross, the Lord guaranteed that, whatever our history or whatever happened in world history, a new and glorious future awaits us and the world.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:17–19. According to these verses what did Jesus do for all humanity? How has this event changed human history?

Our sins have been laid upon the shoulders of a Lord who willingly died beneath a load of human guilt and who, in its place, gave us salvation. And His promised climax of history will grant us eternal history with the Author of history. The destiny of every person is involved. The second coming of Christ will be decisive. Both the Old and New Testaments promise a “new heaven and a new earth.”

If you have accepted Christ, how should your future be different, now that your past history won’t be used to condemn you, no matter how much you deserve to be condemned?

Further Study: “The Bible is the most ancient and the most comprehensive history that men possess. It came fresh from the fountain of eternal truth, and throughout the ages a divine hand has preserved its purity. . . . Here only do we find an authentic account of the origin of nations. Here only is given a history of our race unsullied by human pride or prejudice.

“In the annals of human history the growth of nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as dependent on the will and prowess of man. The shaping of events seems, to a great degree, to be determined by his power, ambition, or caprice. But in the word of God the curtain is drawn aside, and we behold, behind, above, and through all the play and counterplay of human interests and power and passions, the agencies of the all-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will.

“The Bible reveals the true philosophy of history.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 173.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ For years, philosophers and theologians have debated the issue of God’s foreknowledge and human free will. Many see the two ideas as incompatible. They argue either that we don’t have free will or that God doesn’t know the future. Why are both those positions wrong? What evidence do we have in the Bible that we do have free will? What evidence do we have that God does know the future? The truth must be that, even with our free will, God knows future events before they unfold. Why is there no contradiction in the idea of God having foreknowledge of a choice that is freely made?

- ❷ One of Satan’s harshest attacks is on Daniel 2, which provides such rational evidence for God’s existence. After all, what firmer foundation can you have for faith than something as solid and unchangeable as world history? Part of his attack is to use scholars to argue that Daniel 2 was written about 165 B.C., long after many of the events predicted in it already happened. Yet, the argument is destroyed by the prophecy itself. How could Daniel have so accurately predicted the break up of Rome into the nations of modern Europe, which didn’t happen until more than five or six hundred years later than 165 BC? If an amazing prediction like that required supernatural foreknowledge, why shouldn’t we then trust the book for what it says about itself and when it was written, as opposed to accepting a view that is refuted by the prophecy itself? The whole point of the late dating of Daniel is to try to denude it of its prophetic power. As we can see, this attempt fails, even miserably. Discuss.

Summary: However chaotic world history can appear, above it all the Lord is working out His purposes, and human history will end with the glorious second coming of Jesus.

From Despair to Hope

by DOWELL CHOW

Neng Suan cried out in agony. His son—his only son—was dead.

Neng and his wife have five daughters, but, in their culture, girls count for nothing. If someone asked Neng how many children he had, his answer was, “I have a son.” A son meant stability, support in old age, and hope for the future. But suddenly his only son, his pride and joy, was dead. Now Neng had nothing, no hope, and no future.

Neng and his family live in a village in Southeast Asia. In his culture, if a couple dies without a son, the relatives swoop in and claim everything the couple owns—their land, their home, their livestock—everything. Daughters have no rights; it’s as if they don’t exist. And now Neng and his wife had no son. His life became meaningless.

Before his son died, Neng had been attending a Protestant church, but when his son died, his hope and faith died with the boy. He stopped attending church. His life became enshrouded in darkness. He began drinking, and before long, he was smoking and chewing *khaini*, a tobacco-lime product.

Neng lost interest in his work and spent his days drinking. His whole family gave up on him, except for his wife, who supported the family by cultivating a few crops in her hillside garden. She tried to encourage her distraught husband, but nothing seemed to bring peace to his troubled soul.

Then one night Neng turned on his radio looking for distraction. He found a program that caught his interest. It was called the *The Voice of Hope*. The speaker’s voice soothed him, and the message brought hope to Neng’s heart. From that night on, Neng listened to the program.

Neng learned that the speaker, Pastor Khan Suan, would be holding meetings near his home. Neng decided to attend the meetings. His wife went with him, and together they experienced the love of God anew. Neng and his wife surrendered their lives to Christ and asked to be baptized.

Neng claimed God’s promise in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (*NKJV*), and with Christ’s strength, he gave up his self-destructive habits. People noticed the changes in Neng’s life. “God understands my loss,” he says. “He gave His son to die for me. Although I lost my precious son, I have found comfort in Christ.”

Neng is glad that in his deepest sorrow, God sent him the message of love through Adventist World Radio. Your mission offerings help support this ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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