

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 of the point of a story 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, and 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 French 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 far 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 had 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.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Revelation 1:8*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Examine history through the lens of the great controversy, which reveals God's will and character, including a deep respect for free choice.

Feel: Value a God who goes to such lengths to demonstrate the foundations of His government through the events of history, the highlight being the Cross.

Do: Believe the Spirit-authored revelations of history and prophecy and choose to interpret earth's last-day events according to Scripture.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Greatest Story

A How does the great controversy inform our understanding of the past, present, and future?

B Why has God taken such pains to allow free choice? What does this demonstrate about His character?

II. Feel: The Cross at the Center of History

A How does the Cross teach us to value a God who allows Himself to be murdered by His created beings?

B Why is the Cross the apex of history?

C What feelings are awakened in us as we dwell on God's revelations of the future, which are told through Daniel and other prophets?

III. Do: Free Choice

A How do we demonstrate our appreciation of God's character as it has been revealed throughout history, especially at the Cross?

B How does our acceptance of prophetic revelation affect our relationship with God?

► **Summary:** The Bible not only chronicles God's interpretation of history but documents God's ability to foretell the future. The most critical historical event of all is the Cross, which transformed history, bridging the gap that sin created between God and humanity.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Human history opens a window to the working of God’s divine purpose and will. If we look closely, we can trace God’s fingerprints in human affairs. However, tracing God in history will never remove our need to see Him with eyes of faith.

Just for Teachers: After sharing the following introduction to this week’s learning cycle, ask your class to list examples of past and present misrepresentations of history. Examine the reasons why some are prone to “bend” history.

Historical revisionism (the process of altering an accepted, usually long-standing view of events in history) is a practice that has been elevated to a fine art by some in the media. But this practice predates the modern media by millennia. The Bible itself gives an exposé of one of the more infamous and blatant accounts of this distortion. In the Gospels, we find recorded a post-Resurrection plot of attempted revisionism spun against Jesus. In the cruelest twist of irony, this plot is devised and sanctioned by no less authority than the members of the very priesthood that Jesus once set up in ages past. These same priests bribed the Roman soldiers, who had guarded the tomb of Jesus, to get them to spread the rumor that His body was stolen. It was the basest lie, designed to cover up the fact, at any cost, that He had risen from the dead.

History is prone to abuse and misuse. Never underestimate humanity’s desire to remake history to its liking. As someone once noted, those who write the history of an event rarely do so in a manner that reflects negatively upon themselves.

Consider This: Ask the class to consider the following questions: If God is the only Being who knows history perfectly, can we humans with all of our biases and prejudices see His moving in history? How can we be sure that we are not spiritualizing history in an attempt to move God’s existence and intervention in human affairs?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: Throughout the Bible we see God’s writers telling and retelling the story of God’s work in the scope of humanity’s existence. This section seeks to examine why this retelling is important,

the close connection God has to us through Christ, and how Satan works to cloud God's narrative.

Bible Commentary

I. Telling and Retelling (*Read Revelation 1:8 and Deuteronomy 9:1–29 with the class.*)

Our study for this week examines God's working in history as seen through the lens of His Word, the Holy Bible. The memory text for this week captures the sweep of God's existence in one of the most quoted verses in all of Holy Writ. God is both the beginning and the end, the One who was, is, and is to come—and, lest we forget, “The Almighty.” John is struggling to reduce the supernatural nature of God to something we humans can grasp.

Throughout Scripture we see efforts written to remind human beings of God's awesome greatness and magnificent goodness. As the Israelites stood on the borders of the Promised Land, Moses began to recount Israel's history, specifically God's goodness in spite of their unworthiness. In verse 5, he made this searing statement, “ ‘It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord your God drives them out from before you, and that He may fulfill the word which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’ ” (*Deut. 9:5, NKJV*).

Moses goes on to remind Israel of its many failures and of God's abundant grace. In the oral culture in which Moses operated, recounting history was more than mere formality. If history was forgotten, trouble was sure to follow. Sadly, Israel often forgot God's hand in its history and, when it did, apostasy would follow.

Consider This: Can believers retain a deep connection with the One who is “Alpha and Omega” without a careful understanding of His work in history? Why, or why not? Who in the New Testament retells the history of God's leading in Israel? How does God's historical record inform our Christian experience and walk?

II. Nature Talk (*Read Psalm 104 and Colossians 1:17 with the class.*)

Monday's study, “The Prophets as Historians,” shares the fascinating idea that processes of nature are not a “self-contained, autonomously functioning mechanism” but rather the place where God is acting every moment. We know that God's creation speaks to us (*Ps. 19:1, 2*), but there's so much more that we do not grasp.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian believers about the prominence

of Jesus Christ in God’s creation and in the sustenance of planet Earth. He commented that Christ was “before all things, and in Him all things consist” (*Col. 1:17, NKJV*).

According to *The SDA Bible Commentary*, the word *consist* means literally “‘to stand together,’ ‘to hold together,’ or ‘to cohere.’ The form of the verb in Greek stresses an original organization and a continued maintenance of the organization. The power that holds the far-flung orbs of the universe on their appointed courses with mathematical accuracy, the power that holds the particles of the atom on their predetermined orbits, is the same. By the power of Christ all things cohere. Not only did He bring them into being, He maintains them each moment.”—Vol. 7, p. 192.

Consider This: As Monday’s study makes clear, some argue that God created the physical world and left it on its own. Many scientists don’t believe that God even exists, to say nothing of His act of Creation. How do we as Christians compete with this thinking? Should we even attempt to address those in and out of our ranks who question the biblical historical record of Creation? Discuss.

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: This practice section is meant to examine God’s historical record and how it is viewed beyond our Adventist Christian circle.

Thought Questions:

- 1 Tuesday’s lesson study focused on Daniel 2. History details the rise of the kingdoms spoken of in Daniel 2. In the face of this prophecy being fulfilled, why might some still refuse to believe in the God who gave Daniel this vision of the future?
- 2 Why don’t historical facts about God’s working compel some people to believe? What problems of faith arise when one seeks to corroborate the biblical historical record with that of secular history? Are the two compatible? Explain.

Application Questions:

- 1 If God led biblical writers to record His acts in the affairs of human

beings, then we can be sure that it is important for us to remember them. How do you record God's act in your personal history? What record of God's working in your life will you leave behind?

2 One of the truly beautiful points in this week's lesson is found in Thursday's study, which makes the point that Jesus' death for our sins not only washed us clean but also created for us a new history, one that will continue for eternity. If someone asked you to sum up your history pre- and post-Christ, what would you say, and why?

Questions for Witnessing:

1 Read Isaiah 43:12. What word did God use to describe Israel? What was the unique calling that He had for the Israelites? Have they fulfilled that calling?

2 If God singled out the Jews to be His witnesses, what was to form the core of their testimony about who God is? In other words, what were they to tell the world about God by way of their lifestyle and the words that they spoke?

3 What aspects of Israel's history might they share to show God's hand in their lives? What aspects of your life do you share to show people God's hand in yours?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Ask your students to consider how those in crisis might misunderstand God's working. Then apply what we've learned this week to the following situation.

A despondent worker sits in his office after speaking with his boss. The meeting didn't go well. He knew that layoffs had been coming, but he never thought it would happen to him. As he dwells upon his new reality, he grows angry. He remembers all the slights he endured from coworkers who did not work nearly as hard as he did yet continue to be employed. He even contemplates getting even.

On his way out of the office, he stops at your cubicle and tells you the bad news.

"I don't know why this is happening to me," he says, hanging his head. "I try to do everything right. I work hard. I go to church. I take care of my family. Why is God doing this to me?"

Based on what you've learned this week, what would you say to this coworker about how God works in our lives and in history?