

***The Story Series***  
***Week 17: The Fall of Judah***  
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Good morning! It's great to be able to share God's Word with you here today. As you probably guessed from the video we watched together, the plot of the Old Testament *Story* we have been looking at takes another nasty, downward spiral. Today's *Story* tells the utter and absolute destruction and devastation of God's people. How uplifting, huh?

You might also have figured out that with today being Week 17 of this series, we only have five more weeks before we complete the entire chronological *Story* of the Old Testament. It's hard to believe we have covered this much ground together.

Just in case you missed a week or two in our journey together, I thought I would spend a little time this morning reviewing the first 16 chapters of the *Story*. Don't worry, I'll try to get you home before your pot roast is burned to a crisp!

So what is *The Story* of the Bible all about? It is a story about a Father – God, the Father Almighty – and his kids. That's us, by the way. We are God's children. The Bible *Story* is our personal story. The *Story* begins with the Father creating his beautiful children and this wonderful earth where we live. In the beginning, the relationship between the Father and his children is one of love in its purest form. We see the Father and his children walking together in the Garden, experiencing life together, side by side.

But God gives his children some ground rules – one rule actually. Don't eat from *that* tree. "Why?" his kids ask. Because if you eat the fruit of that tree, God tells them, everything will change. Right now, God tells his children, you understand that I am the Lord, and you are not. If you eat the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, you will become confused. You will challenge my authority and question my unconditional love for you. I know what is best for you, God tells them, and I have your best interest at heart, so let me be in control of your life.

But like any child who you tell *not* to touch something, Adam and Eve become overwhelmed with the desire to touch the fruit they are forbidden to touch. Our free will makes its first appearance. And from that point on, there is a rift between God the Father and his children. The rest of *The Story* can be summed up by God's relentless, purposeful pursuit to win us back. The Bible is the story of God getting his family back.

Adam and Eve have children, and they have children, and they have children, and they have children, and they are all one BIG mess! God knows that something drastic has to be done in order to break this vicious cycle and so God calls a man named Noah to build a big boat, the ark. God tells Noah that he will send a great flood to wipe out all of the sinful people of

the earth. The boat will provide the means by which Noah's faithful family (and two of every animal) will be saved from the great flood.

After the flood, Noah's children have more children, and they have children, and they also have children, and once again they are all one BIG mess! So God goes with a different strategy. God calls one man, Abraham, and builds one nation by which all of the people of the earth will come to know the goodness of God's mercy and love.

Abraham, Isaac, then Jacob. Jacob's twelve sons become the leaders of the 12 tribes of God's holy nation, Israel. Jacob has a favorite son, Joseph – the one with the fancy coat. Joseph is sold as an Egyptian slave by his jealous brothers. Sounds like such a cruel thing to do, but God uses it to bring about something good, namely, saving Jacob's family from the famine in Canaan. Jacob moves his family to Egypt where there is plenty of food, thus beginning the period of Israel serving as slaves in Egypt.

In order to free his people from slavery, God lifts up another man – Moses. God speaks to Moses through a burning bush and tells him to go to King Pharaoh and demand, "Let God's people go!" Pharaoh refuses, so God sends 10 horrific plagues upon the Egyptians. Pharaoh finally releases God's people, the Red Sea parts, and God's people find themselves wandering in a barren wilderness.

In the wilderness, God gives his people 10 basic rules to live by, called the 10 Commandments. They balk, choose another god, and God disciplines his children. They end up wandering in the wilderness for 40 years before God allows his people to enter into the Promised Land. Finally, God's people are home.

But now they have a new challenge. The land in which they now find themselves is filled with people who aren't like them, who don't live as they live. They don't believe in the one, true God. They don't love their neighbor as themselves. So God sends people called judges to help the people understand that God expects them to be the example. All of the other peoples and nations are to learn the will and ways of God by watching the Israelites in action. They are to transform the world by living out the ways of God in their everyday lives. Through the nation of Israel, the world will come to know the one, true God.

Once again, God's people don't rise to the challenge. Instead, they demand to have a king "like all of the other nations have." Instead of being the role model for the other nations, Israel chooses to become just like them. In this point of *The Story*, I envision God and Israel having a conversation much like a conversation between a father and a teenager. It goes something like this:

"Daddy, can I have a king?"

"No, you can't. I'm sorry."

"But Dad, everyone else gets to have one!"

“True, but you’re not like everyone else. Remember, you already have a king. I, the Lord, am your King.”

“That doesn’t count! I want a *real* king!”

“Alright. Have it your way.”

Israel gets her king. First, King Saul followed by David and Solomon. Although each king tries his best to keep the people focused on God, their human, sinful nature has a way of rearing its ugly head, causing God’s people to get off track. So God sends yet another group of people – this time prophets – who courageously address the people’s sin in hopes to bring them to repentance, to turn them back once again to the ways of God.

Still, the people refuse to fully put their faith and trust in the one, true God. So God removes his hand of protection and blessing from them, and the surrounding nations invade God’s people, take them prisoner, and exile them to foreign lands. The Assyrians take over the northern tribe of Israel; the Babylonians capture the southern tribe of Judah.

Whew. That’s the last 16 weeks in a nutshell. So now today, Week 17, we encounter (as I said earlier) the utter and absolute destruction and devastation of God’s people. Nothing is left, or so it seems. Knowing that there are five more weeks left in the Old Testament portion of this *Story* series, it gives us a clue that maybe God has something else up his sleeve. What is God up to? What move will God make next?

One thing that we must understand is this: As odd as it sounds, it was the most loving thing God could have done to allow his people to face the consequences of their disobedience. Did you get that? God was showing love to his people by allowing them to be cast out of the Promised Land. Why is that? Because time and time again, God had warned his people that if they continue to choose to walk in ways contrary to his will, there would be consequences. To walk away from God is to distance ourselves from the source of all goodness and blessing.

God, our heavenly Father, is a perfect, good and loving parent. And part of what it means to be a perfectly good and loving parent is to allow consequences to play out. God enforces consequences. Truth be told, it’s one of the most loving things God does for us: he delivers on his consequences. Believe it or not, it’s the way we learn to trust God.

If you are a parent or teacher, you know all too well that the worst thing you can ever do is to not enforce the agreed upon consequence. If a child disobeys and you never follow through on the consequence, that child learns to not trust you. The child learns to not take the parent seriously. But when we follow through on disciplining our children, we are actually building trust. Our kids learn that we will do what we say we will do.

So God, as that perfect parent, wants to build trust with his people and so he enforces the consequences. He allows his people to be overthrown and cast out of the land God had given to them. God does what he says he will do, which builds trusts with his people. Even though God's people are cast out, there is no denying it: God will do what he says he will do.

Holding his people accountable is the last thing God wants to do. As we reviewed *The Story* earlier, just think of how many warnings God gave to his people, how many second, third, and fourth chances God offered. God is so patient with his people. But ultimately, because God is that perfect, good and loving parent, he follows through on the consequence of their sinful behavior, reminding them that he can be trusted.

And as they are reminded that God can be trusted, they naturally begin to remember the promises God has made to them. They think to themselves, "Even though we are scattered and broken, God still loves us. God has promised never to leave us or forsake us. God will do what is necessary in order to win us back." Believe it or not, through the exile event, their hearts begin to have a spiritual awakening. The Israelites begin to refocus their hearts on the one, true God and try to discern what God is up to in their lives. "What move will God make next to prove once again that nothing can ever separate us from his love?" they ask themselves.

In order to help the people discern what God is up to, God sends some faithful messengers –Jeremiah and Ezekiel – who speak God's Word to the people in exile. In the Scripture reading today, we heard Jeremiah's plea for the people to return to God, of God's desire to win their hearts back. Sometimes words fall short, so God gifts Ezekiel with a powerful, unforgettable vision of redemption to share with the Israelites. Ezekiel paints this picture of a valley filled with dead, dried-up bones. A valley filled with bones, you say? What's so good about that? When we take a closer look at the picture, those dead, dry bones begin to rattle. The bones of each person come together once again. Muscles and skin form over those bones. Then the Spirit of the Lord comes over those bones and breathes new life into each one. And those dead, dry bones take on new life.

The message is crystal clear. From the dead, rebellious lives of God's people, God will bring forth something new, something glorious. He will resurrect their dead bodies! Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord spoke these words: "O my people, I will open your graves and cause you to rise again. Then I will bring you to the Promised Land. I will put my Spirit within you, and you will live again and return home. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have done what I said I will do. I, the Lord, have spoken!"

I'm hoping those words sound a tad familiar to you. It is the same promise that God has spoken over your life. "I will open your grave, and bring forth within you new life. And I will show you the way to the new home that I have prepared for you." God is on a mission to redeem and save our lives. God has a plan to win back all of his wayward children. We, who once were dead, will live again. We, who once were separated from God, will be brought once again into his glorious presence.

This is the promise that God has made to each of us. You can count on God. God is trustworthy. God will do what he says he will do. When all hope seems lost, God will act and restore you to new life. No amount of sin or rebellion on our part – not even death – will be able to hold God back. Even though we experience the consequences of our sin, they are not the end of the story. No matter how dry and brittle the bones are in your life, no matter how consequence-filled your life is, God is ready to act in your life. God is about to bring new life out of your dry, dead bones.

God is on this relentless, purposeful pursuit to win us back. The *Story* of the Bible is all about God winning us back. God has already set into motion the dawning of a new day in our lives. God has declared, “I will have the last word.” And the last word God will speak into our lives is LIFE, abundant life – both now and in the world to come.

God has claimed us as his people. You can count on God. God is trustworthy. God will do what he says he will do. Thanks be to God. Amen.