

The Story: Don't Make God's Big Things Small

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[0 : 00] So this morning we're continuing in our sermon series on the story. And anyone who's not been here, I'm going to give you five seconds. God has an upper story. God is at work.

God's will is at work. The lower story is our story. It's not somehow less. It's not somehow inferior. But we need to understand that our lower story and God's upper story are always working at the same time.

Sometimes God's people connect with God's upper story. But quite often we don't. Quite often we miss the story. We miss what God is doing in our lives.

We miss what God is calling us to do in our lives as part of the upper story. So this morning as we continue in our series on the story, I want to take a moment to recognize something.

That what we've experienced here this morning as we've participated in this dedication, as we've declared our support for George and Nana as they seek to be godly parents, as we've committed ourselves to being intentional about this, do you recognize what happened this morning?

[1 : 14] Obviously we've had an Echetication. You're welcome. But we've also witnessed, not only witnessed but participated in, a beautiful intersection point, a beautiful connection between God's upper story and his plan for us and our lower story as human beings.

Echetic is a baby. He has parents. We are his church family. But God is at work in his life, in George and Nana's lives and in our own.

And not in some vague way. Oh yeah, that's nice. God's kind of at work. But in a real way because we just experienced it this morning. George and Nana have recognized that Echetic is not their baby.

He is, biologically, as Shola alluded to. But he is God's child. They've declared this morning, they've recognized this morning, that fact.

And we have joined with them in recognizing that. And it's a beautiful and holy thing. It's important that we recognize that it's not just checking off a box, but we have committed to something.

[2 : 41] We have covenanted together in something this morning. And this morning as we continue in the story, we're going to look at how the big things of God's plan for us can often get lost in the small things that we consider important.

So maybe you're like me. God help you. Maybe you're like me. You've got a place in your house where all the one day all things are kept.

Feel that? Where all those things have wound up, where they're stored, where they're held on to, just in case. Do you have a stack of those, one of those days books by your bedside table?

Oh, this is a good book. I'm adding that on my Amazon wish list that I'll never actually get to. Do you have clothes in your closet that, oh, one day when I lose those 10 pounds, I've got an entire section of wardrobe here.

One day I will get there. Do you have sports equipment? We have rollerblades in our garage that used to get a lot of, and one day I will, or musical instruments, or craft supplies that fall into that one day category.

[4 : 09] This is not about making you feel guilty. I want you to realize that. But there are a few people here, and people that I know, who might encourage you to get some of those one day things out of your life, to let go of them, to extend your self-grace that maybe one day I'll never get to this, and that's okay too.

Because I've asked myself in the past, when it comes to things like this in my life, if I could let go of some of these small things, really insignificant things ultimately, what truly big things might God be able to do with me, or with my life?

And as we continue in our series on the story this morning, our sermon is titled, Don't Make God's Big Things Small. And we find ourselves in the book of Ezra.

So the big idea for us this morning is this. What does God do when we make his big things our small thing?

The book of Ezra follows the book of 2 Chronicles in the Bible. And it follows that 2 Chronicles history of the Jewish people.

[5 : 32] It records their return to the land after being held captive in Babylon. So who was Ezra? Ezra was a priest, a scribe, so someone would dictate to him and he would write because he was skilled in that way.

And Ezra was also a great leader. So to give us a bit of context, 2 Chronicles ends with Cyrus, the king of Persia. And Cyrus asks for volunteers, against all odds, asks for volunteers to return to Jerusalem to reconstruct the temple, the house of God, Persian king.

That's important to note. Ezra chapter 1, verses 1 to 3. You can follow along in your Bible if you have it open or you can listen as I read it aloud for us.

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word the Lord had spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus, the king of Persia, to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put in writing.

This is what Cyrus, the king of Persia, says. The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build the temple for him at Jerusalem in Judea.

[7 : 09] In Judah, pardon me. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them.

And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with free will offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem. Is that striking you as odd? Persia, one of the most powerful nations, not people of God, their king is saying, I've been told by God, the God of Israel, not my own God, to bless his people by sending them home, to pay for their way back home, and to help them to rebuild a temple for their God.

So remember that we've learned that the Babylonians had destroyed the city of Jerusalem. We learned that a few weeks ago. They defeated the people of Israel and they took them into exile. But after the death of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, we heard about him last week, two weeks ago, Babylon had no strong kings.

[8 : 48] Nebuchadnezzar was it. And so the Babylonians were then eventually conquered by the Persians. Enter Cyrus. The people of Israel remained captive to the Persians.

But the Persians, it's important to recognize, had a more relaxed policy towards captives than other nations. You remember the Egyptians forced the Israelites into slavery.

The Babylonians took them from their land. But the Persians had a more relaxed approach. They even actually allowed them to own property in some cases, to have jobs in some cases.

In fact, many Jews, as we read in Scripture, such as Daniel, who we learned about last week, Mordecai, Esther, other Jewish people, and Esther we'll learn about next week, by the way, these prominent Jewish people rose to prominent positions within the nation, in spite of being held captive.

But we find that Cyrus, the king of Persia, went one step further. He actually allowed some exiled nations to return to their homeland. Kind of defeats the purpose of taking someone captive, right, when you let them go again.

[10 : 16] But it does speak volumes about Cyrus as a leader. What a nice guy. Right? Actually, no. What a strategic guy.

Scripture tells us that three generations have passed with the Jewish people in exile to Babylon. And then Babylon fell to Persia.

And I love how God works here because he uses Cyrus. He uses a pagan king to draw people's attention to himself.

Cyrus is a Persian king, the ruler of one of the nations who had oppressed God's people. And God specifically uses him, an oppressor, to inspire God's people to return to Jerusalem and build a temple.

Do you remember that closer to the beginning of our series and the story, we learned how God hardened Pharaoh's heart. He hardened his heart so that Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go.

[11 : 32] God's plan in that time was to show his power through the many miracles that he worked in response to Pharaoh's stubborn resistance. But here, with Cyrus, we see that God is actually turning the heart of someone who should be theoretically opposed to his people instead towards them.

Cyrus releases the Jews to return to Jerusalem and build God's temple. So what is the big deal about God's temple?

Are you asking that at all? Have you ever asked that? Quickly, the temple refers and reflects God's passion.

The temple in Jerusalem is the literal reminder that God is passionate about wanting to live with his people.

The temple also reflects God's problem with sin. The fact that sin separates God from his people. And the temple is a very physical, very tangible way for people to bridge that separation through sacrifice.

[13 : 01] The temple also represents God's solution. salvation. It's a place where sacrifices can be made to atone for sin so that his people can regain access to his presence.

The Bible says in Ezra 3, 1-3, let's read this together. When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem.

When the seventh month came and the Israelites said, sorry, sorry guys, I missed a sentence. So then Joshua, son of, do your best with the names, they're tricky, Josedach and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel, son of Shealtel, and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it in accordance with what is written in the law of Moses, the man of God.

Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices.

Sorry for the technical difficulties. So things are off to a great start, right? People are back where they should be. They're following God's big upper story plan.

[14 : 35] They're seeking to make a way to return to God. But the people begin well, but as we've seen over and over in the story and in our own lives, we start to lose focus.

God's big thing, his priority for their lives in Scripture here, or in our lives, becomes their little thing. We read in Scripture that when the enemies of the Israelites learned that they were building their temple, were rebuilding their temple, they offered their support.

not in a sincere effort to encourage them, but in a way to try and mess up their plans.

Yeah, we'll help you, no problem. Here's how I think we should do it. Why don't we do this or that or the other thing? And unfortunately, that effort seems to have worked.

[15 : 44] We learn that the people started strong, but we also learn that they ultimately abandoned the rebuilding of the temple for 16 years.

God is amazingly patient with us, isn't he? 16 years. Because they were focused on rebuilding homes for themselves instead.

We're back in our homeland. We could serve God. We could build his temple or I want a nice place for myself. So believe it or not, I wish Vern was here because he loves the book of Haggai.

We're now jumping forward to the book of Haggai to learn more. And as I've said about the story before, the story is a chronological view of the upper and lower story of God and his people.

But scripture is not laid out chronologically all the time. So hence jumping forward and backwards a bit in scripture. So Haggai was a prophet during the time of the rebuilding of this second temple.

[16 : 56] And he's known specifically for his prophecy that got the people moving again. The Bible says in Haggai 1 verses 3 to 4, let's read this together.

Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai. Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses while this house remains a ruin?

This house being the temple. And there's a clear message for us here this morning as we continue in verses 5 and 6. Now this is what the Lord Almighty says.

Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much but harvested little. You eat but never have enough. You drink but never have your fill.

You put on clothes but are not warm. You earn wages only to put them in a purse with holes in it. Do you see that?

[18 : 02] Our priorities are not always God's priorities. And do you see how God responds to our misplaced priorities?

How he responds to our choices to make our priorities central to our lives and make his priorities for us small.

God sends seasons of suffering and trial to call people back to their purpose. To remind us of our calling.

To remind us that our calling is greater and higher. God may send severe times of testing. But it's important to recognize that not all testing is a result of sin.

If you're struggling, if you're having difficult times and difficult experiences in your life, it's not because, always, it's not always because you have done something wrong.

[19 : 14] God is not a God who purely punishes. Remember that. God uses trials as well to call our attention back.

He allows challenges to come our way so that we will return to and rely upon him alone.

In our story this morning, God's people had lost their focus. love. They had lost their intentional passion for him.

Do you remember the one days that I talked about earlier? I'm sure all of us have things in our lives that we were once passionate about, we once cared deeply for, we once thought, boy, that's somewhere I want to put my time, my effort, my energy.

But we may also recognize that those once important things have become neglected, have been forgotten, have become small.

[20 : 31] So what can we take away with us this morning? God will, my friends, God will call us from the distractions in our lives that pull us from his purpose for us.

And that pull can be gentle and mild, or if we decide to be stubborn, that pull can be a life altering change.

God will do whatever it takes. God will as we've seen this morning as a result of seasons of testing, the people of Israel got back on track in fulfilling God's purpose for them.

Did Jesus call us to look after ourselves and give the leftovers to him? Do we think to ourselves, oh, he's God.

God will make up the difference. I'll give what I can manage, I'll give what I want to, God will make it up on his own. Nope.

[21 : 52] Jesus called us to seek, second, first, his kingdom, the kingdom of God, and then God will take care of the rest.

our action comes first. As the amazing author, one of my favorites, and theologian C.S.

Lewis wrote, if we put first things first, we get the second things thrown in. But if we put second things first, we lose both first and second things.

in our world of me first, self-interest, independence, the message of God for us is one that is increasingly counter to what the world tells us.

But guess what? That is the point. God's view on all of this is throughout scripture.

[23 : 04] scripture. We see it over and over. The prodigal son repented and left the pig slop to return to the mansion. Jonah repented and escaped being fish food.

The Jews repented and finished the temple for God. God. Haggai called the people to go up into the hills to gather the supplies they needed to build the temple.

He challenged them to gather what they needed to fulfill God's purpose for them. My friends, this morning, what are some of the things that you may need to consider gathering to reorient your priorities to God?

A new attitude? An altered schedule? Busy is not always good. A tender and forgiving heart?

Or maybe it's an attitude of generosity that puts others before yourself. I challenge each of us to seriously consider that this coming week.

[24 : 27] Think about the one-day things that have taken you away from your first love. Is God speaking to you about that this morning or right now in your life?

Maybe you've heard and chosen not to listen. or maybe you even realize right now that you are in a season of testing.

If God is calling for your attention, give it to him. Do you recognize ways in which you're being distracted from God's purpose for your life?

Friends, commit yourselves, and I will as well, to coming back to making the big things of God your big things too.
Let's pray. Let's pray.