

The Space for the Final Portrait

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[0 : 00] Let's turn together to 2 Chronicles chapter 36. We're going to look at the final part of that chapter and particularly the final sentence of the chapter and of this book of 2 Chronicles.

We can read there at verse 23.

Portraits as we call them of the kings here in 2 Chronicles. We've imagined ourselves in a pictured gallery and around us are hung all of these portraits that we find as these descriptions of these various kings in 2 Chronicles.

We haven't of course looked at them all but we've looked at the most prominent ones. We've looked at some more fully than others because they're in more detail in the account we have in 2 Chronicles.

And as we've gone through them we've noticed certain features that are prominent and some that are in the background. And now we're at the exit to the gallery.

[1 : 27] And as we're about to exit the gallery we take another look around the portraits and we notice that there's actually an empty space. And it's that idea of the empty space that we want to just keep our minds focused on as we go through our study this morning.

Because that empty space really is something that we're going to try and bring out in the meaning of it in the way in which these verses end the book of 2 Chronicles.

The focus here in the final verse is on going up. And of course going up as we've noticed in going through the gallery has to do with the way that 2 Chronicles came to be written.

Primarily for the benefit of those who had returned from exile in Babylon after 70 long years there. They had begun rebuilding the temple, re-establishing the community of believers in Jerusalem.

And this book was written to encourage them. So these portraits of the kings, some of the features there were very much directed to encouraging those who had come back to Babylon to re-establish the community of God's people there.

[2 : 40] They had come to be taken away to Babylon as we notice in this chapter itself and it's repeated so often in the Bible because of their disobedience to God. And it had reached the level where the Lord no longer sent any messenger to them but brought upon them the thing which he threatened if they didn't repent.

And because they didn't repent the Lord kept his word. And he gave opportunity and license to Nebuchadnezzar and the power of the Babylonians to overrun the people of Jerusalem and Judah.

Take many of them from Jerusalem to Babylon and that's where they spent the 70 years and the things of the temple. You notice the temple so prominently in all these portraits of the kings.

The repairing of the temple. The temple so much a central feature of these portraits. The temple was desecrated. The temple's vessels, the things they had served God with.

And because they had refused to serve God with them, they were taken to Babylon. The king of Babylon took all these things with him. But they came back and this was to encourage them in coming back.

[3 : 49] So this is the end of the gallery. And it's this empty space for one final portrait to be hung there that we're really focusing on this morning.

And it'll become clear, I hope as we go through the study, what that really means. The first thing is that we're going up from Babylon to Jerusalem. As we've said, the people who returned from Babylon, they didn't have an easy time of it when they came back to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding. They faced the huge task of rebuilding the temple. The walls of the city, as we find especially in Nehemiah's book, were all in a state of disrepair.

As they began building the temple and reached the foundations, they began to cry. They wept as they looked at it. Because it was so pathetic looking. It was so poor compared to the grand temple

that Solomon had built that the Babylonians had actually flattened.

It was a time also of facing a lot of opposition from those who were around them. People who didn't want them back there. People who did not agree with rebuilding the temple of God.

[4 : 59] Those who were actually enemies of all that they believed in. And you can see from Ezra, from Nehemiah's books, these people are described. And as we've studied Nehemiah not so long ago, we can see, we saw from that, just how vehement that opposition was.

And how much like the opposition of today it is as well. That's why they needed this encouragement. And they needed especially this final part of the book of 2 Chronicles. Because what that is really telling them is that this work of rebuilding the temple. Yes, they may think it's not significant. They may actually say that it's pathetic compared to what was there before. But this is telling them actually God is in charge of the whole project. Because that's what this is saying.

Cyrus, the king of Persia, the Persians took over from the Babylonians. They overran the Babylonians. That's how it is in history. One empire gives way to another.

[6 : 03] And when the Persian Empire took over from the Babylonians and defeated the Babylonians, the Persians were much more open in religious things.

And so this king of Persia said that the Lord, the God of heaven, the God of these Jews, had given him a charge to build a house at Jerusalem for him, which is in Judah.

Whoever is among you, of all his people, may the Lord as God be with him. Let him go up. In other words, these people who were busy rebuilding amongst all of that opposition, they could hang on to this great truth.

That this was not their own idea. This was not their own invention. This was not something that they themselves collectively had thought was something that should be done for the sake of history, for the sake of their fathers, whatever.

What this was saying to them is, God has brought you back here. God has brought this about. God has arranged in his providence that this great king of Persia has actually given a decree that you should come back and rebuild the cause of God in Jerusalem.

[7 : 10] God has brought this about.

building project in your life. If you think of your whole life as a building project, if you like. And if the building project in the wider sense that we're involved in, in the gospel, in the church of God, if that is of God, if God has given us the mandate to go and make disciples of him, it doesn't really matter who's out there to stand against that.

What you and I need to know is that this is of God. And if you're facing difficulty today because you're living a Christian life, because you've decided to follow the Lord, that this is the life for you, that this is where God has led you, then you're aware, obviously, of people who don't agree with that, who make things difficult for you.

But you can see, well, this is the Lord's doing. God is behind this. And God approves of this. And God supports me in this.

And the whole project is from God. So keep going up. That's what the message is. Whoever is among you, of all his people, may the Lord as God be with them.

[8 : 57] Let him go up. That fed its way into the building project in Jerusalem from these returned exiles. But something else.

There's a going up too in the sense of from the Old Testament to the New. Because you'll know yourselves that the Old Testament was written originally in the Hebrew language.

And you can still get one of the things we need to do as trainees for the ministry is to learn as far as possible how to read Hebrew. And to read the Old Testament in the way it was written in the original Hebrew language.

And if you take the language, if you take the book rather, the Old Testament if you like, as a book, as it was originally written. The last book of the Hebrew Old Testament is 2 Chronicles.

They're not arranged in the way they arranged in the English translations of the Bible. That has collectively put Kings, Chronicles, Samuel together. Because historically they belong together in a sense.

[10 : 04] But the arrangement of the books in the Hebrew Bible brings 2 Chronicles as the last book of the Hebrew Scriptures. In other words, the last words of the Hebrew Scriptures, the last words of the Old Testament as they are arranged in the Hebrew Bible are these words.

May the Lord as God be with him. Let him go up. The Old Testament ends on the note of looking up. In other words, there's a signal there, there's a definite emphasis there in the Old Testament that there's something else yet to come.

That there's something higher than the Old Testament itself to come. And that's the New Testament and the New Testament age. And that's why we're saying that as you come out of this gallery in 2 Chronicles, as you look around you, there is an empty space there.

And that empty space is for the King who has not yet arrived as the Old Testament closes. There's an expectancy there.

There's a promise that a King would come who would be greater than any of these kings. Who would be a saviour and deliverer as well as a king. Who would be a high priest and a prophet as well as a king.

[11 : 24] Who would be the great King of kings and Lord of lords. He has not yet arrived as these words are written. But there's an anticipation of him.

There's an expectancy that he will yet come in the future. And so the Old Testament ends by saying, Let us go up. Let us look forward.

Let us look up. Let's go up towards the King that's coming. And that's the second point. That's going up from the kings in this gallery to the king.

One of the things we've noticed going through this gallery of kings is that they're really a pretty motley bunch. It's a very mixed bunch indeed, isn't it?

Most of those and all of those that we've read in this final chapter even. As the crisis in Judah reached its head. As the Babylonians pressed in and eventually just took everything away with them.

[12 : 24] They all mentioned us doing evil in the sight of the Lord. So are some of the ones we noticed before that. It's a very mixed bunch.

There are good kings and there are bad kings. And the thing to notice is that even the good kings like Hezekiah, they're still flawed.

They are imperfect. They can't possibly be the king that was promised by God to be the savior of his people. And so we're still waiting in the gallery.

And we're noticing that that space is still left for the king that's still to come. But that space as you and I now look in our age is no longer empty.

That portrait has been hung. Because we come from the gallery in 2 Chronicles. Through the emphasis at the end here, let us go up towards the New Testament.

[13 : 32] And you come from that gallery straight into an outhouse in Bethlehem. And as you enter that house in Bethlehem beside this inn that was so full of people, you find an infant laid in swaddling clothes, nursed by his mother Mary.

And there is the final portrait. And it's the king that has arrived. You know, despite the fact that that portrait of the infant Jesus appears so lowly and so much below the other great kings that are mentioned in 2 Chronicles and in this gallery, grand and glorious kings like Solomon and Hezekiah and Josiah and Jehoshaphat.

Yet this is the king whose portrait belongs above all the rest. Because when you hang this portrait in the gallery just to complete it, you don't put it alongside the rest.

You don't put it below the rest. You put it above them. I remember being in Korea. One of my pastoral friends in Korea, they went into his study one day on one of the visits there.

And his study in the church, where they have their study there. And he had three portraits in the study. And the portraits were of two great reformers and one of himself.

[15 : 13] There's one of John Knox. There's one of John Calvin. And there's one of himself. And John Knox was on the bottom. John Calvin was next.

And he himself was above them. And I remember jokingly saying to him, Are you sure you've got these in the right order? And of course he smiled. Well, when we put these portraits in order, We have to put one at the top.

And it's not Jehoshaphat or Josiah or Hezekiah or Solomon or David Or any of the great kings of the Old Testament. Not even the most perfect one.

It's King Jesus. It's the final portrait. It's the Lord who was born into this world.

Because that's what fills this empty space in the Chronicles gallery. But who would have expected that that empty space, When you think of it in the sense of all of these kings not being adequate to

be the king, The deliverer, the saviour.

[16:25] That's what we mean, of course, What we say by the empty space in this gallery. He's not yet arrived at this stage. But when he did arrive, Who would expect that this space would be filled by God himself?

And by God himself coming to be a human being. What's the wonder of Christmas? We know what the Christmas story is. That is the birth of Jesus.

That is the Son of God born into this world. And coming to develop in his life as a human being. And exercise that great ministry right up to his death on the cross and his resurrection.

But what is the great wonder of the story of Christmas? It's not the conditions in which he was born. It's not that there was no Rome in the inn.

It's not the circumstances of his birth. It's not the environment into which he was born. What is the great wonder of Christmas? It is who was born.

[17:29] It is who came to be born. It is the fact that the King of Glory appeared in the form of an infant child.

And came to be a servant to bring redemption to his people. In the words of the great Carol, Who is he in yonder stall, At whose feet the shepherds fall?

Tis the King, O wonder story, Tis the King, The Lord of Glory.

You see what it is saying? It's the King Who is in that manger. It's the King, O wonder story, Tis the King, The Lord, The King of Glory.

And you remember when Christ was crucified, That Pilate, The governor of the Roman colony there, He wrote an inscription.

[18:38] And there was an inscription to put above Jesus on the cross. And that inscription said, Jesus of Nazareth, The King of the Jews.

And the chief priests were annoyed. And they came to Pilate, And they demanded that he change what he had written, And that instead of saying that, That he would write, That he said himself, That he was the King of the Jews.

And without really knowing the enormity of what he was about to say, That wicked man, Pilate, Uttered some of the greatest words in the Bible.

What I have written, I have written. In other words, God is saying to us through that, Whoever thinks otherwise, This is the fact of the matter.

This is the King. This is the King. This is the portrait now completed.

[19:51] This is the empty space filled in the gallery. This is the Lord, The King of Glory. And even on the cross, This is who he is. And this is who he remains.

Because this is who he always was. And this is who he always will be. And not for a moment, From his conception, Through his birth, To his death, Did he cease to be the King.

That is what Pilate's words effectively mean. This is the fact of the matter.

He is the King. We have gone up from the King's, To the King. The portrait, That was empty in the days of the Chronicles, The space that was empty, Has been filled, By the coming of the Son of God, By Jesus.

But just ask yourself, As I must ask myself a question, Have I hung that portrait, In the gallery of my heart? I can see him hanging above, The other kings in the portraits, Of second Chronicles.

[21:04] I understand, That he is the one, Who really comes to crown, This gallery, Because they were all insufficient, Although they were anticipating, And looking forward to him.

But the question for me today is, Have I come to take this portrait, And have I come to hang it lovingly, And respectfully, And obediently, On the walls of my heart?

Is he the King there? As much as anywhere else? Isn't that what he came for? Isn't that what he gave himself for?

Isn't that why the King died? So that you would take him, And make him your King. So that you would not die, But live forever.

So it's a going up from Babylon, To Jerusalem, It's a going up from, The kings to the king. And that, Brings us to, Thirdly, It's a going up, From death, To glory.

[22:10] Because this King Jesus, Came into the world, To die. And you could say, That he died, Not just in order, That we might be saved, And they would carry the penalty, Of our sin, In that death.

He did that. But he himself, In one remarkable, Sentence in John's gospel, In chapter 10, Or 17, There says, That he laid down his life, So that, Or in order, That he might take it again.

In other words, He died, So that he would actually, Have such a thing, As resurrection, From the dead. In order to provide, Resurrection life, For his people.

He went into the grave, So that you and I, Would be convinced, That the grave, Is not, The last word, In human destiny. That death, Does not have the last word.

Because Christ, Rose from the dead. And as Christ, Rose from the dead, He triumphed, Over death. That's what we were singing, In Psalm 68, You have ascended, Gloriously, You have led, Captivity captive, And you received, Gifts, For men, For human beings.

[23 : 27] His ascension, His going up, Begins with his resurrection, His going up, From the dead. And you know, It's interesting that, This language of going up, Is used so much, In the Bible.

And it's used, In relation to death as well. Christ went up, From death, In resurrection. It's used in terms of, The resurrection of Christ, From the dead.

It was a resurrection, Out of death, But in the sense, In which he put death, Beneath him. He rose, Not just out of death, He rose above death. And the great thing, For you and for me, To know today, Is that, There is one, Who is today, Triumphant over death.

Who has death, Beneath his feet. Who has conquered death. And in him, I conquer death also.

And so do you. In him, But only in him. And that was followed by, His ascension up to glory.

[24 : 37] And as we're going through, The gospel of Luke, In Sunday evening studies, One of the questions, That's kept coming up in Luke, Deliberately set by Luke, As he tells, The story of Jesus, Is, Who is he?

It's on the mouth, Of different people, As we've seen. Who is this man? Who is this person? And, We haven't yet reached, The end of Luke, It might be a week while, Before we do so, God willing. But, When we do so, If you look at the end, Of Luke's gospel, It's about the ascension, Of Jesus. He led the disciples, Out to Bethany. And he lifted up his hands, And blessed them.

And while he was still, Blessing them, With his hands, Lifted above them, He was carried up, From them, Into heaven. And then you go to, The other book, That Luke wrote, Which is the book of Acts. And the beginning, Of the book of Acts, Tells us, That these disciples, Were still, Looking up into heaven, After Jesus had ascended, And, They were met by, A couple of angels, A couple of figures, In white, Who appeared to them, And said, Why do you keep, Looking up to heaven?

[25 : 46] This same Jesus, Will come again, As you have seen him depart. He went up. He went up to heaven.

And that's, Where we look up to him today. But he is coming back. He's coming back, As the angels said.

He will return. And you know, The great thing is that, In union with Christ, There's a sense in which, God's people, Are already in heaven with him.

Because everything, That he has done for them, They actually benefit from that, Because they are joined to him. I know this is a very difficult thing, Theologically to, To follow, To understand.

But that's really what the Bible says. And if you turn to second, The second chapter of Ephesians, There's a great verse there, In verses four to six, That talks about, How God brought us from the dead, Spiritually, Being rich in mercy, In verse four, Because of the great love, With which he loved us, Even when we were dead, And out trespasses, He has made us alive, Together with Christ, Joined to Christ, In other words, When he came up from the dead, His people were joined to him, In that victory.

[27 : 12] And he raised us up with him, And seated us with him, In the heavenly places, In Christ Jesus. In other words, He is really saying, That when you think of Jesus, In heaven where he now is, There's a sense in which, His people are already there with him, Because they are joined to him.

Their victory is guaranteed, Because he is there, They will be there with him, Forever. And that's why the Christian life, Is really an ascending life, You might say.

We're looking at this idea, Of going up, And of looking up. The old testament, Looking up to the new testament. The king's gallery, Looking up to the coming king.

And the coming king, When he came, Went up from death, And ascended up to heaven, And that's where he now is. And we look up to him, By faith.

Our faith, You could say, Is that going up, To Jesus where he now is. You put your trust in him, Your faith looks up to him, It goes up to him, It reaches up to him.

[28 : 23] And your whole Christian life, That's really essentially, What the Christian life is. It's an ascending life. Because the life that Jesus gives, Is a life that is constantly going up.

It's a life of constant ascendancy. What has he given you, In the life that he's given you? He's given you a life that, In this world, Gradually, Step by step, Goes up, Above sin, Above death, Above temptation, Above the devil, Above the world, Above the things of self.

It's a life that's constantly, In the ascendancy. Until it's ready to ascend, Finally, To be with himself. The thief on the cross, Again in Luke's gospel.

There he is, He's dying, Beside Jesus. And he hears his, Former friend, This thief on the other side, Cursing Jesus.

And he turns to Jesus, And he says, Lord, Remember me, When you come, Into, Your, Kingdom.

[29 : 44] He recognized him as a king. He had faith, To see beyond the agony, Of this Jesus on the cross. To see that the agony, Belonged, In some way, To this man, As a king.

Remember me, When you come, Into your kingdom. What did Jesus reply? Truly, Truly, I say to you, Today, You will be with me, In paradise.

Jesus was saying to him, Not only am I going to be in paradise, In a short time, But you're going to be with me.

What happens to believers, When they die? They go to be with Jesus. Their body, Is buried.

It remains in this world. But they, Their conscious life, In their soul, They go to be with Christ. They go to be with Christ.

[30 : 50] And then the day comes, When there's a final resurrection, The day of Jesus' return. And that's the day, That God's people, Look forward to in their hope.

Their hope goes beyond, Even being with Christ, In their souls, While their body, Is still in the ground. Their hope is set, On resurrection. Their hope is set, On being with them, Fully and finally, Completely.

That's how Paul, Wrote to the Thessalonians. Who were worried, As a people, And who needed teaching, About the things, Of the resurrection, And of the coming of Christ again.

And in order to, Both teach, And encourage them, Paul wrote to them, As he did there, In 1st Thessalonians, And chapter 4. They were worried, You see, That those who had died, And gone away, From this world, Though they were believers, That somehow, They would miss out, On the Lord's coming, On the Lord's return.

That those who were still alive, In the world, When Jesus came, Would have the advantage. And Paul said, No, That's not going to be the case.

[32 : 05] Because he said, The Lord himself, Will descend from heaven, With a cry of command, With the voice, Of an archangel, With the sound, Of the trumpet of God, And the dead, In Christ, Will rise first.

Then we who are alive, Who are left, Will be caught up together, With them, In the clouds, To meet the Lord, In the air. And so we will always, Be with the Lord.

Therefore, Encourage one another, With these words. In other words, You encourage one another, With the thoughts of going up.

Of going up in Christ, To be already in him, In glory with him. The thought of going up, In your faith to him, To be joined to him, In your trust, In your believing, In your obedience.

The thought of going up, When you leave this world, To be going up with him, Spiritually, To be with him. And the thought of going up to, In the final resurrection, When you are raised from the dead.

[33 : 15] Encourage one another, With these words, What a great going up, We have, In the Lord Jesus Christ himself, First, There is the gallery completed, There is the final portrait, The space has been filled, Christ has gone up, Let's go up to him, In our faith, In our trust, In our hope, And let's encourage one another, In the prospect, Of the final going up, That is coming, Let's pray, Lord our gracious God, We cannot adequately express, Our thanks, For all that you have done,

For the great issues, Of your going up, From death, To that ascendant life, That you possess, We thank you that your people, As they are joined to you, That they anticipate, Being with you, And going up finally, In the resurrection, And ascension, And glorification, Of their persons, Lord help us, We pray to take encouragement, In the midst of all the woes, Of this world, With the bright things, Of eternity, Hear us we pray, For Jesus sake, Amen.