

WHY WE NEED THE OLD TESTAMENT



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INTRODUCTION

"The God of the Old Testament is not the God of the New Testament!" I was shocked by my friend's comment because I knew he held an influential position in his church. Apparently, Sunday school teachings had left him convinced that violence by God's people in the Old Testament could not be reconciled with Jesus' call to "turn the other cheek" in the New. He saw the Old and New Testaments as accounts that could not possibly have been inspired by one divine Author.

The distinction between Old and New Testaments was emphasized in a 2018 sermon in which the pastor of one of America's largest churches called Christians to "unhitch" from the Old Testament. This popular pastor and author justified his call to diminish use of the Old Testament for the purpose of more effective evangelism. In his view, Christians must "unhitch from the Jewish Scriptures" in order to "not make it difficult" for unbelievers to come to faith in Jesus.

Skepticism about the value of the Old Testament for Christians is as old as the Christian church. In the second century, an influential church member named Marcion spoke out against the Old Testament. He believed the God of the Old Testament was different from the Father of Jesus. Marcion put forth his own version of Scripture, rejecting

the Old Testament and reducing the New. Marcion was removed from the Christian church of his time, and used his wealth and influence to begin a rival church that lasted for several centuries. The church's reaction to Marcion's views was instrumental in formulating the recognized canon (authoritative collection of inspired books) for the Christian church.¹

Given the trouble that many have had reconciling the Old and New Testaments, should we consider the Old Testament as no longer worth our study? Should we "unhitch" from it and just focus on the New Testament? No. We don't need to unhitch from Old Testament—we need to understand it. We need to understand why God gave us sixty-six books in Scripture, instead of only twenty-seven. We need to teach the Old Testament to our children and study it in our small groups. We need to learn why Jesus said: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4, quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3).

1 Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, eds., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, third edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017) 524-525.

CHAPTER 1

How Jesus and the Early Church Understood the Old Testament

The Scripture we know as the Old Testament was the only Scripture Jesus and his earliest followers had. Jesus lived his earthly life on the foundation of that Scripture. He quoted it, taught from it, and lived to fulfill it. He gave great honor to Scripture, saying:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17-19)

In the subsequent verses of Matthew chapter 5, there are six times when Jesus quotes from or alludes to an Old Testament verse. He then explains the need to address the heart attitude behind each command or prohibition. Jesus did not dismiss Old Testament teaching. He explained and applied it.

Jesus always treated Scripture as God's authoritative truth. For Christ, to say, "It is written," was to provide evidence and to settle a matter. In his response to the hypocritical Pharisees, he often said, "It is written," or "Have you not

read...," to provide settled truth from Scripture (e.g., Matthew 19:4, 21:13). When correcting the Sadducees, Jesus appealed to Scripture to correct their wrong ideas:

But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." (Matthew 22:29-32)

Jesus often quoted from the Old Testament Book of Psalms to reveal who he was and what he came to do. He applied Psalm 110:1 to himself as evidence that he was "Lord," even of King David (Matthew 22:43-45). He quoted from Psalm 118:22-23 to predict his rejection, suffering, and exaltation (Matthew 21:42). When dying on the cross, he applied Psalm 22 to himself: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to two of his followers on the road to Emmaus. Failing to recognize him, they talked until he revealed himself, saying: "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:25-26) In other words, the events of his crucifixion, death, and resurrection had been predicted in the Old Testament Scriptures. They should have expected what had happened! Jesus then gave his followers what must have been one of the most remarkable teachings ever heard: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Wouldn't you love to have heard that message!

The leaders of the early Christian church relied upon the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament to explain the resurrection of Christ, to present the gospel, and to make major decisions for the growing church. For example:

- Peter explained the resurrection of Jesus by using Psalm 16. (Acts 2:25-28)
- Paul used Psalm 2, Isaiah 55, and Psalm 16 as evidence for the resurrection. (Acts 13:32-37)
- Philip explained the gospel to an Ethiopian leader by using Isaiah 53. (Acts 8:32-35)
- Church leaders found guidance for replacing Judas Iscariot with another apostle in Psalms 16 and 109. (Acts 1:19-20)
- Critical decisions about how the gospel would be shared with the Gentiles was based upon Amos 9:11-12. (Acts 15:15-18)

The New Testament letters are filled with quotations from the Old Testament. In Romans chapter 3, the apostle Paul quotes from the Psalms, the Proverbs, and the prophet Isaiah to stress the faithfulness of God and the sinfulness of humanity. He then explains that "the Law and the Prophets" bear witness to "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" (Romans 3:22). In the first letter to the Hebrews, the author quotes from seven different Old Testament chapters to prove the deity of Jesus Christ. The writer presents the quotes as if God himself is speaking (Hebrews 1: 5, 6, 7, 8, 13).

The use of the Old Testament by Jesus and the writers of the New Testament make it clear that they considered the Hebrew Scriptures to be the very words of God. In

these words, they found evidence of God's great plan of redemption for his people. This plan would come to fruition in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and the establishment of the Christian church. Its consummation would be revealed in the Book of Revelation. All sixty-six books of Scripture contribute to the revelation of God's plan. The Bible is a unified whole—one story and one plan—given us by the inspiration of one divine Author.

CHAPTER 2

THE VALUE OF LEARNING THE OLD TESTAMENT

Since Jesus has fulfilled many of the Old Testament prophecies, and we have the New Testament to teach us how to live as his followers, is there any reason to study the Old Testament? Absolutely! While we are called to live by the grace that has been brought to us through Jesus, we need the whole counsel of God (all sixty-six books) in order to love God with all of our hearts, souls, and minds. Each biblical book contributes to God's big-picture plan, and our spiritual lives will be stronger by understanding that plan from beginning to end.

Here are ten reasons to study, learn, and grow to love the Old Testament:

1. The Old Testament teaches us about God's work as our Creator. "In the beginning, God created..." (Genesis 1:1) provides the foundation upon which everything else in life rests. The first book of the Bible is essential for our understanding of who God is, why he created us, how sin separated us, and how God would reconcile us.
2. The Old Testament reveals the devastating and far-reaching effects of human sin. From the time of Noah, when humans were so corrupt that their thoughts were "only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5), to the time of the Judges, when "everyone did what was right in his

own eyes" (Judges 21:25), human beings rejected God and his ways. Sin is serious, and the Bible makes no attempt to hide how it offends God and harms people.

3. The Old Testament teaches us about God's holiness. Some of the most challenging Old Testament passages to read are those about sacrificial laws. The Book of Leviticus (where many readers give up on daily Bible reading plans!) provides extensive guidance about priests and sacrifices. This detailed instruction was intended so that God's people would understand God's separateness—that is, his holiness. God's people were to be separate—distinct from other peoples—and Levitical sacrifices highlighted that distinction. The words of Leviticus 20:26 express the purpose of many Old Testament laws: "You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine" (Leviticus 20:26).
4. The Old Testament gives us examples for our walk with God. As we read about the Israelites being led by Moses after their exodus from Egypt, we are struck by their recurring unbelief and disobedience. Despite having seen miracle after miracle, they seemed determined to rebel against God and his servant, Moses. They murmured, complained, and worshiped idols. As the apostle Paul would later write: "With most of them God was not pleased" (1 Corinthians 10:5). Why are we given their account in Scripture, and what should we learn from them? Paul makes it clear: "Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did." He adds, "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Corinthians 10: 6, 11).

5. The instruction of the Old Testament provides us with encouragement and hope. Writing to the Romans, the apostle Paul quotes from Psalm 69:9 to speak of the selfless sufferings of Christ: "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me" (Romans 15:3). In the very next verse, Paul writes of the encouragement that can be ours by learning the Hebrew Scriptures: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).
6. The Ten Commandments teach us how to relate to God and to one another. I doubt there is any other moral code in history that has had greater effect upon the human race than the Ten Commandments. From the mandate to honor God as the only true God, to the commands against murder, adultery, and stealing, these commandments have benefited humanity since the time God gave them to Moses. In the New Testament, Jesus makes it clear that these commandments are about more than outward behavior. They speak to the intents of the human heart, and show us our need for God's mercy, forgiveness, and grace.
7. The Old Testament reveals the attributes and character of God. The Hebrew Scriptures reveal him as all-powerful, all-knowing, present everywhere, unchangeable, eternal, and personal. (Psalms 29 and 139, Malachi 3:6, Isaiah 40:28, and Psalm 63:8) One of the most often-repeated qualities of God in the Old Testament is his steadfast love. Despite the sins and unbelief of his people, God has chosen to love his own with loyal love.

8. The Book of Psalms is a storehouse of praise, comfort, and inspired prayers. The Psalms have been called "the songs of Jesus," because they were frequently used by Christ.² Many of the Psalms were written out of difficult, painful circumstances, and they show us how to come to God during trials and suffering. The Psalms are perhaps the richest source of comfort (think of the twenty-third psalm) in Scripture. When we turn to God in adversity, we find him to be our Fortress, Refuge, Rock, Strong Tower, and Shepherd. The Psalms help us to know God better and love him more.
9. The Book of Proverbs is a storehouse of practical wisdom. Proverbs teaches us how to live disciplined lives. These wise sayings guide us in avoiding sin and pursuing discretion. Proverbs instructs us in wise business dealings and financial management. This book of wisdom teaches us about guarding our words and exercising self-control. As the Book of Psalms focuses on relating to God, the Book of Proverbs focuses on relating to one another.
10. The Old Testament prepares us for the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Romans chapter 3, the apostle Paul makes it clear that "the Law and the Prophets" (of the Old Testament Scriptures) serve an incredibly important role in preparing people for the gospel. Paul notes that "through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). He later clarifies this by writing: "For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet'" (Romans 7:7). The Old Testament law serves as a spotlight that shows us our need for

2 Kathy Keller and Timothy Keller, *The Songs of Jesus* (Random House: Penguin, 2015), ix.

God's forgiveness. But the Hebrew Scriptures do more. Paul writes that they "bear witness" to something—"the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Romans 3:22). The Old Testament prepares us for the New Testament. The law prepares us for the gospel.

CHAPTER 3

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE OLD TESTAMENT

QUESTION 1:

Do we have to keep the laws in the Old Testament?

RESPONSE:

Biblical scholars have long divided Old Testament laws into three categories: civil, ceremonial, and moral laws. The civil laws were given to the nation of Israel to govern their actions and highlight their separation to God as his special people. The ceremonial laws directed the worship of Israel, and the many sacrifices highlighted their need for atonement for their sins before a holy God. Civil and ceremonial laws point to Christ and find their fulfillment in him. Jesus himself emphasized this when he pointed to laws about clean and unclean foods. In Mark 7, we read:

"There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him." And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) (Mark 7:14-19)

Jesus makes it clear that Old Testament laws forbidding certain types of foods were no longer binding upon his followers.

In Acts 15, the early church leaders met to consider whether Gentile converts were required to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses. The apostle Peter said:

Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. (Acts 15:10-11)

Clearly, the Old Testament requirement of circumcision no longer applied to followers of Christ.

Along with the civil and ceremonial laws, the moral commands of the Old Testament also find their fulfillment in Jesus. However the moral commands (like the Ten Commandments) are lived out by Christians as we follow Christ in the power of his Spirit. This seems to be what Jesus had in mind when he said:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40)

Later, the apostle Paul would write to the church at Rome:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your

neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

In summary, Christians are actually called to live by a much higher standard than the Old Testament laws—the law of love. Our obedience to God's moral laws should flow from love for God and others. God's purpose is to transform our hearts so that we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit. As the apostle Paul writes:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:1-4)

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QUESTION 2:

How can Christians point to Leviticus (18:22, 20:13) to say homosexual practice is wrong, when the same Old Testament book says it is wrong to sow a field with two kinds of seed, or wear a garment made of two kinds of material? (Leviticus 19:19)

RESPONSE:

While civil and ceremonial laws find their fulfillment in Christ, Old Testament laws about sexuality are repeated in the New Testament. As pastor and author Kevin DeYoung writes: "The sexual ethic of the Old Testament was not

abrogated like the sacrificial system, but carried forward into the early church."³ Both Jesus and the apostle Paul pointed to the "one flesh" instruction of Genesis 2:24 to stress that sex was to be within the bounds of marriage between one man and one woman. Furthermore, the New Testament is consistent and clear in its inclusion of homosexual practice as a form of immorality (Romans 1:24-31, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:9-10).

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QUESTION 3:

Why was polygamy allowed in the Old Testament?

RESPONSE:

The short answer is: "I don't know!" It is clear that leaders like King David and King Solomon had multiple wives, and this would seem to violate the principle of Genesis 2:24, especially as it was applied by Jesus (Matthew 19:4-6) and the apostle Paul (Ephesians 5:31). Perhaps the best way to answer this question is by relying upon Jesus' answer to the Pharisees when they questioned him about the Old Testament allowance for divorce. Jesus replied, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matthew 19:8). Jesus calls us back to God's original design for marriage—one man and one woman. The apostle Paul affirms this in noting that church leaders must be "the husband of one wife" (1 Timothy 3: 2, 12).

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3 Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 44.

QUESTION 4: Why was there so much violence in the Old Testament?

RESPONSE:

From the time Adam and Eve rebelled against God and ate the forbidden fruit, sin began its destructive work in the human race. The firstborn son of Adam and Eve, Cain, murdered his brother, Abel. By the time of Noah, "the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth" (Genesis 6:5). The Old Testament record is filled with the results of humanity's sin—bloodshed and warfare. God raised up prophets, judges, and kings to guide his people, but his people continually rebelled. The Book of Judges, filled with accounts of bloodshed, ends with this sobering verse: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

The prophet Isaiah prophesied of one who would come as the "Prince of Peace," noting that "of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end" (Isaiah 9:6-7). Violence is a result of human sin. In the eternal kingdom of Christ there will be peace. Those who know Jesus now can experience "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

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QUESTION 5:

Why did God tell the Israelites to wipe out the Canaanites?

RESPONSE:

This is one of the most challenging things to understand in the Old Testament. Many people are disturbed when they read guidance from God like this:

But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 20:16-18)

Why would God tell the Israelites to do this? Let's first remember that God is all-knowing and he (and only he) knows when a culture or people group is beyond any possibility of repentance. God judged and destroyed the world in Noah's time, sparing only Noah and his family. God judged and destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, knowing there were not even ten righteous people there.

The sins of the Canaanites were almost beyond description. One of their most horrible forms of idolatry involved offering their young children in fire to the god Molech. God charged the Israelites that they were never to do such things, saying: "You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 18:21). The Lord went on to tell his people that the Canaanites had made even the land unclean by their idolatrous practices. He warned them: "Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these

things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants" (Leviticus 18:24-25).

Apparently, at times sin has so overtaken a people that God knows they are beyond the possibility of repentance. Like a cancer, this sin will only grow to infect others. There are times when God, like a skilled surgeon, knows the disease of sin must be removed so that it does not destroy others. This seems to have been the reason God called the Israelites to destroy certain people.

Did the Israelites obey completely, sparing themselves and their children from the infectious disease of Canaanite sin? No. Psalm 106:34-39 gives us the sad account:

They did not destroy the peoples,
as the Lord commanded them,
but they mixed with the nations
and learned to do as they did.
They served their idols,
which became a snare to them.
They sacrificed their sons
and their daughters to the demons;
they poured out innocent blood,
the blood of their sons and daughters,
whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan,
and the land was polluted with blood.
Thus they became unclean by their acts,
and played the whore in their deeds.
(Psalm 106:34-39)

One more thing needs to be said about the destruction of the Canaanites. God's mercy was available to any Canaanite who turned to him. Joshua chapter 2 gives us the account of the prostitute Rahab, who told the Israelite spies that "the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath" (Joshua 2:11). She and her extended

family were spared when the other inhabitants of Jericho were destroyed. By her faith, this non-Israelite even became the great-grandmother of King David, and is included in the genealogy of Jesus! God's mercy is always available to anyone who turns to him.

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QUESTION 6:
How should I study the Old Testament?

RESPONSE:
Remember that the Bible is a unified whole. The sixty-six books from Genesis to Revelation are all inspired by God and profitable for our spiritual growth (2 Timothy 3:16-17). And while the New Testament certainly provides clearer guidance for growth as a follower of Jesus Christ, the Old Testament is an important foundation for our faith.

For new Christians who have never read the Bible, I recommend starting with the New Testament. I think we can appreciate the Old Testament more in light of the New. As someone has said:

"The New Testament is in the Old concealed,
the Old is in the New revealed."

For more seasoned Christians, a helpful plan for reading the Bible in a year was developed by Scottish pastor Robert Murray M'Cheyne. Recognizing the applicability of the New Testament and the Psalms, this plan takes the reader through the entire Bible once and the New Testament and Psalms twice in a year.

When reading the Old Testament, remember that "the Law and the Prophets" prepare us for and point us to the coming of Jesus. Remember that Old Testament laws point to God's holiness and our need for his forgiveness. Remember that the people and accounts in Old Testament history are to serve as examples and warnings for us. And, finally, remember that we need the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, who inspired the writing of the Scriptures, to help us understand them.

After Jesus told his disciples that "everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets must be fulfilled," we read that "he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:44-45). May we rely on his Spirit to do the same for us today!

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible, Robert L. Plummer
(Good resource on understanding and interpreting the Bible)

Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God,
Paul Copan (More advanced resource that deals with difficult
questions about the Old Testament)

Jesus on Every Page, David Murray (Interesting insights into
seeing Jesus in the Old Testament)

Taking God at His Word, Kevin DeYoung (A basic book on the
inspiration and authority of the Scriptures)



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