

PASTOR'S PERSPECTIVE on the Old Testament

“Why Read the Old Testament?” by Herbert W. Bateman IV

Personally, I love reading, studying, and sharing what I learn in the New Testament. But I'm particularly fond of the Old Testament.

It has numerous historical biographies. Stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Tamar, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Jephthah, Ruth, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, and Nehemiah are a few of my favorites. Their lives appear in the complex landscape of a nation who's up and down experiences over the centuries intertwine with various cultures and civilizations like Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. Their stories along with many others reveal the heartfelt struggles of actual people slugging it out in life one day at a time, just like me.

The everyday battles of people not only appear in historical narratives, they also emerge in poetic books like Ecclesiastes where the author wrestles with the meaninglessness of life without God. The Psalms convey the sincere worship (Pss 100, 136, 150), genuine joys (Pss 9, 30, 145), candid agonies (Pss 22, 26, 64, 142), open tragedies (Pss 32, 105), and unpretentious questioning of day-to-day experiences (Ps 13) of real people.

Yet at the core of the Old Testament stands God who calls, directs, and speaks to these people through the prophets who pronounce divine judgments and offer divine promises of restoration. In essence, they reveal God's plans (Jeremiah 29:11). They demonstrate God's patience (Hosea), depict God's protection (Daniel, Esther), and disclose God's compassion for all people (Jonah), while at the same time expressing God's displeasure with people who repeatedly disobey and refuse to honor him (Amos, Habakkuk). The unifying message of all the prophets, however, is “to promote justice, to be faithful, and to live obediently before God” (Micah 6:8). Those who disobey can expect to experience God's justice, but God's justice is always balanced with hope (Isaiah, Jeremiah).

My fondness for the Old Testament exists because the Old Testament points to Jesus. He is the one through whom God has chosen to fulfill the Old Testament promises to Abraham, David, and the nation of Israel. He is God's promised Messiah (Luke-Acts). It's difficult to study many New Testament letters like Hebrews, 1 Peter, and Romans without an awareness of the Old Testament. Appeals to Abraham (Rom 4), Melchizedek (Heb 7), and Isaiah (1 Pet 2) are essential frameworks for comprehending God's big picture rooted in the Old Testament but fulfilled in Jesus (Matt 5:17).

Ultimately, the Old Testament directs and assists in my everyday aspirations to live according to what *God desires*. Jesus boils down God's longings from the Old Testament in this manner: love God and love others (Mark 12:28–33), namely, worship God and treat other people, as I'd like to be treated (Matt 7:12).

If you haven't read the Old Testament recently, let me encourage you to pick an historical biography, a psalm, or a prophet and enjoy reading the Old Testament anew.

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