

Reading the Old Testament

There's a Bible study group I'm involved in leading, and a year or two ago we were considering what to do next. One person suggested we simply start back at the start, that is, with Genesis chapter 1. The idea was not to worry about a theme or topic or schedule, but simply to start reading from the first page of the Bible, and discuss as we go along. Many meetings later we're only half way through Genesis, but I must say it's been a tremendous blessing. In particular it's reminded me of how important the *Old Testament* is to our faith as Christians. In this article I thought I'd share some words of encouragement in reading the Old Testament as part of your devotional life.

Many Christians gravitate to the New Testament rather than the Old. There is something right and good about this. It's in the New Testament that God's wonderful plan of salvation is fully revealed in the coming of Jesus. Jesus Christ is the centre of the Scriptures and the focus of our faith. If a person has never read the Bible before I wouldn't advise them to begin with Genesis, but to begin with one of the Gospels where they can encounter Jesus himself.

On the other hand, as Christians when over an extended period of time we neglect the Old Testament entirely or even avoid it, we do so to our spiritual detriment. Have you ever had that experience where you come into a conversation which has already been going on for a while? You sort of get the idea of what's being discussed, but you also feel as if you're missing things and playing catch-up the whole time. Or have you ever come in late to a movie? Often, it's possible to pick up the basic story line while at the same time feeling a bit lost. We whisper, 'Why did that guy do that? I thought he was on their side?', and so on.

It has been said that reading the New Testament without the Old is a bit like these experiences. It's like coming in on a conversation or a movie half way through. We read about Jesus being the 'Messiah' or the 'Christ', but what does that actually mean? We hear Jesus talk about things 'at the beginning', but what is he referring to? To get the background and fill out the picture we need to go back to the Old Testament.

Here's another analogy. Do you remember a time when you've watched black and white television? What's the difference with watching in black and white or in colour? Either way you can get the basic point of what's happening. But the colour is a very different experience. It's richer and more vibrant and you see and notice more detail than you do in black and white. This is a bit like the impact that reading and studying the Old Testament can have on your reading and studying of the New.

Two of the strongest encouragements we can have to read the Old Testament are to do with our Lord Jesus himself. Firstly, consider Jesus own view of the Old Testament. His teaching shows clearly that he was immersed in the Old Testament Scriptures and saw them as the inspired words of God. He references the Old Testament over and over again and bases much of his teaching on it. If the Old Testament was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for us.

Secondly, Jesus tells us what the ultimate point of the Old Testament Scriptures is, namely to lead us to Him. In John 5:39 Jesus says, '*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me*'. Again, in Luke 24:27 we read of Jesus travelling with two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection, and then there is this summary of his teaching, '*And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*'

The Old Testament is about Jesus. This is both the strongest reason to keep reading the Old Testament, as well as the best guiding principle to keep in mind as we read. For example, as Christians when we read of the serpent's deception and humanity's fall into sin, we know that we are pointed to the 'seed of the woman', Jesus Christ, who has crushed the serpent's head and brought redemption from sin. As Christians when we read of the Israelite's journey into the promised land, we know this foreshadows what Christ has done to usher us into the true promised land of heaven. As Christians when we read of David and Goliath, we know this testifies to Jesus who would win the ultimate victory over the enemies of sin, death and hell.

Apart from all this, the Old Testament can just be great fun to read! The narratives and storylines are among the most entertaining you'll find anywhere. Go back and read about Samson, Jonah, Ruth or Esther, and let yourself be immersed in the drama. The Old Testament also has a 'real life' quality about it. These aren't stories where the rough edges have been smoothed out to make them more palatable. On the contrary, the authors of the Old Testament simply tell it as it is and they don't shy away from the flaws of God's people. I think this can be very refreshing for us in a time when we so value authenticity. Not only that, but there is encouragement here as we read of how God continues to bring about his perfect plan, even through imperfect people.

So may I encourage you as individuals, families, and Bible study groups, not to neglect the Old Testament. Let it enrich your faith as we all find our place in God's grand storyline.

Yours in Christ, Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer