

FIVE REASONS TO LOVE THE OLD TESTAMENT



Daniel Block



introduction

Five Reasons to Love the Old Testament

A Path to Unity in a Shattered World

The **Old Testament** is as challenging to read as it is long. It comprises nearly two-thirds of the whole Scripture and covers everything from the history of humanity and Israel as well as laws and rituals that sound completely foreign to our modern ears. It contains treasured verses and strange stories. So what should Christians do with the

Old Testament? In this booklet, Daniel Block dives straight into the question of why Christians should not only read, but also treasure the Old Testament for its picture of a gracious and loving God.

Our Daily Bread Ministries

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one

Why Should Christians Read the Old Testament?

When I was headed off to get an advanced degree in the Old Testament, my sister asked me why anyone would devote their life to studying that part of our Scriptures.

People are confused by the strange literary forms, ranging from the bizarre imagery of the Song of Songs to tedious genealogies. Many are bored with its detailed histories; who cares that Jehoahaz reigned in Samaria for seventeen years (2 KINGS 13:1)? They find the detailed laws of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy to be irrelevant for life in North America in the twenty-first century. The command to build a parapet (guard wall) around the roof of a house (DEUTERONOMY 22:8), and the prohibition on eating

pork (DEUTERONOMY 14:8) make little sense to us. Modern readers who actually get to the prophets may be amused by the strange antics of Ezekiel, but they find it difficult to get the significance of his actions or his messages. Perhaps the most serious problem of all is the picture of God they see in the Old Testament. Whereas the New Testament presents God, who is embodied in Jesus Christ, as a gentle God of love and grace, they perceive the God of the Old Testament as angry and violent, seemingly always on the lookout for some poor victim on whom he could unleash his fury.

Many reinforce this negative attitude by quoting the New Testament. In Romans 4:15, Paul writes, “The Law brings wrath,” and in 7:6, he says, “But now . . . we have been released from the Law; we have died to that by which we were bound” (NASB). According to Galatians 3, “all who rely on works of the law are under a curse” (v. 10), “the law is not based on faith” (v. 12), and “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law” (v. 13). In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul writes, “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” If we equate the “law” and the “letter” with the Old Testament, as many do, why should we even want to read the Old Testament?

If Christians accept the Old Testament as inspired Scripture but do not view it to have any authority for their theology or their lives, why should they read it? That is the question this short booklet would like to address. To answer this prevailing negative view, I propose five reasons why Christians should read the Old Testament, beginning with what I consider to be the least significant and ending with the most important.



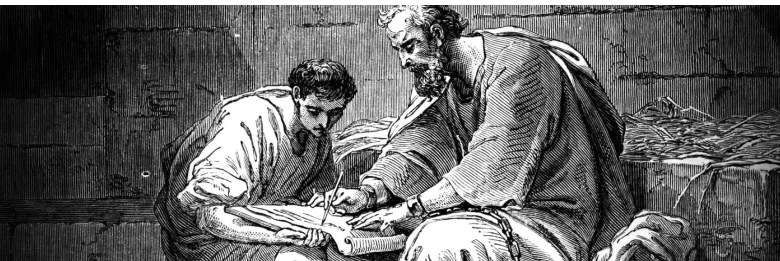
two

REASON ONE

It's the Oldest Literature.

It's hard to believe that when I was in elementary school our literature curriculum in Saskatchewan required us to memorize biblical texts like Psalm 23, Ecclesiastes 12:1–8, and the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3–12. And we took considerable delight in reading other parts of the Bible. It wasn't that the provincial government or the local school boards were trying to convert anyone. It was universally recognized that the Bible contained a vast supply of magnificent literature that needed to be studied alongside Homer, Shakespeare, and William Wordsworth. People were not considered literate if they did not have at least

a minimal appreciation for stories like those of Abraham or David or Jesus, and for delightful short stories like the books of Ruth and Jonah, or the impassioned poetry of the Psalms. Today, biblical literacy is so low that if public figures allude to biblical themes or quote fragments of biblical texts, few recognize them as Scripture. But we need to read the Old Testament along with other great books because it ranks among the best literature in the world.



three

REASON TWO

Our Theology Demands that We Do

To argue for a high view of the Bible (its inspiration and authority), we often quote 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right” (NLT). However, few people realize that when Paul wrote these words to young Timothy, he was thinking about what we now call the Old Testament. The same is true in 1 Timothy 4:13, where Paul appeals to Timothy to “devote” himself to

the public reading of Scripture, by which he has in mind the Old Testament. Very few of the books that would eventually make up the New Testament had even been written at this time. And we don't know how widely those that *were* available were circulating among the churches springing up all around the Mediterranean.

To Paul, the Scriptures were those sacred writings that are found in the Jewish canon. Most people who use English translations divide the Old Testament into four parts (Law, Historical Books, Poetic Books, the Prophets). However, the Scriptures to which Paul was referring consisted of three parts and these were arranged slightly differently from ours (SEE FIGURE 1). In Luke 24:44, Jesus referred to these three parts as the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. He called the Writings “Psalms” because, according to the customary arrangement of his day, the Psalms were at the front of the Writings.

Like other Jews of that time, Jesus and the apostles would have been appalled that today we separate Psalms and Proverbs and put them at the back of our Gideon New Testaments, as if they have unique authority for Christians. If there were levels of authority, to all in that world—Jesus included—the Torah (GENESIS TO DEUTERONOMY) would have been the most important part of Scripture. This is reflected in the fact that Jesus quotes from the book of Deuteronomy more often than from any other Old Testament book. And when the psalmist spoke of meditating in the “Torah” (English “law”) day and night (PSALM 1:2),

FIGURE 1: The Canons of Scripture

The Hebrew Bible

Torah	The Prophets		Writings
	Former	Latter	

The Protestant “Old” Testament

Law	History	Poetry	Prophets
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The Roman Catholic “Old” Testament

Law	History	Poetry	Prophets
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he had in mind primarily the book of Deuteronomy. Neither David nor any of the other people who wrote the Psalms would be impressed by the attention we give this book, while we either neglect or outrightly reject the Torah of Moses. Paul’s statements for young Timothy apply to us as well.



four

REASON THREE

Jesus and the Apostles Read It

They had obviously treasured this word deep in their own hearts (PSALM 119:11). Although Paul encouraged Timothy to devote himself to the public reading of Scripture (1 TIMOTHY 4:13), this raises a very important question: did he or the other apostles expect Christians to read the Scriptures for themselves? We are not sure how many people in ancient Palestine or Asia Minor could read; literacy was certainly not universal. Even if people could

read and write, the Scriptures had to be copied by hand, which made them extremely rare and very expensive. This is why ancient sacred writings were written to be heard orally when the people gathered as a community.

In Deuteronomy 31:9–13, Moses charged the Levitical priests to read “this book of the Torah” (the speeches of Moses in Deuteronomy) before all the Israelites assembled for the Festival of Booths (Tabernacles) at the central sanctuary. One of the functions of the Levitical priests was to teach the people the Torah (DEUTERONOMY 33:8–10), which presumably meant helping them memorize it. So when the psalmist called on people to meditate on the Torah “day and night” (PSALM 1:2), he did not mean “read it day and night,” but “think deeply about what you have memorized.” This was the only access to the Scriptures most people would have had.

But it’s even more obvious that Jesus and the apostles were steeped in the Scriptures from the way they constantly quoted and alluded to them. Expressions like “It is written,” “Moses wrote,” and “Moses said,” occur more than eighty times in the New Testament, always referring to Old Testament texts. This observation is reinforced by the hundreds of unmarked quotations from and allusions to the Old Testament that we find in the New Testament.

In the Gospels, Jesus’s teaching was steeped in the Scriptures. Indeed, he declared explicitly that he did not come “to abolish” the Law or the Prophets, but “to fulfill them” ■ (MATTHEW 5:17).

🔔 **That Jesus “fulfilled” Jewish Scripture** could mean several things: (1) in his teaching (for example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5–7) he offered a perfect divine interpretation; (2) in his life he embodied the righteousness of both the God of the Old Testament and of the ideal righteous king (DEUTERONOMY 17:14–20); (3) in his mission he fulfilled the Messianic hope of the Old Testament. This last point he confirmed after his resurrection, when on the road to Emmaus he explained to the disciples with whom he was walking all those texts in the Old Testament that spoke of him (LUKE 24:25–27).

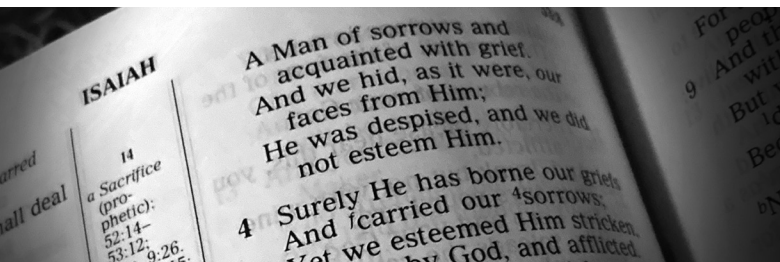
But we can be even more specific. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’s teaching is laced with references and quotations to the Old Testament, especially to the Torah of Moses. In this sermon, Jesus did not intend to replace the teaching of Moses, but to explain to his disciples how they were to live out the spiritual truths and ethical values of the Torah. In Matthew 6:9–15, he taught his disciples how to pray using the words of the Lord’s Prayer. Almost every phrase in the Lord’s Prayer echoes phrases or alludes to ideas that we find in the Old Testament, especially Deuteronomy. In Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount of Olives (MATTHEW 24), we hear many echoes from the prophets. And when he quoted from the book of Daniel (MATTHEW 24:15), he let his hearers know this.

As Jesus was dying in agony on the cross, he burst out with a quotation from Psalm 22:1: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (MATTHEW 27:46 NLT). While many interpret Psalm 22 as a messianic prediction, Jesus’s quotation of it actually demonstrates how deeply

immersed he was in the Scriptures, and how deeply the Scriptures were embedded in his heart and mind. In a moment of intense crisis, he spontaneously cried out to God in the words of the psalmist.

We could make similar comments about Paul and the rest of the authors of the New Testament epistles. Paul's training in the Pharisees' highest institutions of learning is obvious on every page of his writings. Even when he didn't explicitly quote from the Old Testament, it's obvious that the entire Jewish Scriptures were embedded in his mind. Whether he wrote of significant theological subjects like the Messiah, sin, atonement, and redemption, applied specific expressions like "servant" (ROMANS 1:1) or "apostle" (GALATIANS 1:1) to himself, or spoke of "circumcision" of the heart (ROMANS 2:25-29), his writings demonstrate a mastery of the Jewish Scriptures.

Similarly, the author of Hebrews was thoroughly versed in Israel's priestly writings, the psalms, and the prophets. And it appears that Peter had been having his devotions in Exodus 19:4-6, when he wrote, "But you [Christians] are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 PETER 2:9). I mention all these texts to argue that since Jesus and his disciples obviously read the Old Testament and had probably memorized vast portions of it, especially of the Torah (Pentateuch), they have set good examples for us.



five

REASON FOUR

It Explains the New Testament

While this argument arises naturally from the previous point, we should not take it for granted. Many today view the Old Testament entirely negatively, as if *it* is the problem that the New Testament intends to fix. But this cannot be! Most evangelical Christians agree that all the Scriptures were inspired by God. This means that they are all true, but it also means that God neither speaks untruth nor issues revelation at an earlier time that is false or needs to be corrected at a later time. Anyone who's read Psalm 119 or the book of Deuteronomy with both eyes open knows that saints in the Old Testament

perceived the Torah as the key to life, not the way of death. Since that is the case, if it sounds to us like Paul was fixing Moses, or correcting the Old Testament, or replacing it with a different gospel and a different God, then we must not be reading Paul correctly.

In reality, rather than being in opposition to each other, the Old and New Testaments tell one grand story that begins with creation and God's installation of human beings as his agents to administer the world for him. Then it recounts our rebellion and fall as the reasons for God's just condemnation, the call of Abraham and his descendants as agents of blessing in a cursed world, and the elevation of David as king over Israel, through whose descendant finally the righteous reign of God would be restored. This story climaxes in Jesus Christ, the new Adam and the new Messianic David who destroys the universal problem of sin and will ultimately renew the heavens and the earth and all their contents. This is one story. The New Testament does not offer an alternative story, but declares the fulfillment of the old story in Jesus Christ. Unless we read the Old Testament, we will neither recognize the big story of sin and redemption, nor grasp the full significance of the New Testament as the climactic chapter in this grand narrative of God's redemption.

As is the case with any book we read, whether a novel or a historical work, we must read the Bible forward, rather than backward. Before we read the last chapters, we must read what comes before. And we must let the earlier chapters have their own voice. The books of the Old Testament made sense to the original audience,

and we must seek that same understanding before we get to the New Testament or begin to explore how the New Testament used Old Testament texts. Otherwise we will not only remain ignorant of the Old Testament, but we will also get the New Testament wrong. We will either *misinterpret* any given New Testament text or we will *under-interpret* it—that is, fail to grasp its full significance. I have room here for only a couple of examples.

In Matthew 1:20–21, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and said:

“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

Because “Jesus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Joshua,” many view Jesus as a second Joshua, or Joshua as a type of Christ. However, when we look at the Old Testament background to this statement, we find that this approach to understanding the significance of Jesus’s name is very inadequate. The name Jesus / Joshua means so much more. The Old Testament never presents Joshua as a “savior” figure, like the deliverer judges in the book of Judges. As reported in the book of Joshua, Joshua was the aggressor in the battles against the Canaanites; if anything the Canaanites wanted salvation from him!

The Old Testament associates the notion of salvation primarily with Israel’s exodus from Egypt. That was the

supreme act of salvation (EXODUS 14–15). So far as we know, Joshua played no role in that event. In fact, the point of the signs and wonders in Egypt was to declare to Israel, the Egyptians, and the world who the Lord (YHWH) was. This fact is memorialized in a formula that appears dozens of times in the Old Testament: “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (EXODUS 20:2). In Numbers 13:16, Moses recognized that this goal had been fulfilled. That’s why he changed Joshua’s name, *Hoshea*, which means “He [any god] has saved,” to *Yehoshua* (Joshua), which means, “YHWH [the Lord] has saved!” The name says nothing about Joshua, but it says everything about God. The one who rescued Israel was the Lord God himself. Neither Moses nor Joshua would have been pleased to hear us link Joshua to the exodus and then forget that the One who’d rescued them from the Egyptians was the Lord.

Remarkably, while the Old Testament is full of language about “being saved from slavery in Egypt,” it never talks about “being saved from sin.” In Matthew 1:21 the angel of the Lord linked the word “salvation” to “sin” for the first time in the entire Bible. Using the language of Israel’s rescue from Egypt, the angel announced a salvation far greater than Israel’s rescue from slavery to Pharaoh: Jesus came to rescue his people from their sins! But there is more. The One who’d been conceived in Mary’s womb was the same God as the One who had introduced himself by name to Moses in Exodus 3–4. Just as the events surrounding Israel’s exodus from Egypt had revealed the LORD as God in all his grace and glory, so the birth of Jesus

and his saving work would reveal him as God in all his grace and glory (JOHN 1:14).

This close identification of Jesus with God is confirmed by the other title that Jesus was given in Matthew 1:23: he is Immanuel, which means “God is with us!” And this was what the angel of the Lord announced, “Today in the town of David a **Savior** has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (LUKE 2:11, EMPHASIS ADDED). I interpret “Savior” as a reference to YHWH, the covenant God of Israel, whose name is preserved in “Jesus” (Hebrew, “Yehoshua”), which means “The LORD (YHWH) saves.” Among many other significant themes, the New Testament makes two fundamental points about Jesus: He is the Davidic Messiah (“Christ”), and he is God. This statement by the angel to the shepherds on the hills of Bethlehem reinforces both points (LUKE 2:11). Unless we were thoroughly steeped in the Old Testament, we could not connect these dots.

For a second example, I mention the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist/Communion) which Jesus instituted, as reported in four texts: Matthew 26:26–30; Mark 14:22–26; Luke 22:14–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26. The link between the Lord’s Supper and the Israelite Passover is firmly established in the New Testament texts. Paul speaks of Christ as “our Passover lamb” (1 CORINTHIANS 5:7), using the same word (*pascha*) that the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, used for the Passover lamb in Exodus 12:21 and Deuteronomy 16:2, 6. The first three gospels note that the timing of this meal coincided with the

Jewish Passover and Festival of Unleavened Bread (MATTHEW 26:2, 17; MARK 14:1, 12, 14; LUKE 22:1, 7, 11, 15). Jesus deliberately timed this last meal with the disciples before his crucifixion to signal a significant new moment in history! Here he transformed the foundational Jewish festival celebrating Israel's release from slavery in Egypt into a new Passover meal. This would become the church's foundational festival celebrating Christians' release from slavery to sin and death. Unless we've read the Old Testament, we won't grasp the association of the Lord's Supper with the Passover. By making this connection Jesus also highlighted his substitutionary role—like the Passover lamb, he died in our place.

However, it is clear from two short phrases—"my blood of the covenant" (MATTHEW 26:28; MARK 14:24) and "for the forgiveness of sins" (MATTHEW 26:28)—that the bread and the cup represented much more than Passover. Both expressions deserve comment. According to Exodus 12–13, the Passover was celebrated in Egypt three months before the covenant was established at Sinai (EXODUS 19, 24). At the first Passover, there was no mention yet of a covenant. However, by adding "my blood of the covenant," Jesus intentionally linked his death with the original covenant ceremony at Sinai by which Israel formally became the LORD's covenant people.

According to Exodus 24, after Moses had sprinkled blood from a sacrificial animal on the altar and on the people, he declared, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with

all these words” (v. 8). Just as through this symbolic act the Israelites were bound by covenant to YHWH, so through Jesus’s own sacrificial blood God binds himself to us, his new covenant people. And by drinking of the cup, God’s people bind themselves to him. The Lord’s Supper is a covenant meal, open to those who accept his gift of covenant relationship and commit firmly to fulfilling his will.

In the New Testament accounts of the Lord’s Supper, only Matthew links this meal to Old Testament sin offerings, which he does by adding one small phrase: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many *for the forgiveness of sins*” (26:28, EMPHASIS ADDED). The original Passover sacrifice described in Exodus 12–13 had nothing to do with sin. But like John the Baptist’s declaration, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (JOHN 1:29), this addition presents Jesus as a sin offering and links the Lord’s Supper with Isaiah 53. By drinking the cup, worshipers celebrate the gracious forgiveness of the Lamb of God, who bears the iniquities of many (ISAIAH 53:11).

Unless Christians read the Old Testament, their understanding of a practice as fundamental as the Lord’s Supper will be flat. Fully aware of what he was doing, Jesus brought together three important Old Testament notions and combined them in one rich religious practice.



six

REASON FIVE

It Teaches Us How to Live in Response to Grace

At the personal level, the Old Testament offers instruction on life and godliness that not only reinforces New Testament truths, but also often deals with issues on which the New Testament spends little time or is silent. Without the Old Testament, New Testament metaphors for God's great and gracious acts of on our behalf (such as salvation, redemption, atonement, and heart transplant) will not be understood. And without the Old Testament, we would know very little about many subjects in the New Testament. To be sure, the New Testament offers us

a much fuller picture of subjects like the Holy Spirit and our future hope, but the fullest descriptions of creation, the nature of the cosmos, and how sin entered the world are found in the Old Testament.

The gospel is much bigger than providing for my personal salvation or my individual relationship with God. The Old Testament reveals God's plan of redemption for the entire cosmos. It teaches us that God created us to be his image bearers,²⁴ which means we are assigned the role of governing the world on his behalf—as he would were he physically present. The Old Testament teaches us that we are stewards of God's creation, and that because of our sin all of creation suffers from his curse. But many psalms and the last chapters of Isaiah look forward to a future when God's righteous rule will extend to the ends of the earth and his peace will reign over all creation.

↗ *Genesis 1:26–27 talks about God creating humanity **in his image and likeness**. That phrase is somewhat tricky, but it carries with it the picture of physical representations of the king or ruler of the cosmos. Humans, then, were God's tools for representing his authority and rulership on the earth. To be human was to represent God perfectly to the created world. That ability of humanity to bear God's image was damaged but not destroyed in Adam and Eve's rebellion (SEE GENESIS 3:14–24). It is in Jesus (SEE COLOSSIANS 1:15) who fully images God again, and it is in Jesus's image that God renews those who follow him (ROMANS 8:29).*

Within the Old Testament, Deuteronomy plays a special role, like the gospel of John among the

Gospels, or the book of Romans among Paul's epistles. Tragically, Christians today often have little interest in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. They are viewed as outmoded after Jesus's death and resurrection. But this attitude is wrong. The book of Deuteronomy was Jesus's favorite biblical book, and so it should be our favorite Old Testament book as well.

In Deuteronomy, I learn of the amazing love of God, who in brilliant mercy rescues an undeserving people, calls them to be his children, enters into covenant relationship with them, reveals to them his will, and promises them an eternal hope if they fear and trust him fully. In the Shema, recited by orthodox Jews morning and evening to this day, I learn what an appropriate response to grace looks like: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (DEUTERONOMY 6:4-5). The Shema is a declaration of exclusive allegiance to the LORD and a declaration of how that allegiance is demonstrated—all of life devoted to the true and living God, with no energy or resources remaining for any other god. In fact, in Deuteronomy 10:12, Moses asks a question that is just as important for us as it was for the Israelites: "What does the LORD your God ask of you?" He answers the question with five brief statements, one for each of the fingers on the right hand: *fear* the LORD your God, *walk* in obedience, *love* him, *serve* him with your whole being, and *obey* his revealed will (vv. 12-13). This is precisely the pattern that Paul called for in Romans 12:1-2:

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”

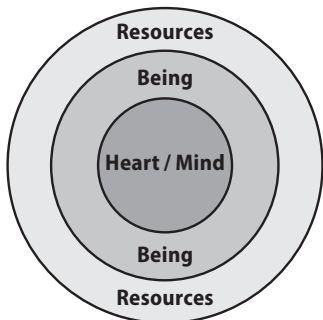
Paul did not invent this model. This is simply a paraphrase of the Shema (DEUTERONOMY 6:4–5), reflecting the concentric dimensions of covenant commitment illustrated in Figure 2. Worship should involve all of life. Jesus followed this model perfectly, and it should be our model as well.

The Old Testament also teaches us that faith in God and love for God are demonstrated in everyday life. In Deuteronomy 22:8, Moses instructs Israel: “When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof.” This is not a law arbitrarily demanding that all houses have the specific architectural feature of parapets (guard rails around the roof). Instead, this is a plea to the heads of households to take care that everyone who enters their homes is safe. In ancient Israel (and still in the Middle East today), houses typically had flat roofs, which provided extra living space. Because it was cooler up there, people would sleep on their roofs or relax and entertain guests there. In Moses’s mind, the heads of households are responsible for the safety of all who enter.

Instead of asking whether we need to keep a specific Old Testament law, Christians today should be asking, “What is the underlying principle here, and how do I apply that principle in everyday life?”

FIGURE 2

All of Life for the Glory of God
DEUTERONOMY 6:4-5



The answer to the first question is obvious: the importance of demonstrating covenant commitment (show love) to our family members, neighbors, and guests by taking practical steps to secure their safety. In a modern Midwestern context, this might mean putting a railing on steps leading up to

the door or down the stairs into the basement.

This past weekend here in the suburbs of Chicago, a blizzard dumped twenty inches of snow on us. How do I apply this verse to this situation? By shoveling the sidewalk so neighbors walking by will not slip and fall and hurt themselves; by shoveling the snow away from my mailbox so the mailman can get right up to it without having to get out of his vehicle and step onto the icy street; by going over to the neighbors and asking if I could help them shovel their driveways.

Jesus rightly summarized all the laws in one simple statement with two parts: to love God with all their being, and to love their neighbor as themselves (MATTHEW 22:37; MARK 12:30; LUKE 10:27). While this may have been a new command for those who had been trained in Pharisaic religion, this command is as old as the nation of Israel (LEVITICUS 19:34; DEUTERONOMY 6:5; 10:19). This

is the ideal by which Jesus lived (PHILIPPIANS 2:5–11), and the Old Testament teaches us that this is the ideal by which we must live.

Sixth, and finally, perhaps the most important reason for reading the Old Testament is because in it we are presented with the gospel—the brilliant message of grace. We see God’s grace demonstrated to Adam and Eve in promising victory over sin and the serpent (GENESIS 3:15–16), in God’s call of Abraham to be the agent of blessing to the world (GENESIS 12:1–3), in God’s rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt (EXODUS 1–15), in his care for Ruth and Naomi and Boaz, and in picking them to be the grandparents not only of David, but also of the Messiah (MATTHEW 1).

But we hear the gospel proclaimed most powerfully and eloquently by God himself in Exodus 34:6–7.

Passing by in front of Moses he introduces himself:

“The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.”

This text catches many people by surprise, not only because this is how God defines himself, but also

The Character of God as Actually Portrayed in the Old Testament

EXODUS 34:6-7

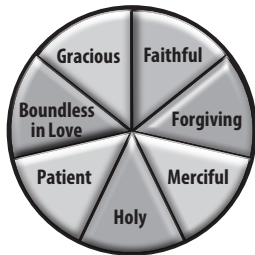


FIGURE 3

**The Character of God as Portrayed
in the New Testament**



**The Character of God as Commonly
Perceived in the Old Testament**



because it sounds so much like the New Testament.

The problem is that to many people the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament seem to be two different Gods. Either that or God became civilized over time!

The contrast in many people's minds looks something like the pies in Figure 3, in which each piece of the pie represents a dominant characteristic of God.

But Exodus 34:6–7 is actually not an isolated text. Explicit references to God's grace are heard as early as Genesis 6:8 ("But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD") and echo throughout the Old Testament (NUMBERS 14:18; NEHEMIAH 9:17; PSALM 51:1; 86:5, 15; 103:8; 145:8; JOEL 2:13; MICAH 7:18–20). But to me the most interesting text is Jonah 4:2. Dismayed over the repentance of the people of Nineveh after his announcement of their doom and then over the LORD's not carrying through with his threat, Jonah complained bitterly to God:

“Didn’t I say before I left home that you would do this, LORD? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people” (NLT).

Jonah’s problem with God was that he was *too* gracious; he did not wipe out his enemies! But these echoes of Exodus 34:6–7 also carry over into the New Testament. After reflecting for decades on the life and work of Jesus, the apostle John declared:

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of *grace and truth*. . . . For from his fullness we have all received, *grace upon grace*. For the law was given through Moses; *grace and truth* came through Jesus Christ” (JOHN 1:14, 16–17 ESV, EMPHASIS ADDED).

Yes, the Torah that Israel received from God through Moses (DEUTERONOMY 5:1–21) was a supreme gift of grace. And yes, Jesus Christ, embodied in human form the very character of God as it was revealed to Moses at Sinai. Exodus 34:6–7 provides us with a lens through which we should read the entire Bible. Far from separating the two testaments, the gracious character of God serves as a common thread.



seven

Conclusion

Why then should Christians read the Old Testament? This question is tragic. Unfortunately some people read the Old Testament only because they feel obligated to; their credal statements tell them that all the Scriptures are inspired. Consequently they never give themselves a chance to be inspired and nurtured by it. I have spent the majority of my adult life trying to open people's eyes to the glorious message of the whole Bible. I have tried to give back to the church the only Bible Jesus had.

I wish that by now I could have been unemployed, but for every person who seems to catch the true Spirit of the Old Testament, I run into four or five killjoys, whose cynicism robs us of three-fourths of the Bible.

They ask me, “If there is so much grace in the Old Testament, then what is new in the New Testament?” My answer is, “Probably less than you think!”

To be sure, in terms of intensity and clarity, the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ surpasses anything that Old Testament saints experienced. But the revelation is not actually different in kind. The whole Bible is a story of God’s grace. If there are dark chapters in this story, it is because the people to whom his special grace was offered rejected the Giver of all grace and insisted on going their own way. But neither the judgment of the world nor the judgment of Israel could be the ending to the human and the cosmic story. God was so covenantally committed to Israel that he kept taking her back. And even when the nation as a whole rejected him, he graciously called individuals to himself.

My question is not “Why should Christians read the Old Testament?” but “Why do Christians not find as much delight in reading the Old Testament as they do in reading the New Testament?” When the psalmist wrote, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (PSALM 119:105 ESV), he had in mind the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible—but especially the book of Deuteronomy. By the grace of God—and it is indeed an act of his grace—my eyes have become accustomed to discovering the light of the gospel of divine grace everywhere. How I pray that this would be true of all who read this small booklet.



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