

“Why We Need the Old Testament”

2 Timothy 3:15-17

At our annual meeting, when I was laying out the teaching and preaching schedule for the year, I said that we were going to go through Zephaniah. And because Zephaniah is an unknown book to many people, I jokingly said we could call the series, ‘Zephaniah, Why not?’ As in why not preach through Zephaniah. It is in the Bible.

When I was away last week, I was skimming through my Kindle reader and saw a book I hadn’t read on preaching the Old Testament. As I read it the Lord seemed to impress upon me the need to explain why we must preach and teach on the Old Testament. Because some Christians response to hearing that their pastor is going to preach from the Old Testament is ‘No not, the Old Testament’ which reflects their poor understanding of it and more importantly, its key to helping us understand almost every important doctrine we hold to. So, as a primer to getting into Zephaniah next Sunday, I want to show you how crucial it is that we read and study the Old Testament so that we better understand the New Testament.

The terms ‘old’ and ‘new’ are unfortunate because for many Christians the idea of ‘old’ means outdated and irrelevant. How many ‘old people’ here today would call themselves outdated and irrelevant!?! Sadly, this has been reinforced by bad teaching from well-meaning preachers who have wrongly taught that the Old Testament is fulfilled and therefore obsolete and unnecessary. Or false teachers who teach that God’s political covenant with Israel applies to nations today and predict times and dates based on the Sabbaths to predict Jesus’ coming. And then there’s the prosperity gospel preachers who abuse the Old Testament by taking Scripture out of context and saying God’s plan for you is to be rich, healthy and happy and if you aren’t its because you have no faith.

And then there’s the spiritualizing of the Old Testament making everything an allegory of the cross or the gospel showing us the ‘deep’ truths of the Word that we couldn’t see. The cross and the gospel are there – don’t get me wrong – but its obvious when it is and we don’t have to invent mystical meanings in order to find something meaningful. So, to help us understand the Old Testament better let’s look at how Jesus and the apostles viewed the Old Testament and we’ll start in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, where Paul wrote;

¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

When Paul or Jesus or any New Testament writer says “Scripture” he is always referring to the Old Testament. We could simply put ‘Old Testament’ every time we read ‘Scripture’ in the New because the New Testament had not been compiled during the 1st century. But now that we have the New Testament complete, “all” refers to everything written by God. All means all. Leviticus hasn’t stopped being the Word of God, nor has Song of Solomon, nor Zephaniah. They were and continue to be God’s very words, breathed to prophets, apostles and those associated with the apostles from the Holy Spirit and continue to be useful (beneficial) to mature us into being more thoroughly equipped servants of God.

Without the Old Testament our Understanding Is Imbalanced
(2 Tim. 3:16-17)

I grabbed a text only – no notes – bible off my shelf and counted the pages. The Old Testament covered 731 pages while the New Testament covered 219. The Old Testament comprises 77% of the Bible. If I dismiss or ignore 77% of God's breathed out words, I'm going to have an imbalanced understanding of God and His ways. Paul says All Scripture benefits us through instruction, rebuking, correcting and training so that we'll be better trained to serve God.

The apostle Paul said to the Ephesians in Acts 20:

²⁰ You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. ²¹ I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

Then he says in v.27,

²⁷ For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose [counsel] of God.

God employs many literary styles to teach us about Himself, His plan and His ways. We have narratives, poetry, wisdom sayings, prophecies, dramatic enactments, gospels and epistles. All different styles – all different tools in our spiritual toolbox – to learn from and use in serving God. Because we're all different we will gravitate to some more than others. Some of us could read the narratives or the gospels over and over again but spend little time in prophecy or epistles. Some of us may prefer the psalms and proverbs but don't care much for facts and history. Others spend too much time in prophecy and because they don't have the balance of narrative and epistolical teaching they don't balance doctrine and application. We need the whole counsel of God so we are more mature servants of God.

In 2019 we'll spend time tracing the theme 'eternal life' through the Bible. Then we'll do some prophecy with Zephaniah. Then we'll study poetry and song during Lent. In the summer we'll dig out very familiar verses to make sure we're understanding properly in their right context. Then in the fall we'll study the epistle to the Galatians. Different styles require different approaches but all of it a balanced diet of Spirit-led truth that prepares us to serve God better.

What else will we miss if we don't study the Old Testament?

Without the Old Testament our Understanding Of Jesus is Incomplete (Luke 24:25-26)

If you think studying about Jesus begins in Matthew you are greatly mistaken. All we have to do is read the gospels to find out how badly the religious leaders misunderstood the Scriptures (Old Testament) to see that they missed seeing Jesus in the Old Testament.

After His death and shortly after His resurrection Jesus appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:25-27 and asked them what they were discussing. They said,

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.²² In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning ²³ but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴ Then

some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.”

Then Jesus says,

²⁵ He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

Jesus gently rebuked them for failing to believe the Old Testament teachings about Himself. The Old Testament taught that

He must suffer first (1 Pet. 1:10-12)

¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets [Old Testament], who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹ trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

Where? Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, Zechariah 11-12. Jesus would have also showed them that the Old Testament also taught that

He had to die and be buried (Acts 2:16-36)

At Pentecost, the apostle Peter, filled by the Spirit quoted Old Testament verses from Ps. 16:8-11 that talked about Jesus' death but not being abandoned to the grave. Then he would have shown them from Is. 53:8-12 that ...

He would rise from the dead (Is. 53:8-12)

⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished.

⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

¹¹ After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

¹² Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

All this is from the Old Testament and they missed it. Yet this is what the apostle Paul said in 1 Cor. 15:1-4

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold

firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

Paul affirms that the gospel was not a new teaching but an Old Testament teaching. Again, the Scriptures referring to the Old Testament. Paul taught the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus from the Scriptures, meaning the Old Testament. And, obviously that the Scriptures (OT) pointed out that

He is the Messiah (John 5:39, 46-47)

Jesus had many discussions with the religious leaders about Jesus' identity. The reason Jesus didn't out right declare Himself to be the Messiah was because He allowed His actions and words to be validated by the Scriptures (OT). Listen to John 5,

³⁶ "I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to finish—the very works that I am doing—testify that the Father has sent me. ³⁷ And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, ³⁸ nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. ³⁹ You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

The Pharisees treated the Scriptures as their personal guarantee from God that they would get into the kingdom, much like their forefathers thought that having the temple guaranteed their presence in the kingdom. Jesus says you don't believe Scripture (OT) which points to me and my words and actions which match the Scriptures (OT).

This is extremely important because Jesus upholds the authority of the Old Testament. Sometimes we Christians use the New Testament to prove the reliability (or even relevance!) of the Old Testament. That's backward thinking. The Old Testament came first. The Old Testament is the foundation for any other revelation from God.

Without the Old Testament the New Testament is Not Credible (2 Pet. 1:19-21)

Peter writes quite a bit about Scripture (OT). In his second letter he spoke about seeing Jesus transfigured on the Mount of Olives. He writes,

¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." ¹⁸ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. ¹⁹ We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. ²⁰ Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. ²¹ For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Peter validates the life of Jesus through the prophecies of the Old Testament. He basically says, 'I'm even more confident now in the Scriptures (OT) because what they predicted about Jesus

came true! He encourages his listeners to keep listening and reading the Old Testament because it is reliable and its prophecies will come true.

Sadly, many people doubt the literalness of God's prophecies about Jesus' future return even though all the prophecies of His first coming were all true! But you can't understand prophecy without the foundation of the Old Testament. That's where so many go wrong.

How did the people know whether the apostle's teaching and writing were from God? They validated it with the Old Testament (Scripture). Look at Acts 3. Here John and Peter are explaining the miracles they just performed and their teaching about Jesus. He defends it through the OT. (3:17-18)

¹⁷ "Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. ¹⁸ But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. ¹⁹ Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, ²⁰ and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus.

Their actions in the present were proof that the Old Testament was true and accurate and credible, even regarding Jesus' return. Peter is acting biblically. Back when God had Moses write out the law, He gave him specific instructions on what to do if people claimed they had a revelation from God. We read in Deut. 18,

²¹ You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?" ²² If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed.

This is in the context of God saying He would send another prophet like Moses and they must listen to Him (being Jesus). The people needed to test His words with Scripture (OT) to see if that person was speaking truth from God. The reason we have the New Testament as part of the canon is because holy men of God, led by the Spirit, agreed that the second half of the book agrees with the foundational writings.

And if we want a really good example of this go to Acts 17.

¹⁰ As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. ¹² As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

The Old Testament was used to see if Paul's teaching was from God. When it agreed with the Old Testament, they accepted it. And what did they learn when they understood that Jesus was the Messiah and that all these prophecies pointed to Him? They learned that ...

Without the Old Testament We Won't Understand the Sovereign Plan of God (Luke 24:27)

If we go back to the Emmaus road on Easter afternoon, remember how Jesus explained 'the things that had happened'?

27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

The Jewish people call the Old Testament the *Tanakh*. It's a made-up word of the 3 divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures (OT). 'T' for Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy), 'N' for Nevi-im (prophets) referring to all the books from Joshua to Kings and Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the minor prophets and the 'Ch' for Ketuvim (writings) includes Ruth, Ezra through Ecclesiastes, Daniel and the Chronicles. When Jesus says Moses (Torah) and Prophets He's referring to the Scriptures. Sometimes they said Moses, prophets and the Psalms (summarizing the writings) [see Luke 24:44. Jesus showed them God's plan to save the world through Jesus.

When you start with Genesis 1-12 you see how God's plan unfolds. He creates a perfect world but mankind rebels against God and sins. So, God punishes them but also promises mankind that a seed from the woman would one crush the head of the serpent (the cause of all sin). Sin continues to the point where God feels He must wipe the world out and start over with Noah and his family. Sin remains. Mankind rebels again making the tower to heaven in Shinar. God judges again, confusing their languages, dispersing people to all the world but then takes one man, Abram and makes a 3-fold promise to him in Gen. 12. I will make you great through descendants, I will give you the land of Canaan and I will bless the nations through you. God's plan to bless the nations unfolds as we find out that a king will come from Judah. And later that this king will come from the line of David and that His would be a virgin birth (remember seed of the woman only) and in spite of Israel's disobedience and loss of kingdom and temple and exile, God's plan still unfolds and we open the New Testament with a genealogy of the promised one starting with Abraham, working its way to Joseph and Mary – affirming the truth of the Old Testament so that we will accept this 'new' teaching' as being from God.

Remember when Stephen was put on trial for teaching about Jesus. How did he defend himself in Acts 7? He started with Abraham and laid out the sovereign plan of God in bringing Jesus to this earth to save us from our sins. And Paul reminds us in Romans 9-11 that God's sovereign plan for Israel is still on. The promises made through Abraham about descendants, land and Messiah are still true and He affirmed those promises through His covenant with David and through Jeremiah (New Covenant) which Jesus inaugurated at the Last Supper and we are grafted into Abraham's spiritual descendants by faith.

There are 4 places in the Bible where we are warned not to add to the word of God nor take anything away from it. By ignoring the Old Testament, we are in danger of taking it away, by not trusting it is reliable and foundational to the New. Jesus Himself affirmed the Old Testament as to its continuing validity and usefulness when He said in Matt. 5:17-19,

17 "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. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

So, let me encourage you to read the Old Testament if you don't. To ask God to help you understand it. To come to Sunday School or one of our Bible studies and learn together with others what Scripture says. And to be open minded about Zephaniah and any other books God leads us to study. And pray for the Word that as we open up together we would see 'wonderful things in your Law' and allow God to instruct us, rebuke us, correct us and train us so that we will be more mature and equipped to serve God as we should.

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