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WHY YOU NEED THE OLD TESTAMENT

Romans 15:4

By

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Romans, Lesson 98

Why You Need the Old Testament Romans 15:4

Years ago at the church I pastored in California, I referred in a sermon to the story of when Sennacherib had surrounded Jerusalem with his army. He sent a threatening letter to King Hezekiah, which the king took to the temple and spread out before the Lord, praying for deliverance. As I referred to that story, I could tell from the looks on people's faces that many had no clue of what I was talking about.

So I asked everyone to bow their heads and close their eyes. Then I asked everyone who had never read that story to raise their hands. More than half of the hands in the congregation went up. I was stunned. That isn't an obscure story in the Bible. It occurs in three different places (2 Kings 18-19; 2 Chron. 32; Isa. 36-37). That meager show of hands told me that my people were not reading the Old Testament.

I won't ask for a show of hands today, but I suspect that many of you have not read through the Old Testament. Maybe you've read the Psalms or Proverbs, or perhaps a few other favorite parts. But you don't regularly read through the Old Testament over and over. If that describes you, then you're not reading the Bible of Jesus, Paul, and the other apostles. The Old Testament was the only Bible that they knew. The teaching of Jesus and the apostles is built on the Old Testament. They assumed that those they taught were familiar with its stories and teaching. It's safe to say that if you don't have a basic grasp of the Old Testament, you cannot adequately understand the New Testament. It was primarily to the Old Testament that Paul referred when he wrote to Timothy (2 Tim. 3:15-17),

... from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

Without the Old Testament you lack a major part of God's revelation that He gave for teaching about Himself, about man, sin, and salvation. You lack much of what God gave for reproof and correction of your sins. You're not adequate, equipped for every good work. In short, you lack an understanding of God's ways.

I can anticipate your objections: "I tried reading the Old Testament, but I died in Leviticus. I skipped ahead to Numbers, but that really did me in!" I feel your pain. I'm not telling you that the Old Testament is always easy to read or understand. I'll be honest in saying that I find parts of it tedious to read. I bog down reading the dimensions and descriptions of the tabernacle and the temple. I fog over reading the boundaries of the twelve tribes in the land. I find the long lists of genealogies just as irrelevant as you do. I struggle every time I come to the chapters where the prophets pronounce judgment on all of Israel's enemies. I sometimes wonder why God put these things in the Bible.

But I keep working at it, prayerfully reading it through over and over, because it is God's written revelation to us. True, there are parts that I still do not understand, but I remember the comment of Mark Twain: "It's not the parts of the Bible that I don't understand that bother me; it's the parts that I do understand!" In our text, Paul tells us why we need the Old Testament:

You need the Old Testament because it points us to Christ and instructs us in godly living, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Romans 15:4: "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." The result of learning what is written in the Old Testament is that we might have hope. And we all need hope! About one in ten Americans suffers from depression and depressed people need hope. To overcome our problems and to live joyfully in this troubled world, we need hope from God. Paul says that such hope comes from the instruction of the Old Testament. Note five things:

1. The Old Testament points us to Christ.

"For" points back to the previous verse, where Paul cited Psalm 69:9, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on

Me.” It’s amazing that to present Christ as our example of self-sacrificing service, rather than pointing to an incident in the life of Christ, Paul points to Scripture. Then he detours for one verse (15:4) to emphasize the importance of Scripture to instruct us so that we can endure trials with encouragement and hope.

The major point of the Old Testament is to testify to Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah. Jesus rebuked the Jews for not reading the Old Testament in light of Him (John 5:39-40): “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.” After His resurrection, He told the two men on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24:25-27),

“O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

Later He told the disciples (Luke 24:44), “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”

This means that every part of the Old Testament must be interpreted in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ. It may not directly relate to Christ, but it is part of a larger context that must be understood in light of who He is and what He came to do. Some things are obvious: the sacrificial system points to Christ as the final and complete Lamb of God, who bore our sins on the cross. The Exodus illustrates and has many parallels with how God redeems us from slavery to sin. Some are less obvious. But it has been said that there are over 300 specific Old Testament prophecies that Christ fulfilled.

Years ago, math professor Peter Stoner (*Science Speaks* [Moody Pres, 1963], pp. 99-112) calculated the odds for just *eight* of these prophecies being fulfilled by one man who has lived since the time of Christ. Taking a conservative approach, he came up with the number, 1 in 10^{17} . To visualize this, he said that 10^{17} silver dollars would cover the state of Texas two feet deep. Mark one, blindfold

a man, and let him go wherever in the state he wished, but he had to pick the one marked silver dollar. That is the probability that Christ could have fulfilled just the eight prophecies that Professor Stoner used. Then Professor Stoner doubles it to 16 prophecies and the number of silver dollars becomes a sphere extending from earth in all directions more than 30 times as far as from the earth to the sun! Picking the right silver dollar would be the odds that Jesus fulfilled just 16 Old Testament prophecies. But He fulfilled more than 300!

But, it's not always easy to draw a line from an Old Testament text to Christ. So you may ask, "How does the main point of the Old Testament text find its fulfillment in Christ?" David King suggests six ways ("Christ in the Old Testament," 9marks.org/media/Christ-old-testament):

(1) Promise: a salvation promise or Messianic prediction.

The earliest of these is Genesis 3:15, where God said to the serpent: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you will bruise Him on the heel." It is the first promise of a Savior who would conquer Satan. But there are many more such promises throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Ps. 2; Isa. 53).

(2) Instruction:

Any time you read a general instruction (especially in the Law and wisdom literature), you're reading about Jesus because He kept all these laws. He read the Old Testament and it shaped Him. Jesus often cited the Old Testament in His moral teaching (Matt. 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43).

(3) Progression: Stories:

How does the story help make progress to Jesus? How is God keeping His redemptive promises that lead to Jesus? The Book of Ruth is an example here. (Read, *The Jesus Story Book Bible*, by Sally Lloyd-Jones.)

(4) Need:

How does the text show our need for the Savior? Every sin, failure, defeat, or problem in the Old Testament points us to Jesus.

(5) Type:

A type is a theological shadow in which a greater reality is the substance. Adam is a type of Christ (Rom. 5:14). Special days, such as the Passover and the Day of Atonement, point to Christ (Col. 2:16-17). The Temple was a type of Christ (John 2:19-21), who is now the dwelling place of God with His people. Are there Old Testament types that are not mentioned in the New Testament? We need to be careful, but the answer is probably, yes. Joseph, who was rejected by his brothers, but later became their "savior," is in many ways a type of Christ.

(6) Theme:

There are many themes in the Old Testament, such as justice, wrath, mercy, holiness, etc. As you read, ask how is the theme fulfilled in Jesus Christ?

Also, I would advise you to read the Old Testament in an accurate modern translation (either ESV or NASB) study Bible, such as *The ESV Study Bible* or *The MacArthur Study Bible*. Or, use a small Bible Handbook as you read. These tools will give you the historical setting of the book, the author, the outline, and explanations of difficult verses or issues that you will encounter as you read. As you read the Old Testament, look for Christ.

2. The Old Testament instructs us in godly living.

Romans 15:4: "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction" Unbelievers are ignorant about God and His ways, so they live in futility, sensuality, and greediness (Eph. 4:17-19). To avoid the ways of the world, we need instruction in godly living. God has provided this for us not only in the New Testament, but also in the Old. As we've seen (2 Tim. 3:16-17), the Scriptures are profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness so that we will be adequate, equipped for every good work. After mentioning how Israel in the wilderness disobeyed God, Paul concludes (1 Cor. 10:11), "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." Hebrews 11 traces the lives of men and women of faith, as found in the Old Testament, so that we can benefit from their examples.

The historical sections of the Old Testament show us how people succeeded through faith and obedience or failed through unbelief and disobedience. The wisdom books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) show us how to think and live rightly. The Psalms teach us to worship God and how to cry out to Him in prayer in all our trials. The prophets warn us of the devastating consequences of sin and the threat of God's judgment if we do not repent. They also encourage us with the truth that God will judge those who persist in evil and He will reward the righteous.

Don't miss the word "written" in our text; it occurs twice: "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction...." God saw fit to have His revelation put into written form. This means that to grow in knowing God and His ways, you must become a reader. This implies becoming a thinker and a student so that you can understand the written Word. You must use your mind in dependence upon the Holy Spirit to grow in understanding the truths of the Word. As we saw in Romans 12:2, Paul tells us that the way *not* to be conformed to the present evil age is to be transformed by the renewing of your *mind*. The fact that God communicated His revelation to us in written form appeals to us to use our minds so that we become biblical thinkers. Don't neglect reading and studying the Word.

Also, note that wherever the gospel has gone throughout the world, schools and colleges have sprung up. Harvard, Yale, and Princeton were founded to train godly pastors! While the simple gospel message can save illiterate, uneducated people who believe, it does not leave them in that condition. The fact that the Word of God is written urges us to develop our minds.

We've seen in Romans that chapters 1-11, the so-called "doctrinal" portion of the letter, are the foundation for the "practical" section that follows (12-16). Even so, teaching and doctrine are foundational for godly living. You can't jump down to "hope" at the end of verse 4 if you bypass "instruction" at the beginning.

3. The Old Testament gives us perseverance.

Strictly speaking, the Greek grammar of verse 4 separates "perseverance" from the phrase "of the Scriptures." The word "through" is repeated twice, so that the verse should read,

“through perseverance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” This might be saying that we gain hope through our perseverance and through the encouragement that comes from the Scriptures.

But I think Dr. James Boice is right when he says (*Romans: The New Humanity* [Baker], 4:1807), “... this is a place where it may be wrong to read too much into a fine point of Greek grammar.” He argues that Paul surely was thinking that through the Scriptures God produces perseverance in us (see verse 5). And we know from other Scriptures (James 5:10-11; Heb. 11; etc.) and from our own experience that the examples of perseverance in the Old Testament encourage us to persevere through our trials.

As you read about how Abraham persevered in faith for over 25 years before God granted the promise of a son, and how he died in faith without owning any part of the Promised Land, except for a burial plot, it strengthens your faith to endure through times when God does not immediately answer your prayers. Or as you read the story of Joseph in prison, falsely accused of a crime he did not commit, but how God eventually worked it out for His good and sovereign purpose, it encourages you to trust God when you’ve been maligned. As you learn both through the narrative portions of the Old Testament and through the Psalms how David cried out to God when enemies were trying to kill him, you learn how to take your own problems to the Lord and how to praise Him in the midst of those problems.

But also, there is a sense in which you must persevere in order to gain the benefits of the Old Testament. It’s not always easy to read, as I’ve already said. There are many parts of it that are difficult to understand, both from the standpoint of ancient customs that we don’t comprehend and difficult incidents that seem harsh by today’s standards: A man is stoned to death for gathering firewood on the Sabbath (Num. 15:32-36). God commands the Jews to exterminate the Canaanites, including women and children (Deut. 20:16). The seven sons of Saul are hanged to stop a famine (2 Sam. 21:1-14). There are many such issues where you have to seek God for understanding and submit to His Word, even when you don’t understand. So it’s true that we gain perseverance from

the Old Testament, but also we need perseverance to study the Old Testament to gain the hope that it brings.

4. The Old Testament gives us encouragement.

The main encouragement that comes from the Old Testament is that God promises a Savior to Adam and Eve in the Garden right after their rebellion—and He keeps His promise! All of the Old Testament shows God working through human history to bring the Savior not just for Israel, but also for the Gentiles (see Rom. 15:8-12). As the godly Simeon exclaims when he holds the baby Jesus in his arms in the Temple (Luke 2:29-32), “Now, Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.”

The Old Testament also gives us encouragement as it reveals to us who God is and how He deals with fallen sinners. In one of the first revelations of Himself, God proclaims to Moses (Exod. 34:6-7), “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” That description of God is repeated about a dozen times throughout the Old Testament (Num. 14:18; Deut. 4:31; 2 Chron. 30:9; Neh. 9:17; Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah. 1:3). When you see how the Lord deals graciously with imperfect sinners who made some terrible mistakes—Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, and others—it gives you encouragement that He will also be gracious to you when you fail.

5. The Old Testament gives us hope.

“Hope” has the article here: “the hope.” Paul wrote about this hope (Rom. 5:1-5):

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Biblical hope is not uncertain, as when we say, "I hope it doesn't rain tomorrow." We don't know whether it will rain or not, but we're expressing our wish. Biblical hope is certain because it's based on the promises of God, who cannot lie; but it's still future.

During World War II, some men in a German prisoner of war camp received a secret message that Germany had surrendered to the Allies, but it was three more days before the Germans heard that news. During those three days, their grim circumstances were no different than before, but their spirits were uplifted because they now had hope. The news was certain, but not yet realized.

Reading the Old Testament should give you hope because it shows you that in spite of your trials, in spite of what seem like unanswered prayers, in spite of years of waiting on God without seeing any change in your circumstances, God is faithful to His promises. As the angel announced to the shepherds in Bethlehem (Luke 2:10-11), "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Conclusion

This means that if you're not reading the Old Testament, you're missing a major source for hope in the midst of your trials. Or if you are reading the Old Testament, but it's not changing how you think, how you process your trials, and how you feel in the midst of your trials, you're not reading it rightly. You need the Old Testament because it points you to Christ, who is your sufficiency in all of life. You need it because it instructs you in godly living in the midst of an ungodly world. You need it to give you perseverance, encouragement, and hope in the midst of your trials. I encourage you to make reading the Old Testament a regular part of your time alone with God each day!

Application Questions

1. What has been your biggest obstacle to reading the Old Testament? How can this message help you overcome this?
2. Read through one of the gospels, noting what Jesus said about the Scriptures and how often He quoted Scripture. What does this teach us about the importance of the Old Testament?
3. Since we are not under the Old Testament law, how should we apply its moral commands to our lives?
4. Get a “through the Bible in a year” guide (there are dozens online) and set aside the time each morning to do it, asking God to reveal more of Christ to your soul as you read.

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