

Kingdom, Covenants & Canon of the Old Testament

LESSON
ONE

WHY STUDY THE OLD TESTAMENT?



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Kingdom, Covenants & Canon of the Old Testament

Lesson One

Why Study the Old Testament?

INTRODUCTION

If we were to ask people who have no traditional Jewish or Christian backgrounds, “Why should someone study the Old Testament?” their answers would probably go in two basic directions. The more positive responses might be something like, “The Old Testament is an old book, but we should study it because there are still some things that are good for us today.” And the more negative responses would be something like, “Actually, the Old Testament is so old and irrelevant that it isn’t worth reading at all.”

Well, when faithful Christians hear others express these kinds of outlooks on the Old Testament, we instinctively shrink back in dismay. As followers of Christ, we believe that the Old Testament is the Word of God; it is sacred Scripture that God inspired. So, we easily wonder, how can people talk that way about the Bible? But as surprising as it may sound at first, even when we ask Christians, “Why should a person study the Old Testament?” many of us sound just like unbelievers. At best we say, “We should study the Old Testament today because there are a few things in it that are still good for us today,” and at worst, even some Christians will say, “Well, to be honest, the Old Testament is so old and irrelevant that it isn’t worth reading at all.”

This lesson is the first in a series of lessons that will survey the entire Old Testament. We have entitled this series, *Kingdom, Covenants and Canon of the Old Testament*. As this series title suggests, in these lessons we will focus on three crucial dimensions of the Old Testament. We will see that the Old Testament is a book unified around the central theme of God’s kingdom, that this kingdom was administered historically through covenants God made with his people and that through the Old Testament canon these covenants were applied to the specific needs of God’s people at particular times and places.

We have entitled this lesson, “Why Study the Old Testament?” Before we address the kingdom, covenants and canon of the Old Testament directly, we will spend this first lesson focusing on a preliminary issue — the importance and relevance of the Old Testament. The fact is that many well-meaning Christians simply do not believe that the Old Testament deserves careful study.

In this lesson we will look at three reasons why it is important to learn about the Old Testament. First, we will see that the distance dividing the Old Testament from us makes the Old Testament difficult to study. Second, we will investigate the relevance we should expect the Old Testament to have for our day. And third, we will explore some ways we can learn to apply the Old Testament to our own lives in the modern world. Let’s begin with a look at the fact that the Old Testament often seems so distant to us.

DISTANCE FROM US

Through the years I have found that many students go through a similar, almost predictable process as they study the Old Testament. In childhood, or when we first become believers, we are told that the Old Testament is the infallibly inspired word of God, and in light of this, many of us conclude that the Old Testament only contains teachings that are easily applied to the Christian life. Now, so long as we only talk about broad topics like the holiness of God, the hopes of Israel, or the commandments like, “You shall not steal” or “You shall not murder,” we feel as if we are in familiar territory. But something happens when we begin to study the Old Testament more seriously. When we delve into it more deeply, we find that many parts of the Old Testament present matters that are not familiar at all. In fact, the more we read it, the more it becomes difficult to feel at home in the Old Testament; for many of us it feels much more like a strange and distant land.

As we explore why the Old Testament often seems so distant, it will help to focus on two topics: first, the causes of this distance, what makes the Old Testament seem so foreign; and second, the kinds of distance we encounter, the types of foreign things we find in the Old Testament.

Let’s look first at some of the main reasons why we often sense great distance between ourselves and the Old Testament.

CAUSES

Unbelievers have all kinds of reasons for claiming that the Old Testament is foreign to modern people. Some of their assessments are legitimate, supported by the facts, but many of their views result simply from their disbelief. Unbelievers lack saving faith, and this causes them to exaggerate how strange the Old Testament is. When you don’t believe in God, a book that talks a lot about God will certainly seem very strange. And when you don’t believe in Christ, a book that prepared God’s people for Christ will also seem quite foreign. So, it should not surprise us at all to hear unbelievers say that the Old Testament seems very distant from modern life.

But what about believers? We believe in the God of Scripture. We follow Christ. Why do we sense distance between ourselves and the Old Testament? At least two features of the Old Testament often cause us to view it as foreign land. On the one hand, God gave the Old Testament to humanity through a process known as organic inspiration. And on the other hand, God designed the Old Testament to fulfill its purpose through a process known as divine accommodation. These two features, organic inspiration and divine accommodation, cause much of the distance we feel. Let’s think first about the process of organic inspiration.

Organic Inspiration

We often call the historic evangelical Christian view of divine inspiration of Scripture “organic inspiration.” We use this terminology to indicate that the Holy Spirit employed the personalities, experiences and intentions of the original human writers in composing the Bible. That is to say, under the special guidance of the Holy Spirit, the human authors themselves determined what to write. The Bible did not result from mechanical inspiration where God used human writers as passive conduits of information; nor was the Bible romantically inspired as if God merely motivated the biblical writers to say lofty religious things. Instead, God meticulously controlled the content of Scripture so that it is without error, and may rightly be called the Word of God. But he did so through a process that relied upon and reflected the individual personalities and purposes of the human writers.

Consider the way Peter spoke of Paul’s letters in 2 Peter 3:15-16. There we read these words:

Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:15-16).

In these verses, the apostle Peter confirmed that the letters of Paul were written with the wisdom that God had given to Paul. In other words, God’s Spirit inspired Paul’s letters so that they were not mere human writings but writings from God. Yet, Peter also affirmed that Paul’s personality came through these epistles. Notice how he put it: “*Paul* wrote with the wisdom God gave *him*.” These Scriptures were still *Paul’s* letters. We can see, then, that from Peter’s point of view the apostle Paul’s letters resulted from a process involving both God and the human writer.

This same outlook is true of the Old Testament as well. This is why the Old Testament law is not only called the law of God, but also the law of Moses. It came *from* God, but *through* Moses. This is also why many Psalms are called Psalms of David. Although God was the ultimate author of the Old Testament, he employed holy men to write these books, and they did so in ways that reflected their personalities, intentions, and situations.

When you think about it, it isn’t hard to see that the Bible’s human authorship distances us from the Old Testament. All the writers of the Old Testament were ancient people. They all lived in the world of the Ancient Near East, and they thought and wrote like people in those days. In much the same way, because they wrote before the coming of Christ, Old Testament writers did not have fully developed Christian theology as we do today. And as a result, when you and I study the Old Testament, we soon begin to see that the world of the Old Testament is very different from the modern world. And for this reason the Old Testament often seems foreign and unfamiliar.

In addition to the difficulties created by the organic inspiration of biblical writers, we should recognize that divine accommodation also distances us from the Old Testament.

Divine Accommodation

“Accommodation” is a term that theologians use to describe the fact that every time God reveals himself to humanity he appears and speaks to us in finite human terms. Because God is ultimately incomprehensible, whenever he reveals himself, he condescends and speaks “baby-talk” to us. Otherwise, we would not be able to understand anything God said. You will recall that in Isaiah 55:8-9 we read these words:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

God is so transcendent — he so infinitely exceeds our limitations — that every revelation he has ever made has been accommodated to human capacities so that at least some of us could understand and follow what he revealed.

Now, it is important to realize that in the Old Testament God did not accommodate himself simply to humanity in general. He spoke human language in ways that finite human beings could understand. But he also designed the Old Testament for specific, historical situations that the Jewish people living in the Ancient Near East encountered. He designed the Scriptures to be understood, in the first place, by ancient Israelites. Because the primary audience of the Old Testament was ancient Jews, God had the Old Testament written in ancient Hebrew and Aramaic. God gave the Ten Commandments on stones because this was an international standard for the way important documents were written. And the literary styles of narrative, poetry, wisdom literature, and law that we find in the Old Testament followed those of the Ancient Near East so that God’s people back then could understand what he said to them. For this reason, as you and I study the Old Testament, we constantly encounter the reality that it was written for people who were very different from us. It was specifically written to accord with the abilities and needs of the ancient people of Israel.

So, we may say that the Old Testament Scriptures often seem like foreign territory to you and me because they were both organically inspired and accommodated to the original Israelite recipients. Old Testament writers and audiences lived in ancient times that were very different from our day. For this reason, we often sense great distance between ourselves and the Old Testament.

Now that we have seen two reasons for the Old Testament’s distance we should turn to our second subject: the kinds or types of distance we find between ourselves and the Old Testament. What kinds of things do we encounter in the Old Testament that seem strange to us?

KINDS

Needless to say, we cannot count all the ways the Old Testament seems foreign to us, but it will serve our purposes to think in terms of three basic kinds of distance between us and the Old Testament: first, theological distance — the differences between what we believe as New Testament Christians and the theological perspectives set forth in the Old Testament; second, cultural distance — the differences between our modern cultures and the distinctively Ancient Near Eastern cultural outlooks that we find in the Old Testament; and third, personal distance — the differences between you and me as people and the people associated with the Old Testament.

Now, we should all realize that theological, cultural and personal dimensions of life cannot be utterly separated from each other; they are deeply entwined and influence each other in countless ways. This was true in the days of the Old Testament just as it is true in our own day. So, approaching these matters in terms of three distinct types of distance will be somewhat artificial. Nevertheless, it will still help us to work through each of these matters independently.

Let's look first, then, at the theological distance we encounter when we study the Old Testament.

Theological

One of the most obvious obstacles to studying the Old Testament is the gap we feel between the theology of the Old Testament and our New Testament Christian theology. When we speak of theological distance, we are thinking primarily of the historical difference between the revelation that the writers of the Old Testament possessed and the fuller revelation that Christians possess. We have in mind the fact that the Old Testament teaches many things about God and our relationship with him that appear, well, at least at first glance, to be very different from what we learn from the New Testament. Every Christian who reads the Old Testament realizes at some point or another that the Old Testament presents theological viewpoints that do not appear to correspond with the New Testament.

Think about some examples of these theological differences. For example, God called Abraham to sacrifice his son. But what would we think about someone today who told us that God called him to sacrifice his son? We wouldn't even begin to take such a theological claim seriously. And in the days of Moses, God expected his faithful people to seek their salvation by marching from Egypt to a Promised Land. But we would certainly think it strange if we found a group of Christians literally marching through the wilderness to gain salvation. In the Old Testament we also read of men devoting themselves to God's service by making Nazirite vows not to cut their hair. But it certainly seems strange to us that God was so pleased with such vows. Or consider the fact that in the Old Testament, God ordained the temple as the only place where his people were to worship, under pain of death. But today we believe strongly that people can rightly worship God anywhere and at any time. Back then, God required his people to sacrifice

animals as atonement for sins. Today we consider such rituals to be acts of animal cruelty and insulting to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, God commanded the wholesale destruction of Canaanite cities, including women and children. But we cannot imagine such things being approved by God in modern war.

Aren't we all a bit puzzled that the Old Testament calls us to believe that God did such things when it appears so different from the New Testament? The list of such theological differences goes on and on. Whatever else we may say, there is certainly great theological distance between us and the Old Testament.

Cultural

In addition to the theological distance we see between the Old Testament and New Testament, the Old Testament also appears to be like a distant land because of the cultural differences between the Ancient Near East and our modern world. When we speak of the cultural differences between us and the Old Testament, we have in mind dimensions of life for the characters, original writers, and recipients of the Old Testament that were characteristic of the cultures in which they lived. We feel cultural distance between ourselves and the Old Testament every time we read about or imagine life in the ancient world, whether in Israel, Canaan, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, or the many other cultures of the past. The people we encounter in the Old Testament had countless cultural assumptions, values, and practices, just like we do today. But those expectations, customs, and practices were different from our own because of the times and places in which they lived.

Cultural distance occurs because human society is constantly changing. Social structures shift; older customs seem odd in many ways. Can you imagine visiting your own culture just two hundred years ago? For many of us, the differences would make us feel very uncomfortable. We'd have to spend a lot of time adjusting. Now, if this is true of such a short passing of time in our own nations, how much more should we expect to find cultural differences between ourselves and the world of the Old Testament? So many differences exist between the Ancient Near East and our modern world that many things we read in the Old Testament are strikingly unfamiliar.

Consider just a few examples of the cultural dimensions of the Old Testament that make us feel distant from it. On a mundane level the Old Testament world was largely an agrarian world. We read about farming and fishing throughout the Old Testament, but many modern urban people hardly understand the basic processes that went into this ancient lifestyle. We read about arranged marriages in the Old Testament, and many modern people wonder how young couples tolerated such customs. We learn that biblical figures practiced polygamy, and we find our ideals of monogamy challenged. We find slavery in the Old Testament, and we're perplexed by this custom. We also find in the pages of the Old Testament that their culture was dominated by a social structure known as imperialism. To be a part of a prominent empire was considered to be the ideal social structure of nearly every Ancient Near Eastern culture, including Israel. They knew practically nothing of our modern democratic ideals. When we see these and similar features of Old Testament life, we are often left wondering how to handle them. What are we to do with a Bible that is so deeply embedded in a cultural milieu so different from

our own? When we read the Old Testament, these and many other cultural differences also cause us to sense an enormous gap between ourselves and the Old Testament.

Personal

In addition to the theological and cultural distances that exist between ourselves and the Old Testament, there is a third kind of distance: personal distance. When we speak of personal distance, or differences, we are referring to the fact that people who lived in the days of the Old Testament were different from modern people in many ways, and the gaps between us and them often involve very personal, human considerations.

Of course, the people of the Old Testament were not entirely different from us. As we will see later in this lesson, we can identify with them in a number of important ways. But in many other ways, they had a strikingly different mentality from our own. And this should not be surprising. After all, their dispositions grew out of the theological and cultural world in which they lived.

Consider, on the one hand, that many people in the Old Testament had remarkable spiritual experiences unlike any that we experience today. They had visions of heaven and heard the audible voice of God. They physically wrestled with heavenly beings. Now stop for a moment and ask yourself this question: How would you be different if you had such spiritual experiences? What kind of person would you be if you had divinely inspired visions, auditions, and wrestling matches with heavenly beings? I think we realize that we would be utterly transformed if we had such experiences today. Realizing this should help us see that we are very different from the people of the Old Testament who had such experiences of God.

On the other hand, consider what kinds of people we are because of cultural influences on us. In the Old Testament people filled some cultural roles that are very strange to us. They were kings, queens, peasants, slaves. Old Testament people endured the horrors of ancient warfare and the threats of famines and plagues. We read about a young boy standing boldly in battle before a giant; a young woman who led an army into battle. We hear the desperate cries of slaves in Egypt. Very few of us today face these kinds of situations, and as a result, we have a hard time understanding how people think and feel when they undergo experiences like these.

So, as we begin this study, we should be ready to admit that the Old Testament will seem very distant from us in many different ways. This part of the Bible was not written in our modern world, and as a result, time and again we will encounter many theological, cultural, and personal differences between ourselves and the Old Testament.

Now that we have seen the causes and types of distance we feel between ourselves and the Old Testament, we should turn to a second topic: What relevance does the Old Testament have for our lives? Why should we expect such a distant book to have anything worthwhile to say to us today? Well, there are many answers to this question, but without a doubt, the most important response is that we must still expect the Old Testament to be important for our lives because the New Testament teaches us that it is.

RELEVANCE FOR US

Sadly, if ever a teaching of the New Testament has been misunderstood in our day, it is this one. Far too many Christians read the New Testament as if it teaches that the Old Testament is passé, as if the New Testament has done away with our need for the Old. But in reality, the New Testament says just the opposite. As we will see it tells us that the Old Testament is absolutely essential for Christian living. Full life in Christ simply cannot be accomplished unless we draw guidance from the Old Testament.

There are many ways in which the New Testament teaches us that the Old Testament is relevant for our lives today, but we will focus on just two. First, we will look at the teachings of Jesus. And second, we will consider the teachings of the apostle Paul. Let's think first about what Jesus had to say about the relevance of the Old Testament.

TEACHINGS OF JESUS

To gain a balanced view of what Jesus taught about the importance of the Old Testament for us today, we will look briefly into two aspects of Jesus' teaching: first, his apparently negative comments about the Old Testament; and second, his positive affirmations of the Old Testament's relevance. Let's look first at some of the teachings of Jesus that appear at first glance to present a negative view of the Old Testament.

Negative Comments

Many Christians who believe that Jesus brought an end to the relevance of the Old Testament turn to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7 as evidence for their views. At one point in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus touched on several ethical issues, and his approach to these matters leaves many with the impression that he actually opposed the teachings of the Old Testament. Listen to the following familiar passages. In Matthew 5:21–22 we read these words about murder:

You have heard that it was said to people long ago, “Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment (Matthew 5:21–22).

In Matthew 5:27–28 Jesus referred to adultery in this way:

You have heard that it was said, “Do not commit adultery.” But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:27–28).

In Matthew 5:31–32 he spoke of divorce:

It has been said, “Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.” But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery (Matthew 5:31-32).

In Matthew 5:33-34 we see the pattern again as Jesus addressed oaths:

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.” But I tell you, Do not swear at all” (Matthew 5:33-34).

Jesus also spoke of revenge in Matthew 5:38-39:

You have heard that it was said, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.” But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also (Matthew 5:38-39).

And finally, Christ addressed the issue of love for enemies in this way in Matthew 5:43-44:

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:43-44).

Now, all followers of Christ should agree that Jesus is God’s supreme revelation and that his teachings were much fuller than the teachings of the Old Testament. He penetrated to the heart and expanded to the farthest horizons in ways that the Old Testament never reached. But unfortunately, many Christians have understood these verses to teach that Jesus’ views on murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, revenge, and love for enemies actually contradicted the teachings of the Old Testament. Their reasoning usually goes something like this: They say that the Old Testament taught that physical murder is wrong, but that Jesus turned attention to the heart full of hatred. The Old Testament forbade physical adultery, but Jesus went further to talk about adultery of the heart. Regarding divorce, many believe that the Old Testament permitted divorce for a broad range of reasons, whereas Jesus disagreed with this Old Testament teaching and insisted on sexual immorality as the only grounds for divorce. Regarding oaths, they argue that the Old Testament said not to break an oath, but that Jesus instructed his followers never to take oaths. These same interpreters often believe that the Old Testament endorsed a practice of personal revenge — “an eye for an eye” — but that Jesus taught that we should forgive. They assume that the Old Testament taught love for neighbors and hatred for enemies, but Jesus expanded the command to love enemies as well.

Now, if these popular understandings of Jesus’ teachings are anywhere near the truth, then we have good reason for thinking that Jesus came to free his followers from

the ethical authority of the Old Testament. But when we reflect more closely on what Jesus actually said in Matthew 5, we soon discover that this outlook is far from adequate. Although Jesus' revelation is greater than that of the Old Testament, he did not in any way contradict the teachings of the Old Testament. Rather, his intention was to affirm the Old Testament by refuting some common misunderstandings of its teachings.

To understand Jesus properly, we need to see that in Matthew 5 Jesus was not disagreeing with the Old Testament itself. Instead, he objected to the ways that the scribes and Pharisees *interpreted* the Old Testament. In the days of Jesus, few people actually had direct access to the Bible, and for this reason, ordinary people in Israel relied heavily on the teachings of their religious leaders. As we will see, when Jesus set up the contrasts in Matthew 5 that we have just read, he contrasted his own views, which were in harmony with the Old Testament, with the traditions that the scribes and Pharisees had added to the Old Testament. A number of details prove that this was the case.

First, we should notice that Jesus dealt with things that had been said and heard. In other words, he was concerned with oral traditions rather than with the Old Testament itself. When Jesus and other New Testament figures referred to the Old Testament, they spoke of what was "written" or "read." And nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus refute anything introduced in that manner. But in the Sermon on the Mount, he objected to what had been "said" to the people; he objected to what they had "heard." To put it simply, Jesus contrasted what the scribes and Pharisees were saying with what he was saying. Jesus was not disagreeing with what was written in the Old Testament, but with the oral traditions perpetuated by other teachers in Israel. That is why he kept referring to what was *said* rather than to what was *written*.

In this light, we should look more closely at what Jesus actually said about these oral interpretations of the Old Testament. Let's think again about the contrasts that Jesus drew.

With respect to the issue of murder, although many people believe that Jesus expanded the prohibition of murder to include hatred, it is important to realize that the Old Testament not only condemned murder, but also condemned discord among the people of God. The Old Testament ideal of harmony and peace among God's people is expressed well in Psalm 133:1:

**How good and pleasant it is when brothers [dwell] together in unity!
(Psalm 133:1).**

Popular traditions in Jesus' day excused discord so long as it did not lead to physical murder. In contrast, Jesus refuted this false teaching by reasserting the actual standards of the Old Testament. And he did so by associating the prohibition against murder with the prohibition against hatred.

Regarding adultery, many people believe that Jesus expanded the prohibition against adultery to include adultery of the heart. But once again, it is easy to see that Jesus did not disagree with or expand the Old Testament requirements. After all, the Old Testament did not just require God's people to refrain from physical adultery; it also forbade coveting, or adultery of the heart. As we read in Exodus 20:17:

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor (Exodus 20:17).

The tenth commandment explicitly prohibited coveting someone's wife. So, we see that Jesus' argument was not a denial of Old Testament law, but a reassertion of Old Testament law.

Regarding divorce, many interpreters believe that Jesus disagreed with the Old Testament once again. But we must understand that in Jesus' day many religious leaders in Israel believed that Old Testament legislation gave them the right to divorce their wives for practically any cause so long as they issued proper legal papers. But we all know that the Old Testament indicates clearly that God does not approve of such behavior. As Malachi 2:16 says:

"I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel (Malachi 2:16).

In Matthew 19:3-9 Jesus described his position on divorce in more detail, and there he made it clear that his opposition to divorce was based on the Old Testament itself, particularly on the creation narrative involving Adam and Eve.

Regarding oaths, many people think that Jesus objected to the Old Testament practice of taking oaths. But once again, Jesus was not opposing the Old Testament's teachings, but perversions of its teachings. Apparently, in Jesus' day some people taught that lying was permitted so long as one did not swear to keep his word. Jesus disagreed with this teaching and insisted that the Old Testament prohibited all lying, not just lies that violate oaths. As we read in Proverbs 6:16-17:

There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue (Proverbs 6:16-17).

This is why Jesus went on to say in Matthew 5:37:

Simply let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," "No" (Matthew 5:37).

Jesus did not disagree with the Old Testament, but showed that the oral traditions of the scribes and Pharisees fell short of Old Testament standards.

Regarding revenge, many people believe that the Old Testament approved revenge and that Jesus disapproved of it. But originally, the Old Testament legislation about "an eye for an eye" in Exodus 21:24 was designed to guide judges in the official courts of Israel. In a word, judges were to render their verdicts and punishments fairly and proportionally to the crimes committed. This standard was never intended to apply to interpersonal affairs. Instead, the Old Testament taught that kindness and mercy were to guide behavior in those settings. As we read in Leviticus 19:18:

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people... I am the Lord (Leviticus 19:18).

In Jesus' day "an eye for an eye" had been taken as God's approval of personal revenge. It was believed that every time anyone did anything to you, you had a right to do something equally harmful back to him. But Jesus disagreed with this perversion of the law and affirmed the Old Testament teaching that we are to show kindness in interpersonal relationships.

Finally, regarding love for enemies, many people wrongly believe that the Old Testament taught it was acceptable to hate enemies. Some teachers in Jesus' day apparently inferred from the commandment of Leviticus 19:18 to "love your neighbor" that it was equally appropriate to "hate your enemies." But, of course, the Old Testament itself never says anything of the sort. In fact, in Exodus 23:4 we read these instructions about how to treat enemies:

If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. (Exodus 23:4).

So, once again, Jesus did not contrast his own views with those of the Old Testament. Instead, he opposed the false interpretations of his day and reasserted the true teachings of the Old Testament.

We seriously misunderstand Jesus' teaching if we imagine that he taught anything against the Old Testament itself. Now, as we will see, Jesus often revealed where the Old Testament had been heading, and he explained the beliefs and practices it had anticipated. And in this sense, his teachings went well beyond the teaching of the Old Testament revealing more of the character of God and his will to his people. But Jesus never opposed the Old Testament or its teachings. On the contrary, he opposed false interpretations of the Old Testament.

Having seen that Jesus' apparently negative comments about the Old Testament were actually affirmations of it, we should turn to those passages in which Jesus' affirmation of the Old Testament's authority and relevance for his followers are relatively easy to see.

Positive Affirmations

In general terms, there are many ways we can see Christ's positive outlook on the Old Testament Scriptures. For instance, he constantly referred to them as the basis of his own teachings. He displayed his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration standing between Moses, the lawgiver, and Elijah, the head of the prophets. And throughout his life, Jesus committed his entire heart to obeying all the teachings of the Old Testament.

But for specific examples of Jesus' positive attitude toward the Old Testament, we will look once again at the Sermon on the Mount. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 5:17-18:

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and

earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished (Matthew 5:17-18, NASB).

Here Jesus stated quite forcefully that he did not come to do away with the Law or the Prophets. He insisted that every detail of the Old Testament, down to the smallest letter or stroke, will remain in force until the end of all things.

Unfortunately, many times Christians think that Jesus meant just the opposite of what he actually said. They read, “I did not come to abolish but to fulfill,” and they think that Jesus meant something like, “I did not come to abolish [the Old Testament] but to render it irrelevant.” But by looking at the words Jesus spoke next in Matthew 5:19, we know that this was not what Jesus meant. There we read:

Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same 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 (Matthew 5:19).

Notice what Jesus said here. If people fail to keep, or if they encourage others to ignore, even the least of the commandments, they will be least in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus knew that the scribes and Pharisees were very selective in their approach to the Old Testament. So, he insisted that his disciples affirm and follow every detail of the entire Old Testament, not just selected parts of it. Christ expected his faithful followers to submit to every detail of Old Testament Scriptures. In fact, he was so insistent about the authority of the Old Testament that he asserted that we can hope for a destiny better than that of the scribes and Pharisees only if we submit to the entire Old Testament. As Jesus put it in Matthew 5:20:

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).

Now, we should all admit that Jesus’ words here raise all kinds of practical questions. What does it mean in the modern world to submit to the teachings of the Old Testament? How are Christians to observe the commandments of the Old Testament, even the least of them, today? These are important questions that we will be addressing in this series of lessons, but at this point, it must suffice for us simply to insist on the basic principle that Jesus taught so plainly — Jesus called his followers to receive the Old Testament as God’s authoritative word. They were not to reject it as irrelevant. Rather, they were to learn and obey every dimension of it.

TEACHINGS OF PAUL

Now that we have seen how Jesus taught us to expect the Old Testament to be relevant for Christian living, we should turn briefly to the witness of the apostle Paul. To understand his endorsement of the Old Testament, we’ll explore his comments on the Old

Testament in the same way that we investigated Jesus' words. First, we will address Paul's apparently negative comments about Old Testament law. And second, we will reflect on his positive affirmations of the relevance of the Old Testament. Let's consider first some of Paul's apparently negative assessments of the Old Testament.

Negative Comments

Sadly, many Christians today believe that Paul was actually very negative about the Old Testament. These sincere believers appeal to many passages in the apostle's letters, but for the sake of our discussion, we will take just one example. Listen to these words from Galatians 3:1-5:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you have heard? (Galatians 3:1-5).

Now we should readily admit that Paul believed that Christ had revealed more of God and his will than the Old Testament had. He believed that New Testament faith was fuller revelation. But often, well-meaning Christians read passages like this one and think that Paul believed the Old Testament was irrelevant. But in reality, Paul did not deny the relevance of the Old Testament. He simply objected to the misuse of the Old Testament.

Specifically, in verse 2, Paul asked if the Galatians had received the Holy Spirit by Old Testament law or by faith. In verse 3 he asked about their reliance. Would they begin to rely on human effort after having begun with the Spirit? And in verse 5 he asked if the Spirit's miracles came because they observed the law or because they believed the gospel. In each case, Paul's point was that the blessings of the Christian faith come not through observing the law, but through faith in the gospel of Christ.

These and similar statements in Paul's writings lead many to think that Paul rejected the relevance and authority of the Old Testament and replaced it with Christian faith and the Holy Spirit. In fact, the argument often goes: To see the Old Testament as relevant for daily Christian living is to turn from the gospel.

Yet, when we look more carefully at the context of these verses, we find that just like Jesus, Paul was not opposed to the Old Testament itself. He was opposed to its abuse. Paul stood firmly against the misuse of the Old Testament as a source of legalistic religion, religion that said salvation was merited by good works. In this passage Paul opposed teachers who brought the Galatians under the law's judgment through the false teaching that salvation was earned by keeping the law. And in contrast to this false teaching, Paul affirmed that the gospel of Christ is harmonious with the true teaching of

the Old Testament. Listen to the way Paul addressed the situation later in Galatians 3. In verses 10-13 we read these words:

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.” The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, “The man who does these things will live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree” (Galatians 3:10-13).

As this passage makes clear, Paul opposed those who relied on obedience to the law for their salvation. He opposed those who wanted to be justified by the law. When this is our religious practice, we are cursed because we will never obey perfectly. The only way to escape this curse is through faith in Christ who took our curse upon himself.

But did Paul oppose the Old Testament itself? Did he consider the true teaching of the Old Testament to be irrelevant for Christians? Absolutely not. In fact, Paul used the Old Testament to prove that salvation is by faith alone. In Galatians 3:11 he quoted Habakkuk 2:4 where the prophet declared:

The righteous will live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4).

According to Paul, the Christian gospel of salvation by faith alone was actually true to the teaching of the Old Testament.

Now that we have seen that Paul’s apparently negative comments about the Old Testament were actually negative comments about the misuse of the Old Testament as a system of works righteousness, it will help us to see that the apostle strongly affirmed the authority and relevance of the Old Testament for the followers of Christ.

Positive Affirmations

In general terms, Paul actually referred to the Old Testament countless times to justify his own theology. Quotations and allusions to the Old Testament appear all over his writings. But more explicitly, Paul also taught that Christians should expect the Old Testament to be very relevant for their lives. Consider his words in Romans 15:4:

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Romans 15:4).

According to this passage, the Old Testament is essential to developing and maintaining our Christian hope. As we read stories, psalms, the promises and judgments of the Old Testament, our hope in Christ will grow.

But without a doubt, Paul's strongest and clearest affirmation of the relevance of the Old Testament is found in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Most Christians are familiar with this verse, but we often imagine that the words "all Scripture" refer to the New Testament. Well, there is no doubt that these words have implications for our outlooks on the New Testament, but when Paul wrote to Timothy elsewhere about "Scripture," he had in mind especially the Old Testament. So, listen to the wonderful things that the Old Testament is able to give us. The Old Testament is able to teach, rebuke, correct, and train in righteousness for every good work. In a word, Paul said the Old Testament was so relevant that it is nearly indispensable to Christian living.

So, as we begin our study of the Old Testament, we must not only acknowledge the distance that is between us and the Old Testament. We must also see that the New Testament calls us to have high expectations of the Old Testament's relevance for us today. To study the Old Testament is not to spend time on something irrelevant. To study the Old Testament is to study the book that is able to make us wise for salvation.

At this point in our lesson, we will turn to our third main topic: how to apply the Old Testament to our day.

APPLICATION TO US

Just from our brief discussion in this lesson, it should be evident that the task of understanding and applying the Old Testament is enormous. Now, it's a wonderful relief to know that the Holy Spirit helps followers of Christ study and apply the Old Testament. In fact, he leads and teaches us in ways that go far beyond what we could accomplish in our own strength. But as reassuring as this is, we must not allow ourselves to become complacent, expecting the Holy Spirit to do all the work. Instead, it is our responsibility before God to grasp and accept the challenge of learning how to apply the Old Testament in responsible ways, doing the very best we can. The apostle Paul spoke of this responsibility to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

To explore the application of the Old Testament to modern Christians we will touch on three topics. We will explore first the challenge we face as we try to apply the Old Testament; second, the connections that make it possible to apply such an old book to our day; and third, the developments that we must take into account as we apply the Old Testament.

CHALLENGE

What is the challenge that we face as we try to understand and apply the Old Testament to our lives today? There are many ways to describe this challenge, but we will focus our attention on one central concern: We must learn how to bridge the gap between ourselves and the Old Testament. We must learn how to overcome the distance that separates us from the Old Testament so that we may make use of its relevance for us today.

Let's put this matter as plainly as possible. As we have seen, God gave the Old Testament to his people who lived long ago so that they could live for him in their times. But as we have also seen, he gave the Old Testament to us so that we could live by it as well. But we live in a world that is very different from the Old Testament. So, for this reason, there is a gap, a large chasm between us and the Old Testament, making it difficult for us to know how to apply the Old Testament to our lives. So, if we are to apply the Old Testament to our day in a responsible manner, we must deal with three things: First, we must understand the ancient world to which the Old Testament originally came. Second, we must cross over the historical distance between us and the Old Testament, paying attention to the ways our world differs from the world of the Old Testament. And third, we must bring what we learn in the Old Testament across the gap and apply it to ourselves and others living today.

Listen to the way the apostle Paul summarized the challenge of application in 1 Corinthians 10:11. Speaking of Old Testament narratives of Israel's exodus from Egypt, Paul said:

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Now notice that Paul said at least three things here that are important to us. First, he spoke of the events and writings, "these things happened... and were written down." Second, Paul spoke of himself and his fellow Christians at Corinth when he said, they "were written down as warnings for us." And third, Paul referred to a gap between the Corinthians and the ancient events and writings when he described Christians as those "on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come." These words indicate that Paul clearly understood that New Testament believers live in a different time than that of Old Testament believers. We stand at the end, in the times of the fulfillment of history. From these words of the apostle, we see the challenge of application is that we must be ready to deal with that ancient world, with the gap of time between us, and with our modern world.

In the first place, proper application of the Old Testament to today involves leaving our own world behind. One of our principal tasks is to interpret the Old Testament in its own terms. Now, of course no one can do this perfectly. We cannot get out of our modern perspectives completely. Yet, we all know the difference between pretending that an ancient book was written directly for us and sincerely trying to read a book within its own historical context. Every serious student of the Old Testament must

grapple with the fact that we are reading and applying a book that was specifically tailored to people who lived thousands of years ago. In a very important sense, we are not hearing God and his inspired writers speaking directly to us; we are overhearing them speaking to others.

For this reason, at some point we must always ask what these Scriptures meant originally. The original meaning of Old Testament passages established the initial direction of what God wanted his people to learn from the Old Testament. What were their priorities? What did they believe? What were their situations? How did they understand the Old Testament passages in view? In the lessons that follow in this series, we are going to learn how to read the Old Testament by going back to the world of its original writers and audiences.

In the second place, to apply the Old Testament properly, we must look carefully at the times between the Old Testament and our day to see the kinds of connections and developments that took place in biblical faith. As we will see, the teachings of the Old Testament developed and grew over time. It was not as if God said something to his people once and never said anything related to that topic again. On the contrary, during the historical chasm between the Old Testament and our day, God revealed much more. Some of this increased revelation appears in the Old Testament itself, and some of it appears in the New Testament. But in all cases, to bridge the gap we have to take into consideration everything that God has said.

In the third place, the challenge of application is that we must also be firmly committed to the idea that the Old Testament was written with future generations in mind. As Paul put it, the Old Testament was “written for us.” This fact requires us to give attention to the responsibilities we have as believers in the modern world. The needs of God’s people today are similar in many ways to those of people in the past, but they are also new and different. If we are going to apply the Old Testament today effectively, we must be aware of ourselves and of those to whom we seek to apply it.

Now that we have seen the challenge that faces anyone who wants to apply the Old Testament to our day, we should turn to our second concern in the subject of application: What are the lines of connection that make it possible for us to take teaching from the world of the Old Testament across the historical gap and into our contemporary world? What commonalities make this possible?

CONNECTIONS

For any book to have relevance for someone’s life, there needs to be some kind of connection between the reader and the content of the book. Somehow, there must be enough in common between what the book says and what its readers experience in their own lives for the book to be applicable. This is true of books in general, and it is also true of the Old Testament in particular. So, at this point we need to ask, what connections exist between the Old Testament world and our world that make it applicable or relevant for our lives today?

There are many ways we could catalogue these connections, but I have found it helpful to think in terms of three things we have in common with the original audiences

of the Old Testament. Specifically, we have the same God, we live in the same world, and we are the same kind of people. Let's unpack these three lines of connection.

Same God

First, as we study the Old Testament together we should always be mindful of the fact that the God of New Testament Christians is the same God we read about in the Old Testament. Faithful Christians today worship and serve the same God that faithful ancient Israelites served even before Jesus was born.

The fact that we serve the same God establishes very important connections because the Scriptures teach that God is immutable, or unchangeable. He is the same today as he was back in ancient times. Now, we have to be careful here. The Bible teaches that God is immutable, but only in certain ways. Immutability does not mean that God does nothing. It does not mean that he is immobile. Instead, as traditional Christian theology teaches, there are three main ways in which God is immutable. He does not change in his eternal counsel, in his character or attributes, or in his covenant promises. Let's unpack these ways in which God's immutability ensures that he is the same now as he was in the days of the Old Testament.

First, God's eternal counsel is unchanging. Now, the Bible clearly teaches that everything God has done, and everything that God is doing, is part of an unchanging, unified design. As the prophet Isaiah put it in Isaiah 46:10:

I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, I will do all that I please (Isaiah 46:10).

In these lessons we will explore the goal and direction of this eternal plan in some detail, but at this point it will suffice to say that the immutability of God's eternal plan teaches us that his purposes in the Old Testament align with his purposes in the New Testament. No matter what differences we see, the two testaments do not represent two different plans — one replacing or contradicting the other. On the contrary, the Old Testament and New Testament are phases or steps of one unified plan that has and always will move history toward one unchanging goal.

In the second place, God is also immutable in his character or attributes. God shows different aspects of his character at different times, sometimes expressing mercy, sometimes expressing wrath, but his ever-consistent character — or his eternal nature — never changes. Listen to the way the writer of Hebrews spoke of Christ's eternal nature in Hebrews 1:10-12:

In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end (Hebrews 1:10-12).

And as James 1:17 says:

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows (James 1:17).

Our God does not change; on the contrary, his character always remains the same.

Unfortunately, we live in a day when many Christians have doubted the consistency of God's character. They act as if he has one set of attributes early in the Bible and then another at a later time. I can remember as a 6-year-old child hearing my Sunday school teacher teach us about Joshua's battle at Jericho. When she had finished telling us the story, she looked at us all around the room and said, "Boys and girls, God was very mean in the Old Testament. He even wanted children to die back then. But God has changed now. In the New Testament he loves everybody. Aren't you glad you live in the New Testament rather than in the Old Testament?" And, of course, we were all very glad for this. None of us wanted to be killed like the children of Jericho.

Now, as well meaning as my Sunday school teacher was, she had made a serious mistake. God's character has not changed since the Old Testament. On the contrary, he is just as full of judgment in the New Testament as in the Old Testament. And he is just as loving in the Old Testament as in the New Testament. God's character has always been and always will be precisely as it is right now. He is unchanging.

The immutability of God's attributes also gives us reason to believe that the Old Testament is relevant for our lives today. Despite the fact that on the surface many of God's outward actions in the Old Testament look very different from his actions in the New Testament, we must affirm with the teaching of Scripture that God's character has never changed. Every action he took in the Old Testament reflected his character, and because his character has not changed a bit, we can be confident that his actions in the New Testament period are also harmonious with his eternal nature. If Old Testament believers and New Testament believers have the same God with the same attributes, we should expect to see similarities between the ways God related to Old Testament believers and the way he relates to New Testament believers. And these similarities make the Old Testament relevant for our lives.

Now, in the third place, throughout the Bible God is also unchanging in his covenant promises. Without fail God will fulfill everything he covenanted to be and to do for his people. Now we need to be careful here as well. Many times in Scripture God threatens and offers things to people which he does not bring about. But threats and offers are not covenant promises. Covenant promises are those things God has sworn to do, and these covenant oaths are unfailing. As Hebrews 6:17 reads:

Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath (Hebrews 6:17).

God is immutable in his covenants. In Genesis 9:16 God promised that whenever he saw the bow in the sky he would remember his everlasting covenant with Noah and never again destroy the world with a flood. Three times in Genesis 17 God promised that

his covenant with Abraham would be an everlasting covenant, and in 1 Chronicles 16:15-18 David called to mind God's unending covenant to the patriarchs to give Israel the Promised Land. In 2 Samuel 23:5 David mentioned that God had made an everlasting covenant with him regarding his line's claim to Israel's throne. And although the failures of Israel, Judah and the house of David led to the exile, God always kept his covenant with them. In Ezekiel 16:59-60, we read these words:

This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will deal with you as you deserve, because you have despised my oath by breaking the covenant. Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you (Ezekiel 16:59-60).

We have to admit that from time to time it appears that in the New Testament God has forgotten or set aside some of his promises. But the reality is this — when we understand Scripture properly, remembering that God does not change, we will find that every covenant promise is or will be fulfilled. For this reason, we have good reason to believe that the Old Testament can be applied in profitable ways to us as followers of Christ in the New Testament age. God made many promises to Old Testament believers, and we can be sure that in the New Testament he is keeping those promises.

Now that we have seen that the Old Testament and New Testament are connected by the fact that both testaments have the same immutable God, we should turn to the second type of connection between the faith of the Old Testament and our Christian faith today — the fact that we live in the same world.

Same World

In a word, the Old Testament comes from and describes the same world in which you and I live today. The faith of Old Testament believers did not grow in another universe. It developed here on this planet, so that we share with it a common history and a common set of circumstances. And these facts should lead us to see at least two kinds of connections between our New Testament faith and the faith of the Old Testament. First, the Old Testament provides backgrounds that explain many of our current experiences. And second, the Old Testament describes situations that parallel many of our current experiences. Let's explore what we mean when we say that the Old Testament provides historical backgrounds to our experiences of faith.

One of the most obvious yet remarkable features of the Old Testament is that it reports countless events and teachings that form backgrounds to events and teachings in the New Testament period. Old Testament events did not take place in a vacuum. They were not fictitious. They happened in real history and many of them left indelible marks on the world for all time.

For example, the Ten Commandments given to Israel in the book of Exodus provided essential background for the moral teaching of the New Testament. In a similar way, God's choice of David as the head of a permanent dynasty for God's people

provides the historical background for Jesus' ancestry as the great son of David. The historical fact of Israel's exile to foreign lands gives the background for Jesus' proclamation that he came to set the captives free. In these and countless other ways, the Old Testament is relevant for living in the New Testament age because of the historical background it provides.

Now, in the second place, the Old Testament is also relevant because events in the Old Testament parallel those of our Christian faith. We all know the adage that "history repeats itself," and we understand that many events often look very much like other events that have taken place in the past.

Like Old Testament believers, we live in a world created by God but fallen into sin. The faithful in the Old Testament faced opposition from other people and from demonic powers, and we face the same opposition today. They depended on God's help to overcome; we depend on his help as well. The parallels between the Old Testament world and our world are extensive. Once we look beyond the superficial dissimilarities, we can see that we live in circumstances that are very similar in many ways to those of Old Testament writers and their audiences.

In the third place, we may also find a line of connection between the Old Testament and our day in the fact that we are dealing with the same kind of people.

Same Kind of People

Although there are many superficial differences between the ancient peoples of the Old Testament and modern people, there are also fundamental continuities that connect us with the people who lived during the days of the Old Testament. There are at least three ways in which we are the same kind of people: all human beings are the image of God; we are all fallen into sin; and human beings are divided between those that are and those that are not in covenant relationship with God.

First, all human beings, no matter when or where they live, are the image of God. This is a clear teaching throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament. In Genesis 1:27 we read these words:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27).

Moreover, in Genesis 9:6 we find that even after sin corrupted humanity, human beings are still the image of God. There we read:

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man (Genesis 9:6).

And beyond this, the New Testament also affirms that all people are the image or likeness of God. In James 3:9 we read these words:

With our tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness (James 3:9).

And as Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 11:7:

Man... is the image and glory of God (1 Corinthians 11:7).

Though we will have much more to say about what it means to be the image of God in a later lesson, it will suffice at this point to say that we have a number of characteristics that, to one degree or another, are common, if not universal, for all human beings. In the past, the church has focused attention on the fact that human beings are rational, that we have special linguistic abilities, and that we are moral or religious creatures.

From this biblical perspective, we can see that we must be careful not to overstate the differences between people of the Old Testament and modern people. Beneath the surface, we who live today are not very different from those ancient people. Although we are not exactly like them, we can assume that the rational, linguistic and moral qualities that dominate our lives were also present in theirs. And for these reasons, we can have much confidence that the Old Testament can be successfully applied to our day. The people who wrote it and to whom it was written were the image of God just like we are.

In the second place, we are also like the people of the Old Testament because all human beings are fallen into sin. We are all familiar with those well-known words of Paul in Romans 3:12:

All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one (Romans 3:12).

The apostle made it clear that all people have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And this is not just a New Testament teaching — Solomon said essentially the same thing at the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8:46:

There is no one who does not sin (1 Kings 8:46).

Because we and Old Testament people share the common quality of being fallen images of God, it is not difficult for us to grasp the propensity of Old Testament people to turn from God to sin. It is not difficult for us to understand why Old Testament writers focused so much on sin and its corruption. We connect with the Old Testament on this level because we know that we are sinners much like the original recipients of the Old Testament. And the Old Testament focuses on the redemption of sinners much like the New Testament does as well. What God said to the sinful people of Old Testament times is quite relevant for sinners living today.

In the third place, since the fall of humanity into sin, it has always been the case that human beings have been divided into groups according to their relationship with God. You will recall that at Mount Sinai, God spoke of his special covenant relationship with Israel in this way in Exodus 19:6:

You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6).

And in 1 Peter 2:9 the apostle Peter quoted this passage but applied it to the New Testament church. As he put it:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (1 Peter 2:9).

Although there are differences between God's people in the Old Testament and New Testament, there is still an abiding line of connection. Humanity is still divided in terms of relationship with God.

There are many ways to describe the divisions of humanity. One very helpful way is to notice that throughout the Bible God distinguishes three groups: first, those who are lost because they are outside of covenant with God; second, those in covenant with God who are still lost, not saved from their sins; and third, those in covenant with God who are justified by faith and eternally saved. These three groups of people existed in the Old Testament and they also exist in the New Testament period today. Because of these parallels, we are right to expect the Old Testament to be relevant for us. The human race is divided in our day as it was in the days of the Old Testament. And as a result, God's word to Israel is his word for us.

So it is that as we approach applying the Old Testament to our day, we should remember that at least three major lines of connection exist between us and the Old Testament: we serve the same God, in the same world and as the same kind of people.

Now that we have seen how the same God, the same world and the same kind of people connect us to the Old Testament, we should also turn our attention to the developments that have taken place between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

DEVELOPMENTS

We could approach this topic in a number of ways, but we will simply follow the pattern established by the three lines of connection. We will see how there have been epochal developments, cultural developments, and personal developments.

Epochal

In the first place, although we know that we are dealing with the same immutable God in the Old Testament and New Testament, we must realize that God revealed himself in epochs or ages. Biblical history is a lengthy account of the way God disclosed himself to his people progressively, bit by bit, as the history of salvation moved toward its divinely ordained end. Put simply, Abraham knew more about God than Noah did. Moses knew more than Abraham; David knew more than Moses; and God has revealed more to New Testament believers than ever before. The writer of Hebrews stressed this point in Hebrews 1:1-2:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Unfortunately, we live in a day when there is much confusion about the kinds of epochal considerations that must be made as we apply the Old Testament to our lives today. Many Christians rightly believe that the Old Testament applies to us, but they have different ways of applying the message of the Old Testament to our age. Although there are many variations on these matters, it helps to think of three main tendencies.

On one end of the spectrum are several extreme positions that promote a segmented view of biblical faith. These Christians stress the differences between the various epochs or ages of Scripture. In fact, they focus so much on the differences between the Old Testament era and our own day that they tend to apply to modern believers only those things in the Old Testament that are repeated in the New Testament. So long as the New Testament does not comment on an Old Testament teaching or practice, these Christians assume that the Old Testament does not apply.

On the other end of the spectrum are several extreme positions that promote a flattened view of biblical faith. These Christians focus on things that have remained the same between the various ages of Scripture. In fact, they consider the Old Testament and New Testament to be so unified that so long as the New Testament does not comment on an Old Testament teaching or practice, these Christians assume that the Old Testament should be followed as closely as possible.

In these lessons, we will avoid both of these extremes by following an approach to the ages of Scripture that looks at biblical history as both unified and developing. Our outlook tries to give equal attention to the ways things have stayed the same and have changed throughout the Bible's history. We will assume that all of the Old Testament is relevant for us, but also that every dimension of the Old Testament has developed. We will not treat any of the Old Testament as inapplicable or irrelevant to our day, but neither will we apply any Old Testament teaching without taking into consideration what God has revealed in the New Testament. Instead, all the teachings of the Old Testament must undergo epochal adjustments by passing through the filter of the New Testament. In a word, the developmental model teaches that the whole Old Testament is relevant and authoritative for us, but also that the whole Old Testament must be applied in the light of the New Testament.

This developmental model follows an analogy that the apostle Paul applied to the history of salvation. In Galatians 3:24 he spoke of the stages of biblical history as stages in the growth of a child:

[The] law was our disciplinarian until Christ (Galatians 3:24, NRSV).

Old Testament faith was like the instructions given to a child; New Testament faith is like the instructions given to an adult heir.

Now, think about this analogy that Paul used to describe the development of biblical faith. Normally, we give an appropriate set of rules to young children: "Don't go in the street. Don't touch the stove." But when children become adults, we don't expect them to stay out of the street or to stay away from stoves anymore. After all, they are

adults. But we do expect adults to remember the wisdom that childhood rules were designed to teach. We expect adults to remember that roads and stoves are dangerous and to be approached with care. For an adult to be bound by the same rules in the same way as a two-year-old is foolish. But it is just as foolish to forget the wisdom of the two-year-old's rules.

As we will see in these lessons, much the same is true for biblical faith. In many ways, the Old Testament resembles rules given to a young child. It is designed appropriately for the spiritual condition of the people of Israel in the Old Testament days. Now, as New Testament believers we may go in two foolish directions. First, we may try to go back to the days of the Old Testament and to imitate Old Testament faith as if we lived in the Old Testament days ourselves. But this would be to deny Christ and his great work of salvation. And second, we may be tempted to say that the Old Testament has nothing for us anymore, now that we are New Testament believers. But this is also wrong. The Old Testament has much to teach us about our Christian faith. The developmental model of biblical faith teaches us to appreciate and to submit to the authority of the Old Testament but to do so as those upon whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.

Cultural

In the second place, to comprehend the Old Testament in our day, we must consider cultural developments. If we hope to connect our lives with the text of the Old Testament Scriptures, we must take into account the variations between the cultures represented in the Old Testament and those of our own world.

To acknowledge cultural developments, we must be concerned, on the one hand, to see cultural similarities between ourselves and the Old Testament. What cultural patterns do we face that closely parallel Abraham's experience? How is our culture like David's? And on the other hand, we must be concerned to see the cultural differences that exist. How has human culture significantly changed from the ancient societies of the Old Testament? What customs and practices are different? We must answer these questions, and make appropriate cultural adjustments to the Old Testament's message, as we apply the Old Testament to modern life.

Personal

In the third place, to apply the Old Testament in our day, we must make personal adjustments. We must consider people in the Old Testament and people in our day. There are considerable similarities between the people of the Old Testament and people living in our contemporary world. But we must also recognize that many dissimilarities exist between modern people and ancient people. If we hope to apply the ancient texts of the Old Testament properly, we must take into account these personal variations.

For example, we all need to ask questions like these: How do our personal lives compare with those that we see in the Old Testament? What roles do we have in society?

What is our spiritual condition? How are we serving the Lord compared to this Old Testament character or that Old Testament character? How do our thoughts, actions and feelings compare to those that we see in the Old Testament? By taking account of the variations between ancient Old Testament people and modern people, we can better understand how to apply the Old Testament in our day.

As we continue in these lessons, we will see time and again that we must be ready to go from the Old Testament to our day by taking into account the epochal, cultural, and personal developments of particular themes in the Old Testament. If we do not pay special attention to these matters, we will fail to handle the Old Testament as God would have us handle it.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we have explored why it is important for Christians to study the Old Testament. We have acknowledged the distance between ourselves and this ancient book, but we have also seen that the New Testament strongly affirms that the Old Testament is relevant for us. It still holds authority to guide our Christian living. And finally, we noted the processes that go into applying the Old Testament to our day. We must always be sure to account for the ways themes of the Old Testament have developed over time and how they are to be used in the modern world.

We have touched on only a few preliminary but extremely important issues in this lesson. As we continue with this survey of *Kingdom, Covenants and Canon of the Old Testament*, we must always keep these thoughts in mind. As we do, we will find that the Old Testament is a wonderfully rich source of spiritual strength that God has provided for his people in every age.

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Kingdom, Covenants & Canon of the Old Testament

LESSON
TWO

THE KINGDOM OF GOD



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Kingdom, Covenants & Canon of the Old Testament

Lesson Two The Kingdom of God

INTRODUCTION

We have an expression in English to describe someone who gets lost in details. We often say that such a person “can’t see the forest for the trees.” Now lots of cultures have similar expressions, so it isn’t hard to understand what we mean when we say this. When we are surrounded by lots of details, it’s easy to become lost in minutia to the point that we become confused about larger, more important issues. So, in confusing situations we often remind each other to step back and look at the big picture.

For most people, one place where details tend to obscure the big picture is the Old Testament. The Old Testament is a very large book containing so many names, places, events, theological teachings and moral instructions that we easily lose sight of the underlying perspectives that unify the Old Testament. Now, to overcome this confusing and sometimes bewildering experience, we need to step back and grasp the big picture of the entire Old Testament.

This is the second lesson in our Old Testament survey entitled, *Kingdom, Covenants and Canon of the Old Testament*. As we will see in this series, the Old Testament is a book about the kingdom of God, which is administered by divine covenants, which in turn are explained and applied to specific situations through the books of the Old Testament canon. This lesson is entitled “The Kingdom of God,” and in this lesson we will see that a proper understanding of the Bible’s theology of the kingdom or reign of God provides one of the most comprehensive and unifying outlooks we can have on the Old Testament.

In this lesson we will explore four dimensions of the biblical teaching on the kingdom of God. First, we will see how the Scriptures speak of the kingdom of God in both broad and narrow senses. Second, we will look at the kingdom of God during the primeval period, the earliest stages of earth’s history. Third, we will explore God’s kingdom in the national history of Old Testament Israel. And fourth, we will see how the kingdom of God appears in the New Testament. By looking at these four topics, we will gain a broad and coherent perspective on the entire Old Testament. Let’s look first at the way the Old Testament speaks of God’s reign in both broad and narrow senses.

BROAD AND NARROW

As we begin our lesson it will help to explain two outlooks that are absolutely essential to a proper understanding of God’s kingdom. First, we will see that, in a broad sense, the Old Testament teaches that God’s sovereignty is complete and unchanging.

And second, we will see that, in a narrow sense, God's kingdom is developing and growing throughout history. Let's consider first the more general outlook on the unchanging absolute sovereignty of God.

UNCHANGING

If ever there were a clear teaching of the Bible it's this: God is the Creator and sustainer of all of his creation; there is no other creator God. And for this reason, God has always had and always will have unwavering kingship over his creation. Listen to Psalm 93:1-2, where we find this praise of the royal Creator:

**The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty... and is armed with strength.
The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was
established long ago; you are from all eternity (Psalm 93:1-2).**

In this respect, the faith of Old Testament Israel differed greatly from the religions of its neighbors. Neighboring religions commonly taught that many gods competed for sovereignty, and that the power of these gods ebbed and flowed according to historical circumstances. In some cases, gods rose and fell according to the cycles of the seasons of the year. In other cases, gods rose and fell as their favored nations experienced victories and defeats in war.

But such concepts were not part of biblical faith. Yahweh, the God of Israel, was the sole Creator, Sustainer and Ruler of the entire creation, even of heavenly creatures, or so-called gods. In this sense, the sovereign kingship of God is unchanging. All of creation has always been and always will be his kingdom.

Now, as important as it is to believe that, in a general sense, God has always ruled over all creation, we must also recognize a second, narrower sense in which the Bible speaks of God's kingdom as developing.

DEVELOPING

In this narrow sense, the kingdom of God develops, ebbs and flows, and eventually grows to the point that it extends over the entire world. And as we will see, when the Bible speaks of the kingship and kingdom of God, it usually has this historical sense in mind. One of the most convenient ways to see this perspective on the kingdom of God is by looking at the opening words of the Lord's Prayer. In Matthew 6:9-10 Jesus summarized the teaching of the entire Old Testament on the kingdom of God when he taught his disciples to pray this way:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9-10).**

Now, since we know that in a more general sense God has always ruled over all creation, including all of the earth, these words should give us pause. What did Jesus mean when he taught us to pray, “your kingdom *come*”? How can something that is already here “come”?

Well, in a word, Jesus referred to the Old Testament teaching that God has a developing historical kingship. He taught that the kingdom of God comes to earth and transforms it, so that the earth mirrors heaven. Notice again how Jesus put it in Matthew 6:9-10. Using the custom of ancient Hebrew poetry, Jesus’ words about the kingdom consist of three parallel lines. In the first place, he asked for God’s name to be kept holy. In an elaboration on this, he explained that God’s name would be kept holy when the kingdom came. And then to explain what he meant by the coming of the kingdom, Jesus added that the coming of the kingdom would be God’s will being done on earth as it is done in heaven.

Jesus taught us to pray that God would bring his kingdom to earth to such an extent that the earth would become like heaven, so that God’s name would always be kept holy everywhere. Now, Jesus knew that God already controlled the entire earth, but he also knew that the Old Testament promised that God would one day redeem, renew and perfect the earth so that it reflected the wonder of heaven. And it was in this sense that Jesus asked for the kingdom of God to come to earth in his day. As far as Jesus was concerned, something was supposed to happen on and to the earth. God was supposed to extend his heavenly reign so that his will would be done here as there.

In order to understand how God’s will could be done on earth as it is in heaven, we will look at the portrait of God’s heavenly reign found in Daniel 7. In Daniel 7:9-10 we read these words:

As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him (Daniel 7:9-10).

This portrait of heaven is not unusual. It is the kind of scene that we find every time the Scriptures speak of God’s heavenly throne room. But there are at least two dimensions of this picture of God’s celestial reign that we should point out.

On the one hand, as God reigns in heaven he reveals himself to his creatures in his special glorious presence. As the Scriptures teach, God is omnipresent; he is everywhere — but in his omnipresence he is invisible. In the throne room of heaven, however, God sits on his throne, wearing radiant white garments, with hair white as wool. His throne is ablaze with fire and consuming fire flows from his throne. God’s special presence in his throne room is overwhelming; he appears as all-glorious; his blinding splendor fills heaven.

Now, compare the glory of God in the heavenly throne room with the glory of God on earth. At best, what we see on earth is a faint reflection of his overwhelming celestial splendor. Yes, we see God’s glory reflected in the wonders of creation, but this

is nothing compared to the glory of God in heaven. So, when Jesus prayed for God's reign to come to earth as it is in heaven, one aspect of what he had in mind was that the overwhelming brilliance of God's special presence would fill the earth as it fills heaven.

This is what the apostle John had in mind when he described the New Jerusalem that would come to earth from heaven when Christ returns. In Revelation 21:23 we read these words:

The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp (Revelation 21:23).

So, when Jesus taught us to pray for the kingdom of God to be manifested on earth as it is in heaven, part of what he meant was that we should ask God to come to the earth in his glorious, royal splendor.

On the other hand, we also need to see that God's brilliant, glorious presence causes certain effects in the heavenly throne room. As we read in Daniel 7:10:

Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him (Daniel 7:10).

Countless creatures before the throne of God attend him, worship him, and humbly do his bidding.

The effect of God's glorious presence is a second result of God's heavenly kingdom coming to earth. On the earth, it is easy to rebel against God at this time. In fact, most creatures here do just that. God's enemies, both spiritual and human, oppose his reign. But one day, when Christ returns and the special glorious presence of God comes to the new earth, all creatures on the earth will either be destroyed or they will do his will here as his will is now done in heaven. This is why the apostle Paul could say as he did in Philippians 2:10 that:

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth (Philippians 2:10).

So we see that Jesus presented the kingdom of God as a developing, historical, earthly reality. He longed for the day when God's glory would be so evident in his special presence on earth that God's will would be done as extensively on earth as it is in heaven. And he taught us to share that vision of the future with him.

Now that we have distinguished the reign of God in a broad sense and in a narrow sense, we are in a position to see how the Old Testament finds its unity in tracing the development of the kingdom of God on earth. At this point, we will look at the kingdom of God in Genesis 1:1-11:9 which is often referred to as the primeval history.

PRIMEVAL HISTORY

As we investigate the primeval history, we will look at three issues: first, how this part of the Bible defines the place of God's kingdom on earth; second, how it identifies the people of God's kingdom; and third, how it describes the early progress of God's earthly kingdom. Let's look first at how the primeval history establishes the place of God's kingdom.

PLACE

The opening chapters of Genesis explain how God first began to establish the earth as the location of his kingdom. We will look at how this geographical dimension of God's glorious reign is revealed in two steps. First, we will see that from the beginning God prepared the earth for his coming reign. And second, we will see how God planned to begin his reign in a central location, and then to expand its geographical boundaries to include the entire world. Let's begin by looking at the ways God initially prepared the world for the building of his kingdom.

Initial Preparations

Genesis 1 focuses on the way God first prepared the world to become his kingdom. The title of this chapter is found in Genesis 1:1:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).

After this title, Genesis 1:2–2:3 shows that God immediately began forming the earth into a place for his glorious reign in a threefold structure.

First, the story of creation begins in Genesis 1:2 with the world in chaos and God preparing to move against that chaos. Listen to the way the earth is described in this verse:

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters (Genesis 1:2).

Two important things are said in this verse. On the one side, the earth was “formless and empty,” covered with darkness and a chaotic deep. At this point, the earth was not a pleasant place to be; it was not ideal. The terms “formless and empty” are used elsewhere in the Old Testament to refer to wild and desert places on the earth, places that are uninhabitable by human beings. And in addition to this, “darkness” and “the deep,” have very negative connotations throughout the Scriptures. At the very beginning, the earth was hostile and devoid of life.

But on the other hand, verse 2 also tells us another essential fact about the opening of earth's history — “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” The God of light and life was not satisfied to leave the earth in its initial chaotic condition. He was ready to move against the dark, lifeless creation.

The second part of the creation account, is the six days of ordering in Genesis 1:3-31. These verses explain how God made the world fit to become his kingdom. Many interpreters have pointed out that these six days exhibit a discernible pattern that displays God's wisdom and purposes in the way he formed his creation.

In the first three days, God dealt with the fact that the world was formless. In the second three days, he dealt with the fact that the world was empty. Moreover, God's actions in these two sets of three days parallel each other in some remarkable ways. In day one God formed the day and restricted the darkness to the night. And correspondingly, in day four he placed the sun, moon and stars in the sky to maintain this order. In day two God formed the atmosphere; separating the waters below from the waters above. Then in day five God formed the birds to fill the space between the waters, and he formed the sea creatures to fill the waters below. On the third day God restrained the deep waters below by forming lush, fertile land. And on the sixth day God created land animals and humanity to fill the land. God displayed unsurpassed wisdom and power as he spoke and transformed the world from chaos into a marvelously ordered place.

Now, we should draw special attention to a repeated theme in verses 3-31. Specifically, Genesis 1 tells us that when God looked at his creation, he saw that it was good. And in verse 31, we see that on the sixth day he looked at his work and saw that it was very good.

Now, when the Bible says that creation was good, it means, in part, that God approved of his work in a moral sense because he had significantly restrained the chaos, the darkness and the deep, and because he had brought order to the world. But the word translated “good,” *טוב* (*toḅ*) in Hebrew, also means more than that. Here and in other places in the Old Testament, it also denotes “pleasant,” “pleasing,” and even “beautiful.” In six days God changed the world so that it reflected his own will and desires, making it a beautiful place that delighted him.

This is why the third part of the creation account in Genesis 2:1-3 speaks of the Sabbath day as it does. In the beginning of Genesis 1 God had been dissatisfied with creation. But in Genesis 2:1-3 God took pleasure in what he had done. In fact, God was so pleased with the initial arrangement of the earth that he rested from this work and sanctified the seventh, or Sabbath day. In a word, God was satisfied that his initial preparations set the earth on a path to becoming the kind of place he wanted it to be.

As we have seen, God initially prepared the earth as a place that pleased him, but we also need to notice that God's grand purposes for the earth required further development.

Ongoing Expansion

Despite all the work God had done in the first week of creation, he had not turned the entire world into a wondrous paradise. Genesis 2 draws attention to the fact that while

the entire world had been ordered to some extent, there was actually only one place on earth that could be called a paradise. Listen to the way Genesis 2:8 -9 describe this place:

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden... And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground — trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:8-9).

Think about it this way. God handled the entire earth in the way artists often make pencil sketches on their canvases prior to painting. He did not immediately paint the entire canvas of the earth; he simply established a basic order and orientation for the way he wanted the world to be. But the painting was not complete.

Even so, God did paint one portion of the earth with magnificent colors and adorned it as the center of his creation. The region of the earth was called Eden, which means in Hebrew “pleasant” or “pleasing,” and that region was God’s special delight. The centerpiece of Eden, in turn, was a garden, a wondrously beautiful place, a spectacular oasis, a magnificent paradise garden fit for a king. And so it was that although God was omnipresent in his creation, invisibly present everywhere, he chose the land of Eden, and especially the Garden of Eden within it, as the place of his special, visible presence. This was where God displayed himself gloriously on the earth. But this garden and this land were only a small portion of the earth. The rest of the world had been ordered to some degree, but it was still in need of much more.

Now that we have seen how God first prepared the earth as the place for his rule with Eden and his holy garden as its beautiful and delightful centerpiece, we should turn to our second topic in the primeval period: the people of God’s kingdom. At this time, God ordained the human race as his kingdom servants, the instruments by which he would complete his preparations for the earth to become his kingdom.

PEOPLE

The special role of humanity becomes clear through God’s comments on the man he placed in the Garden of Eden. Although everything in his initial order for creation had been good — even very good — in Genesis 2:18 we read these words:

The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18).

God, who had judged that the creation was “good,” had found something in his special, holy Garden that was “not good” — Adam had no wife. But why was this not good? In a word, God had created the human race for a job that was too great for one creature to accomplish on his own.

We can see why this task was too great for one man by noticing that humanity’s role is described in two ways. God made Adam and Eve to serve him as priests and as his vice-regents, or royal representatives.

Priests

In the first place, Adam and Eve were given the job of priesthood. They were called to minister to and honor God with acts of worship. We have already seen that this is what creatures do in the heavenly throne room; and it was also what Adam and Eve were to do on earth. In Genesis 2:15 we read these words:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Genesis 2:15).

At first glance, we might think that God simply ordained Adam and Eve to be gardeners, but they were much more than this. In fact, the expression “to work it and to take care of it” is unusual and had special significance for Moses and the Israelites who first read this story.

For example, in Numbers 3:8 similar expressions are used to describe the work of priests or Levites in the tabernacle of God. There we read:

They are to take care of all the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting, fulfilling the obligations of the Israelites by doing the work of the tabernacle (Numbers 3:8).

Adam and Eve’s role in the garden is described in ways that reflect this technical description of the Levites’ role in their priestly service to God.

Adam and Eve were placed in God’s holy garden, the place of the divine king’s special presence on earth, much like the tabernacle was in Moses’ day. And they performed priestly work in the worshipful service of the great king by beautifying and maintaining his holy garden. Adam and Eve served God as priests as they worked in his holy dwelling.

Vice-Regents

In the second place, Adam and Eve were also ordained as royalty, as God’s vice-regents. In effect, they were royal priests. We find this description of Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:26 where we read these words:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26).

Now we all know that this and other passages call human beings “the image or likeness of God.” In the past theologians commonly thought this meant that human beings are rational, moral creatures. But this is not the focus of Genesis 1.

To understand the significance of being an image of God, it helps to know that in the ancient world of the Old Testament, it was common for kings and emperors within and around Israel to be called “images,” “likenesses,” and even “sons of the gods.” Kings and emperors received these titles because in Old Testament times people believed that royal figures had a very special role in the world that distinguished them from ordinary human beings. Kings were thought to stand between heaven and earth, and it was believed that kings and emperors had the special task of learning the will or wisdom of the gods in heaven and then using their royal power to enforce that heavenly will on the earth. To use Jesus’ language from the Lord’s Prayer, kings were to learn the will of God in heaven and to bring that will to the earth.

Now, we can see that Moses was radical in his day because he declared that all human beings — not just kings and emperors — were images of God. According to the Old Testament, all human beings were created to be God’s vice-regents, to rule over the earth on God’s behalf and to make sure his will is done here, much like ancient emperors were thought to rule on the behalf of their gods.

This royal imagery explains why God described humanity’s role as he did in Genesis 1:27-28. Listen to what Moses wrote in these verses:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:27-28).

We can summarize this royal role for the image of God in this way. As we have seen, God established a measure of order and beauty in creation, and he put humanity in his wondrous, holy garden to serve him as priests. But God also called his royal image to multiply numerically and to fill not just the Garden of Eden but the entire earth. And he ordained them to have dominion not just over the Garden of Eden, but over the entire earth as well.

The great king of heaven ordained humanity as the instrument for kingdom expansion. Human beings were to multiply, to spread out, and to turn the entire earth into God’s garden in order that they might bring the will of God to the earth and serve him as priests throughout the world. Extending God’s kingdom throughout the world was the very purpose for which God put human beings on the earth.

Now that we have seen how God established a place and a people for his kingdom at the very beginning, we are in a position to sketch the progress of God’s earthly kingdom during the primeval period.

PROGRESS

We will summarize Moses’ record of this time in three ways. In the first place, we will speak of the cosmic treason that took place against the great king. Second, we will look at how the corruption of humanity increased to unimaginable levels and led to severe judgment. But third, we will find that God revealed a long-term strategy for

fulfilling his kingdom purposes on the earth despite humanity's failings. Let's look first at the treason that occurred on the earth.

Cosmic Treason

Instead of bringing God's will to the entire earth, Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation of Satan and rebelled against their divine king by eating the forbidden fruit. As a result, instead of spreading the beauty of Eden to the ends of the earth, they were cast out of Eden and were doomed to live under a curse.

Even so, humanity's role as kingdom builders did not vanish completely. Adam and Eve were still supposed to worship God; they were still supposed to multiply and have dominion. Yet, because of their rebellion, they and the earth were cursed so that multiplication and dominion became difficult, frustrating, and painful. Regarding multiplying, God said these words to Eve in Genesis 3:16:

I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children (Genesis 3:16).

And he instructed Adam regarding dominion in this way in Genesis 3:17:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life (Genesis 3:17).

Instead of fulfilling their task as the image of God with relative ease and unending honor, humanity was forced to dwell in a hostile world, and to experience pain and futility in living as God's image.

Corruption and Judgment

In the second place, during the primeval period humanity continued to pursue a path of corruption that eventually led to severe judgment from God. Before the human race fell into sin, bearing children would have produced more images who were faithful vice-regents and priests. But when Adam and Eve sinned, it was no longer true that all of their physical descendants would be faithful to God. In fact, by their fallen nature, none of them even could be faithful without God redeeming them from the power of sin.

Sadly, the vast majority of the human race continued to rebel against God. Adam and Eve's first son Cain murdered his brother Abel. And as Cain's genealogy in Genesis 4 tells us, as Cain's family grew and took dominion over the earth, their rebellion worsened. Instead of building human culture as God's royal priests, worshipping God and extending his will over the earth, Cain's descendants exalted themselves and built cultures that resisted God's reign. In fact, as time went on, human beings became so vile that God decided to destroy humanity. As we read in Genesis 6:5-7:

The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth — men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air — for I am grieved that I have made them" (Genesis 6:5-7).

Long-Term Strategy

In the third place, however, the primeval history tells us that God designed a long-term strategy for extending his kingdom throughout the world. In effect, with the corruption of the human race, God determined to redeem a select group of human beings from the dominion of sin and to build his kingdom through them. God showed saving mercy to these images so that they would serve his purposes.

The first hint of this long-term strategy was introduced immediately after Adam and Eve sinned, in Genesis 3:15. There God cursed the serpent, who had instigated Adam and Eve's sin, saying these words:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel (Genesis 3:15).

In essence, God promised that even though Satan and those human beings who followed him would continue to trouble Eve's seed, eventually her true descendants, redeemed humanity, would crush the head of the serpent, conquering the one who had led them into cosmic treason. This is why Paul assured the Roman Christians in Romans 16:20:

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet (Romans 16:20).

This hope of redemption continued from Adam and Eve's time all the way to our own day.

In contrast with the line of Cain that became more and more corrupt, a third son, Seth was born to replace faithful Abel. As the genealogy of Genesis 5 tells us, Seth and his descendants honored God with their lives as they sought to bring his will to the earth. And even when things became so bad on earth that God destroyed humanity by a worldwide flood, there was one descendant of Seth who was faithful and found favor in God's eyes — Noah. And God rescued Noah and his family even as the flood exterminated the rest of humanity.

Now, near the end of the primeval history in Genesis 8:21-22 God prepared the way for a long-term, complex strategy by which his redeemed images would fulfill their purposes as the image of God. There we read:

Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease (Genesis 8:21-22).

Notice God's motivation. He recognized that even redeemed human beings are sinful and weak. He realized that sin would continue to wreak havoc on his fallen image. So, the king of heaven arranged his creation so that it would provide long-term stability for the human race. The reason for this stability becomes clear in Genesis 9:1:

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1).

In a word, God established stability in nature and removed the threat of a worldwide flood so that his redeemed images could fulfill humanity's original task.

God knew what the rest of Scripture makes clear. The road to extending his kingdom would not be straight and uninterrupted. He knew his own people would stumble and fall, and he knew that the opposition to his kingdom servants would rise and fall. So, he established a new order of long-term stability in nature, in order that one day in the distant future, his redeemed, faithful images could fulfill the job of spreading his kingdom throughout this fallen world.

So it is that the historical kingdom of God began in Eden and was to be extended throughout the entire earth by God's priestly and royal images the human race. Despite the complexities introduced by sin, God devised a long-term historical strategy to redeem some of his images so that they would be able to bring his kingdom to earth as it is in heaven. These basic contours of the primeval history set the course for the rest of biblical history.

Now that we have seen how the kingdom of God began during the earliest years of earth's history, we are ready to move to the next major historical stage that covers the vast majority of the Old Testament, the time when God dealt especially with Israel as his chosen people.

NATION OF ISRAEL

From the perspective of the Old Testament, the history of the ancient nation of Israel represented a major stride for the kingdom of God coming to earth as it is in heaven.

To see how the kingdom of God developed in ancient Israel, we will look again at three topics. First, we will explore the place of the kingdom during this stage of history. Second, we will look at the people of the kingdom. And third, we will examine the progress of the kingdom during this period. Let's look first, then, at the location of God's kingdom in the nation of Israel.

PLACE

One of the best ways to begin our discussion of the location of the kingdom in this period is with Israel's great patriarch, Abraham. Because Abraham was the father of Israel, God's dealings with Abraham set the course for everything God would do through Israel. In Genesis 12:1-3 we read how God first called Abraham to be his special servant with these words:

Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:1-3).

Notice what God said in verse 1; he called Abraham to leave his homeland in Mesopotamia and to migrate to a land Abraham had not yet seen.

Now, as Genesis 12 progresses, we discover that God led Abraham from Ur in southern Mesopotamia to Haran in northern Mesopotamia, and later from Haran to the land of Canaan, which we now call the Holy Land. And when Abraham arrived in Canaan, God confirmed that Abraham's descendants would receive this particular geography as their homeland, and as the rest of the Old Testament makes clear, Abraham's Promised Land became the geographical center for God's activities in the world from this time forward.

Abraham's call to the Promised Land helps us understand the place of God's kingdom in at least two ways. First, we will see that God called Abraham and Israel to serve him at the original center of his kingdom. Second, we will see that God called Israel to extend his kingdom beyond that original center. Let's look first at the idea that God called Abraham and his descendants to serve him at the original centerpiece of his kingdom.

Original Center

As we have seen, the original center of God's earthly kingdom was Eden. Unfortunately, many interpreters have wrongly believed that Eden was in Mesopotamia. So, they also mistakenly believe that Abraham actually left the vicinity of the Garden of Eden in order to move to Canaan. But Scripture draws a very close connection between Abraham's Promised Land and the land of Eden.

In reality, God called Abraham back to the vicinity of the Garden of Eden rather than away from it. Listen to the way God described the boundaries of Eden in Genesis 2:10-14:

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah... The name of the second

river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris... and the fourth river is the Euphrates (Genesis 2:10-14).

Four rivers formed the boundaries of Eden: the Pishon and Gihon, which are associated with the lands to the southwest in the area of northeastern Egypt, and the Tigris and Euphrates to the northeast of Canaan.

These geographical references are important to us because the Promised Land had similar boundaries. In Genesis 15:18 we read these words:

To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates (Genesis 15:18).

Now, most interpreters agree that the “river of Egypt” is not the Nile but one of the smaller rivers in Northeastern Egypt. But whatever the case, we can see that God promised Abraham land that was bordered by the Euphrates in the northeast and Egypt in the southwest, and as we have seen, the Promised Land’s geographical boundaries reflect the boundaries of Eden. Although some questions remain about how closely we should associate Canaan with Eden, it is at least clear that when God called Abraham to Canaan, he called him back to the area where Adam and Eve first served God. So, just as Eden had been established in the very beginning as the centerpiece of God’s presence on earth, after the failures of the primeval history, God called his special servant Abraham back to the geographical center to begin rebuilding the kingdom.

A second implication of the connection between the Promised Land and Eden is that God gave this land to Old Testament Israel, not as an end in itself, but as a staging ground for extending his reign to the ends of the earth.

Extension

The Promised Land was not the ultimate geographical goal for Abraham and Israel — it was far too small for the kingdom of God on earth. Listen again to Genesis 12:3:

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:3).

Through a process of blessing and cursing nations in response to their reaction to Abraham and his descendants, all peoples on the earth would eventually be blessed. This promise does not simply refer to how Abraham’s faith — and now the Christian faith — would spread to different tribes and language groups, although this is one aspect of the promise. This verse also refers to geography. Abraham’s blessing would reach all families throughout the earth.

This is why the apostle Paul summarized God’s promise to Abraham in this way in Romans 4:13:

Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world (Romans 4:13).

Abraham was not just promised a small piece of land as his inheritance; he was promised the world. Canaan was merely a down payment on this full inheritance — the entire world.

The expansion of the kingdom of God beyond the original borders of the Promised Land took place in small scale at different times in the Old Testament. In the days of Moses and following, two and a half tribes occupied lands east of the Jordan. And during the reigns of various kings, Israel's borders expanded northward, eastward and southward. So it is that during the time of Old Testament Israel, the center of the kingdom of God was the land of Canaan, but even then the kingdom of God was beginning to spread to all the earth.

With the location of the kingdom in the days of Old Testament Israel in mind, we should turn our attention to the people of the kingdom.

PEOPLE

The history of God's people during this time is very complex, so we will have to limit ourselves to a few highlights. Nevertheless, we will still be able to see the big picture of Israel's role in the kingdom of God and how it aligns with God's original purposes for humanity. We will look at three matters: first, the selection of Israel as a special people for the kingdom; second, the formation of those people into a kingdom of priests; and third, the designation of official priests and kings to lead the people of the kingdom. In the first place, let's consider the selection of Israel as the special people of God.

Selection of Israel

We should remember that during the primeval history, with the introduction of sin into the world, God chose one family out of the entire human race that was to serve as his special images in the world.

We see the pattern of a single special family first in Genesis 5 where Adam's son Seth became the father of a righteous line of humanity. Later, God maintained Seth's family through his descendant Noah. You will also recall that Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. But only Shem was God's specially chosen image or son. Out of Shem's descendants, one man was chosen to carry on this special role, Abraham. Then Abraham's miracle son Isaac continued this chosen line. And then Isaac's son Jacob, also known as Israel, became God's specially honored image. And finally, Jacob had twelve sons, Joseph and his brothers, and these twelve sons became the fathers of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. These twelve tribes were dearly loved by God and given the special title of being the people of God, the ones whom God loved as his firstborn. Out of all the nations of humanity, the tribes of Israel were the special people of God's kingdom.

Kingdom of Priests

In the second place, when God chose the tribes of Israel, he formed them into a kingdom of priests in order to fulfill the original priestly and royal roles given to Adam and Eve. God declared in no uncertain terms that Israel was to fill this very special role in building his kingdom in Exodus 19:4-6. There the Lord declared these words as Israel was encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:4-6).

Notice what God said about the twelve tribes of Israel. Israel was to be “a kingdom of priests... a holy nation.” As we have seen, they were to be “holy,” that is, special, separated, distinguished from all other peoples. But more precisely, they were to be a “kingdom of priests,” or a priestly kingdom.

This designation of Israel as a kingdom of priests shows that Israel continued to fulfill the twofold role that Adam and Eve had in the very beginning. You will recall that Adam and Eve were called to serve as God's royal priests. Here we see that the tribes of Israel were also called to be God's imperial priests.

Priests and Kings

In the third place, although Israel as a whole had the privilege of being a royal priesthood for God's kingdom, we should also note that as they grew into a strong nation, some Israelites were given the specialized office of priest and king. In a general sense, the entire nation of Israel was made holy as God's special kingdom of priests. But God eventually selected certain people and families within Israel to be his very special images by serving in the offices of priest and king which led the nation in their holy service to God.

As the book of Exodus tells us, Aaron and his descendants were to serve God as his priests. They primarily led the nation into the special presence of God in the Tabernacle and Temple, offering worship, sacrifice, and praise. And later, David and his descendants were ordained to serve as kings of God's people. They served as God's special servants in the more political dimensions of the nation.

Now that we have seen the place and people of the kingdom in Old Testament Israel, we should take a few moments to sketch out the progress of the kingdom during this time.

PROGRESS

Sadly, the history of Israel is much like the primeval period. It is a mixture of very positive accomplishments and abysmal failures. The kingdom of God made advances, but because of human sinfulness, these advances fell short of the ultimate goal; they did not spread God's kingdom to the ends of the earth.

This period of biblical history is lengthy and complex, so we can only touch on some highlights. We will speak of three stages in the progress of the kingdom during this period: first, the stage of promise; second, the exodus and conquest; and third, the period of Israel as an empire.

Promise

In the first place, we can speak of a period of promise. We have in mind here the period of the patriarchs of Israel. During the days of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve heads of Israel's tribes, God made many promises about the future of Israel. Primarily, these promises break down into two categories: first, promises of multiplication; and second, promises of dominion.

Just as God called Adam and Eve to multiply images of God, God promised Abraham that his descendants would multiply beyond number. Listen to God's great promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:5:

“Look up at the heavens and count the stars — if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be” (Genesis 15:5).

As we have seen, Abraham and his descendants were chosen to lead humanity in carrying out its role as the images of God. This was to happen, in part, through the multiplication of a holy seed, so that redeemed human beings would be as innumerable as the stars. This is why so much stress is put on the birth of Isaac, Abraham's miracle child through Sarah. It is also why the biblical story focuses so much on Isaac's son Jacob and on Jacob's twelve sons. The people of God were multiplying already in the Old Testament, even in this early period of promise. And this is why the multiplication of redeemed images of God in the nation of Israel is a central theme throughout the Old Testament.

Beyond this, the biblical stories about the patriarchs also focus on the promise of dominion. Not only did God promise Abraham many descendants, but also that his descendants would possess the holy land of Canaan. As we read in Genesis 15:7:

[God] said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it” (Genesis 15:7, NASB).

Just as God instructed Adam and Eve to dominate the earth, he promised that his special people Israel would have dominion and enjoy prosperity in the Land of Promise.

This is why Abraham purchased a small symbolic piece of land in Canaan as a burial site for his family. Further, it explains why Jacob left the Land of Promise for a while, but returned even in the face of much danger. And it also explains why, in his dying words, Joseph assured the Israelites that they would leave Egypt and return to the Promised Land. The patriarchal period was a time when God promised that he would multiply and give dominion to Old Testament Israel as the people who would further his kingdom.

Exodus and Conquest

The second major stage of the kingdom of God coming to earth in the history of Old Testament Israel is the period of exodus and conquest. One passage in particular makes it very clear that God's work with Israel during this time was intended to establish his kingdom on the earth. Specifically, when Moses and the Israelites passed through the Red Sea, they sang a well-known song that appears in Exodus 15:1-18. This is the first passage in Scripture in which the theme of God's reign is explicitly stated. There are many wonderful kingdom themes in this song but we will mention only one. In Exodus 15:13 we read these words about Moses' confidence in the future:

In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling (Exodus 15:13).

Notice that the Israelites praised God because he was guiding them toward his holy dwelling. As we have seen, just like Eden, the Promised Land was to be the center of God's special holy presence on the earth. But more than this, we should note that the term translated "lead," *nahal* (נָהַל), in Hebrew, is associated in many Scriptures with leading sheep. This type of shepherding imagery commonly described the activities of kings both in the Ancient Near East in general, and in the Bible. God was leading his people toward his holy dwelling as their Shepherding King.

The theme of God's kingship and kingdom also appears at the end of the song at the Red Sea in Exodus 15:17-18:

You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance — the place, O Lord, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, O Lord, your hands established. The Lord will reign for ever and ever (Exodus 15:17-18).

According to these verses, God was taking Israel toward a holy mountain, a sanctuary which the Bible later reveals to be Jerusalem. And what was to be the nature of that mountain sanctuary? First, Moses said it would be God's "dwelling." Once again, the term translated "dwelling," in Hebrew *yashav* (יָשַׁב), often connotes "a king's enthronement." In light of the royal motifs in this passage, it is best to understand that the sanctuary mountain will be the place of God's enthronement.

This is why verse 18 immediately praises God with explicit royal terminology, saying these words,

The Lord will reign for ever and ever (Exodus 15:18).

When God acted as Israel's king by shepherding the nation to the Promised Land, he intended to establish them as the people who would surround his royal throne. In other words, the purpose of the exodus and conquest was to establish God's reign, his kingship, his kingdom on earth, forever and ever.

Empire

The third stage of the kingdom of God during the period of Old Testament Israel's importance may be designated as the stage of the empire, the time when Israel became an established nation with a king and temple. Unfortunately, the place of human kings in God's plan for Israel is a matter of some controversy. In a later lesson we will look carefully at the fact that God had always wanted Israel to have a human king and at how kingship developed in Israel. But for now we will simply see how the kingdom of God moved forward once God had determined to establish David and his sons as kings over his people.

David and his son Solomon moved God's kingdom on earth forward by establishing Jerusalem as the location of the king and the temple. On the one hand, the establishment of David's throne in Jerusalem was the establishment of the royal family who would represent God's rule on earth. Listen to the way the throne of David's house was described in 1 Chronicles 29:23:

Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king in place of his father David (1 Chronicles 29:23).

The throne of David was the throne of the Lord. The royal house of David led the people of Israel by representing the royal authority of God. David and his sons had a heightened official role as the exalted images of God leading other images of God.

On the other hand, David prepared for and Solomon built a temple for God, which the Bible commonly refers to as God's "house" or "God's palace." In this temple the priests were established as those who would lead the nation of Israel, a nation of priests in the worshipful service of God. Now, at the center of the temple, Solomon placed the ark of the covenant, which David had brought to Jerusalem. The symbolism of the ark of the covenant is extremely important. According to David, the ark of the covenant was God's footstool. Listen to what he said in 1 Chronicles 28:2:

I had it in my heart to build a house as a place of rest for the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, for the footstool of our God, and I made plans to build it (1 Chronicles 28:2).

God's throne was in heaven, but the footstool of his throne was the ark of the covenant in the temple in Jerusalem. In effect, Solomon turned Jerusalem into a capital city for the family of David, and a royal sanctuary for God himself.

So, we see that by the time of David and Solomon, Israel had gone from being a migrating tribe in the days of Abraham to being a nation established through exodus and conquest, and finally to becoming an empire with a king and a temple in the imperial city of Jerusalem. God's kingdom was being established in the nation of Israel.

Now what was the hope, the purpose, of building Israel into an empire? In a word, God led his people through these stages so that through Israel's human king, who was God's special servant-king, God's reign would spread to the ends of the earth. Listen to the way the Psalmist expressed this destiny in Psalm 72:1-17:

Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness... He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth... All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him... May his name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun. All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed (Psalm 72:1, 8, 11, 17).

We can see several important themes here. First, the psalmist prayed for a blessing on David's house, that David's dynasty would be characterized by justice and righteousness. But he knew that this would result in a great expansion of David's reign. The house of David would reign over the whole earth; he would reign from sea to sea, and all kings and all nations would serve the one on David's throne who represented God's righteousness and justice. The reign of God's special servant, the king of Israel, would extend the reign of God to all the nations of the earth.

But why would this extension of the kingdom of God occur? What was the goal? Well, in a wonderful way, Psalm 72 declares that the purpose of the imperial stage of Israel's history was to fulfill the original purpose for which God had chosen Israel. You will recall that in Genesis 12:3 God had a goal in mind when he called Abraham to himself. It was that:

All peoples on earth ... be blessed through [Abraham] (Genesis 12:3).

But how was this promise to Abraham to be fulfilled? Well, look again at Psalm 72:17. There we read that through the just and righteous reign of David's house:

All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed (Psalm 72:17).

The allusion to Genesis 12:3 is obvious. God's original goal in choosing Abraham would finally be fulfilled when the house of David spread God's blessing to all nations.

And finally, we must ask, what was the result of the fulfillment of Israel's original purpose in David's dynasty? Why was the house of David to spread the blessings of Abraham to the world? In a word, the result would be the spread of the glorious reign of

God to the ends of the world. This is why Psalm 72 ends with resounding praise to God in verse 19:

Praise be to [God's] glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen (Psalm 72:19).

This closing verse of Psalm 72 reveals the ultimate goal for all of the developments that took place in Israel from the patriarchs' promises, through the exodus and conquest, and to the empire. These stages of the kingdom were all intended to fill the entire earth with the glory of God. As God's kingdom spread from the borders of Israel to the ends of the earth through the reign of David's house, God's glorious presence would fill the whole world just as it fills heaven.

Now that we have seen the background of the kingdom of God during the primeval history and the history of Old Testament Israel, we should turn to our last topic: the kingdom of God in the New Testament. As followers of Christ we must understand the New Testament perspectives on the kingdom of God if we are to apply the Old Testament rightly in our day.

NEW TESTAMENT

If there is one thing that Christians agree on, it is that the heart of Jesus' message, the heart of the entire New Testament, is the gospel. But often we don't realize that the New Testament gospel, or the good news of Christ, is an outworking of the Old Testament theme of the kingdom of God. Listen to the way Matthew summarized Jesus' preaching in Matthew 4:23:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news [or gospel] of the kingdom (Matthew 4:23).

Jesus preached gospel, or good news. But what was this good news? It was a message about the kingdom of God. And for this reason, our understanding of the gospel that we believe and share with others — the very heart of the New Testament — is directly dependent upon our understanding of the kingdom of God.

We will explore the theme of God's kingdom in the New Testament in terms of the three issues we have explored in other stages of biblical history. We will look first at what the New Testament says about the place of the kingdom. Second, we will speak about the people of the kingdom. And third, we will look into the progress of the kingdom during the New Testament period. Let's look first at the place of the kingdom in the New Testament.

PLACE

In many respects the New Testament has the same orientation toward the location of the kingdom of God as we find in the Old Testament. First, it indicates that the center of God's kingdom was the land of Israel, and second it teaches that the kingdom of God was to expand throughout the earth. Let's look first at the kingdom's location in Israel during the days of the New Testament.

Center

Now, it should not surprise us to find that the kingdom of God in the New Testament is centered in Israel. This is the pattern that we have seen repeated several times in the Old Testament. In the beginning God's kingdom on the earth was centered in Eden. Then, the nation of Israel returned to Eden's vicinity under Moses' leadership in order to build the kingdom of God. So, when the New Testament stage of God's kingdom began, the kingdom started once again in the land of Israel.

It really isn't difficult to see that the land of Israel is the geographical center of the kingdom of God in the New Testament. As we all know, Israel was where Jesus was born, where he grew up, gathered his apostles, ministered, died, was resurrected, and ascended into heaven. Apart from a brief time in Egypt during his childhood, Jesus spent his entire life in the Promised Land.

Now, to understand why God's kingdom was centered in the Promised Land even in the New Testament, it helps to remember the situation of the people of God at this time. God had blessed the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. He had brought them through a semi-nomadic existence during the days of the patriarchs, to nationhood under Moses and Joshua, and then to imperial glory with a capital city, a palace and a temple under the leadership of David and Solomon. These were great advances for the reign of God on earth. But as the Old Testament tells us, the Israelites rebelled so severely against God during these times of blessing that God exiled his people from the holy land. By the time of Jesus, the people of Israel had been exiled, scattered, and tyrannized by five pagan empires for hundreds of years: the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans.

Although many modern Christians do not realize it, Jesus came to the earth to end this exile. He came to call out a righteous remnant of God's people and to rebuild the kingdom of God. Listen to what Luke wrote about one of Jesus' earliest sermons in Luke 4:17-19:

The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:17-19).

While in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read a prophecy from Isaiah 61 that promised that the exiles would one day return to the land of promise. Now Isaiah's prophecy mentioned "the poor," "prisoners," "the blind," "the oppressed" — terms that in Isaiah 61 described the exiled Israelites. But notice what this prophecy said — someone would preach "good news" or gospel, "freedom," "recovery of sight" and "release." Good news was to be preached to those who had been tyrannized by pagan nations. And who fulfilled this good news? Jesus. As Luke recorded in Luke 4:20-21:

Then [Jesus] rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:20-21).

Jesus was the one whom God anointed to declare to the Israelites the good news that their exile was coming to an end.

Expansion

Now, as important as it is to see that the kingdom of God in the New Testament is centered around the Promised Land, it is just as important to see that the New Testament stresses the expansion of the kingdom of God to the entire world. In fact, the New Testament teaches that one day the hope of worldwide expansion will actually be fulfilled in Christ. Just as in every prior stage of history, in the New Testament, God still planned to expand his kingdom from the Promised Land to the entire earth.

We have already seen that Jesus taught his disciples to pray for this worldwide kingdom in the Lord's Prayer. In Matthew 6:10 Jesus taught us to pray:

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

Jesus continued this theme throughout his ministry. In fact, he kept the eyes of his disciples focused on this worldwide goal. As we read in Matthew 24:14 Jesus told his disciples:

This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Matthew 24:14).

The message of the good news of the arrival of God's kingdom was to be spread throughout the world and then Jesus would return.

With the place of the kingdom in the New Testament in mind, we should turn our attention to the people of the kingdom in the New Testament.

PEOPLE

As we have seen, in the beginning God ordained that his worldwide kingdom would mirror his kingdom in heaven. This was to take place through the work of his image, the human race. But with the advent of sin, humanity could no longer fulfill its role. Therefore, God chose a special people and redeemed them from sin so they would be able to continue his work. These special people eventually became the nation of Israel. And as Old Testament history moved forward, God exalted special people within Israel, the priests and kings, to lead his redeemed nation in their kingdom tasks.

These same issues also appear in the New Testament. To grasp the way in which the New Testament speaks of these things, we will touch on two subjects: first, Christ as the premiere image of God; and second, believers in Christ as redeemed images of God. Let's consider first the prominent place given to Jesus as the image of God.

Christ

It's sad but it's true that evangelical Christians today often have little idea why the second person of the Trinity, the eternal *Logos*, became flesh. We rightly affirm that Jesus is God, and we talk a lot about his substitutionary death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. But modern Christians seldom understand why Jesus had to become a man in order to do these things. Well, one of the best ways to understand why God became one of us is to look at the role of humanity in the kingdom of God and the way Jesus fulfilled that role. Two aspects of this role in particular deserve our attention: first, the fact that Jesus is the last Adam; and second, the fact that Jesus is our priest and king.

We are all familiar with the fact that the apostle Paul saw a parallel, a symmetry, between Adam and Christ. He mentioned this connection several times in his epistles. In a word, Christ reversed the curse that Adam had brought; whereas Adam's sin had condemned humanity, Jesus' obedience fulfilled humanity's role as God's image. Perhaps the most succinct expression of Paul's outlook is found in 1 Corinthians 15:21-22. There he wrote these words:

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:21-22).

Notice how these words contrast with what we might expect. We might have expected Paul to say something like this, "Death came through a man, but the resurrection of the dead comes through the power of God." Now, this would be true as far as it goes, but it is not what Paul stressed here.

Instead, he said that because humanity's death came through a man, namely Adam, humanity's resurrection from the dead to eternal life also had to come through a man, namely Christ. Adam was an unfaithful image of God, and therefore he brought us death; but Christ was the perfectly faithful image of God, and therefore he brought us resurrection life.

Christ died under the curse of Adam's sin as a substitute for all who would believe in him, and therefore he received God's reward for his righteousness — and this reward included both victory over death and dominion over the whole creation. This is one reason the New Testament focuses so much on the humanity of Christ. He is the last Adam, the man who did everything the human race was supposed to do from the beginning. Through his efforts God's kingdom purposes will be fulfilled.

Now in addition to being the perfect image of God, Christ also fulfills the kingdom offices of priest and king. You will recall that Adam and Eve served God as royal priests, and that God called Israel to be a kingdom of priests, and also that the kingdom of Israel was led by officers: a king, and an official priesthood led by a high priest. So, it should not surprise us at all to find that the New Testament portrays Christ as our high priest and king. For example, the writer of Hebrews repeatedly stressed Christ's priestly role. As he wrote in Hebrews 4:14:

We have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God (Hebrews 4:14).

In addition to this, throughout the New Testament Christ is referred to as the son of David who fulfilled David's royal office. In fact, when Christ's birth was announced to Mary, the angel said these words about him in Luke 1:32-33:

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end (Luke 1:32-33).

Because Christ perfectly fulfills the office of king, under his leadership the kingdom of God will never end. Through Christ's leadership as priest and king, God's kingdom will indeed come to earth as it is in heaven.

Although Christ is without question the most important person in the kingdom of God during the New Testament age, we would be mistaken if we did not add that his followers are also part of the kingdom.

Believers

Now, at the very beginning of the New Testament, the Jewish people, Abraham's physical descendants, had a special role in the kingdom. Not only were Jesus and his apostles Jews, but so was the entire early church that gathered on the day of Pentecost. On that day, God collected a faithful remnant of Israelites from all over the world to hear and believe in the gospel.

After this, the kingdom of God quickly expanded beyond the borders of Israel to the far reaches of the Roman Empire. Even though many of the converts from other nations were Gentiles, the New Testament teaches that everyone who follows Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, is counted among the people of God and given the role of

building the kingdom of God. This is why the New Testament speaks of followers of Christ as renewed images of God. As Paul explained in Ephesians 4:24, we are:

To put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:24).

And this is also why Peter described the New Testament church, which consists both of Jews and Gentiles, in terms of the role of Old Testament Israel. In 1 Peter 2:9 he wrote these words:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9).

Here Peter alluded to Exodus 19:6 where Israel was called a kingdom of priests. By this allusion he makes it clear that Christians from every race on earth are called to share the goal of Old Testament Israel — the establishment and the extension of God's kingdom on earth. As we follow Christ and live in the power of his Spirit, we are all the special, chosen instruments of the kingdom of God.

Now that we have seen both the place and the people of the kingdom in the New Testament age, we should turn to our last topic: the progress of the kingdom in the New Testament.

PROGRESS

In many ways the progress of the kingdom of God in the New Testament is one of the most radical concepts that we find in the Scriptures. As we will see in later lessons, when we read the prophets of the Old Testament, it is easy to get the impression that once the Christ came to earth, the kingdom of God would come swiftly. Evil would be eradicated suddenly from the earth, the earth would be filled with the glorious presence of God, and God's countless people would fill the earth, serving and worshiping him forever. In fact, this is what most people in Jesus' day expected to happen. But Jesus challenged this expectation so strongly that most people in Israel rejected him rather than followed him as their Messiah.

One of the best ways to summarize the progress of the kingdom in the New Testament is through Jesus' parable of the mustard seed. Listen to what Jesus said about the kingdom of God in Matthew 13:31-32:

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree (Matthew 13:31-32).

In this short parable, Jesus explained that instead of coming suddenly and catastrophically, the kingdom of God would begin small like a mustard seed, but in time

the kingdom would grow to be like a mature mustard tree — the largest kingdom the world has ever known.

As the rest of the New Testament tells us, the New Testament phase of the kingdom began with Jesus' earthly ministry in a relatively small and quiet way. But in the end, when Christ returns, his kingdom will extend over the entire earth. Throughout this series of lessons, we will speak time and again of the progress of God's kingdom in the New Testament age in three main stages.

Inauguration

First, we will speak of the beginning or inauguration of the kingdom in the ministry of Christ and his apostles. Over two thousand years ago Jesus and his apostles inaugurated the glorious kingdom of God on earth. This is why in Ephesians 2:20 the apostle Paul spoke of the church as being:

Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20).

Continuation

Second, we will speak of the continuation of the kingdom which spans all of church history between the first and second comings of Christ. This is the time in which you and I live. It is during this time that we are to place high priority on bringing in the kingdom of God by doing God's will, just as Jesus declared in Matthew 6:33:

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33).

Every day of our lives we are to spread the gospel, build the church, and transform cultures throughout the world for the sake of Christ's kingdom.

Consummation

In the third place, we will speak of the consummation of the kingdom, the time when Christ returns and fulfills God's plan to turn the whole world into his kingdom. Listen to the way John described the kingdom of God at the return of Christ in Revelation 11:15:

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15).

When Christ returns to the earth, the entire kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of God and of Christ forever and ever.

As followers of Christ living today, we look back to our Lord's inaugural work two thousand years ago. We extend his kingdom today during the continuation of the kingdom, and we pray, work, and hope for the day when Christ will bring the kingdom of God to earth as it is in heaven. This is the heart of our Christian faith even as it was the heart of Old Testament faith. All the hopes of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament find their fulfillment in Christ during these three phases of the inauguration, continuation and consummation of the kingdom of God.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have introduced the important biblical theme of the kingdom of God as one of the best ways to grasp the big picture of the Old Testament. We have seen that God planned from the very beginning for his heavenly reign to come to the earth. We have seen how God moved toward this goal in the primeval history, in Israel's history, and in the New Testament age. As we continue our survey of the Old Testament, we will return to this kingdom theme time and again because it is the most comprehensive and unifying theme in the whole Old Testament. And as we do, it will give us as New Testament believers the opportunity to approach the Old Testament as our guide for living for the king and his kingdom even today.

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Kingdom, Covenants & Canon of the Old Testament

LESSON
THREE

DIVINE COVENANTS



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Kingdom, Covenants & Canon of the Old Testament

Lesson Three Divine Covenants

INTRODUCTION

If you were a king, an absolute monarch, how would you rule your kingdom? How would you manage the growth and the setbacks of your reign? How would you handle enemies and friends outside of your empire and how would you deal with traitors and faithful servants within your kingdom?

These are good questions to ask ourselves as we study the Old Testament. After all, the Old Testament presents God as the divine king who is building and expanding his kingdom to the ends of the earth. His kingdom has a long history of advances and setbacks. There have been both enemies and friends outside of God's kingdom, and there have been traitors and faithful servants within his kingdom. So, how did God decide to rule over his kingdom? How does he regulate life within his kingdom? The Bible's answer is this — God administered his kingdom through covenants.

This is the third lesson in our series, *Kingdom, Covenants and Canon of the Old Testament*. In this survey of the Old Testament we will see that the Old Testament is a book about the kingdom of God, a kingdom that God administered through covenants, which in turn were explained and applied to God's people in the books or "canon" of the Old Testament.

We have entitled this lesson "Divine Covenants" because we will be exploring how God governed his kingdom through a series of covenants that he established in Old Testament history. As we grasp the contours of these covenants, we will see more clearly how divine covenants guided the life of God's people in the Old Testament, and we will also see more clearly how they guide our lives even today.

Our exploration of divine covenants will divide into four parts. First, we will investigate the fundamental relationship between God's kingdom and his covenants. Second, we will look into the historical developments of covenants in the Old Testament. Third, we will examine the dynamics of life in covenant with God. And fourth, we will explore the people of the divine covenants. Let's turn first to the connection between God's kingdom and his covenants.

KINGDOM AND COVENANTS

In our last lesson we touched on the fact that the entire Old Testament is unified by the theme of God's kingdom coming to earth as it is in heaven. In this lesson we will see that the concept of "covenant" is very close to the heart of Old Testament faith as

well. The importance of covenants in the Old Testament is evident in many ways, including the fact that the term usually translated “covenant,” *bʿrît* (בְּרִית) in Hebrew, appears some 287 times. The prominence of the term “covenant” in this book about God’s kingdom raises an important question: How did divine covenants relate to the kingdom of God? What is the association between these two very central biblical concepts?

To answer these questions we will look at two issues. First, we will introduce some recent archaeological discoveries that provide a background for understanding the fundamental nature of biblical covenants. And second, we will see how these discoveries give us insights into the biblical connection between God’s kingdom and his covenants. Let’s begin simply by describing some recent archaeological discoveries that are relevant for our study of biblical covenants.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES

One of the most remarkable things about the Old Testament is that it is not a fairy tale. The events we find described there actually took place in space and time, in the ancient world of the Middle East. One of the most exciting things about studying the Old Testament in our day is the fact that we have the privilege of knowing much more about that ancient world of the Bible through recent archaeology. We know much more than Christians have known in the past, and as a result, we often find that our understanding of the Old Testament is enhanced by this background knowledge. This is certainly true when it comes to understanding covenants in the Old Testament. In the last century, many discoveries were made about the cultures surrounding ancient Israel that have given us many insights into the character of biblical covenants.

Many different ancient writings help us understand covenants more thoroughly, but for our purposes, one of the most important discoveries is a group of writings known as suzerain-vassal treaties. Now, don’t let this terminology throw you. The term “suzerain” comes from the same root as the Latin word *Caesar*, *Czar* in Russian, or *Kaiser* in German. It simply means “emperor.” And of course, the term “vassal” means “servant,” or in this case “servant of the emperor.” A suzerain-vassal treaty was an international agreement made between a great emperor (or suzerain) on the one hand, and a lesser king and nation, on the other hand. Within these treaties, the lesser king and nation served as the vassals of the great emperor.

The ancient world of the Bible was a world of empires, and in many ways, this political reality so dominated the landscape of the Ancient Near East that it shaped the ways people thought about nearly everything in life. This was certainly true with respect to the ways empires were established, maintained, and administered. In the ancient world, great kings such as the Pharaohs of Egypt, the powerful kings of the Hittites, or the Assyrian Emperors would extend their kingdoms by conquering or annexing weaker nations and city-states. Of course, not every international relationship was handled in exactly the same way, but many of them were formalized and managed through what we now call suzerain-vassal treaties. Suzerain-vassal treaties are important to Old Testament studies for many reasons, but we are particularly concerned with one main idea: suzerain-vassal treaties were designed by kings for the administration of their kingdoms.

Now to get a flavor of what these imperial arrangements were like, it will help to describe the contents of typical suzerain-vassal treaties. With rare exceptions, the formal features of these ancient treaties followed a predictable threefold pattern. First, the treaties were introduced by a focus on royal benevolence, the kindnesses the emperor had shown to his vassals. They began with a preamble in which the king identified himself as a glorious king, worthy of praise. And at certain stages in history, the preamble was followed by a historical prologue in which the king described many good things that he had done for the people.

The second major portion of suzerain-vassal treaties focused on the requirement of vassal loyalty. They spelled out the kinds of obedience required of the emperor's vassals. Lists of rules and regulations were given to explain how vassals were expected to live in the suzerain's kingdom.

The third major portion of suzerain-vassal treaties drew attention to the consequences of loyalty and disloyalty from the vassals. Faithful servants were promised further blessings or rewards, but unfaithful servants were threatened with curses or punishments of various sorts from their emperors.

Now, other elements also appear in these treaties. For instance, provision was made for the safekeeping of treaty documents, and divine witnesses were called to watch over the parties of the treaties so that the terms of these treaties would not be forgotten. But the heart of the suzerain-vassal relationship may be put in this way. Great kings declared their benevolence toward lesser vassal kings and nations. The suzerains required loyal service from their vassals because they had shown kindness. And they set forth many positive and negative consequences for the loyalty and disloyalty of their vassals. As we will see, these three central features of suzerain-vassal treaties will help us understand more clearly the nature of Old Testament covenants and how they relate to the kingdom of God.

With the basic concept of suzerain-vassal treaties in mind, we are in a position to see what insights they offer us as we explore the connections between covenants and kingdom.

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

Now we should say from the outset that in a broad sense the term covenant (or *b'êrît*) describes many different kinds of relationships. It points to relationships between friends, spouses, political leaders, tribes and nations. All of these relationships were called covenants in the Old Testament because they formally bound people to each other with mutual obligations and expectations. But these relationships were so diverse that their covenants differed in many ways. And more than this, the Scriptures sometimes compare these diverse covenant relationships to God's relationship with his people. For instance, our relation with God is described as marriage, as a family bond, and as friendship. So, we can learn much about ourselves and God from these different types of covenants.

But our concern in this lesson is not with this broad range of analogies, but with one specific type of covenant in the Old Testament, namely divine covenants. These are the covenants that God himself made with people. God made six such major corporate

covenants in the Old Testament. He entered into covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Christ. In this lesson we are primarily interested in understanding the character of these covenants and how they relate to the kingdom of God.

Now, we will explore all six divine covenants in this lesson. But at this point, we will look briefly at one of these covenants, the covenant with Moses, to illustrate how suzerain-vassal treaties have helped us understand the character of Old Testament covenants. The covenant with Moses is particularly well suited for our purposes because God revealed so much more about this covenant than he did about any others in the Old Testament.

When we look at the covenant God made with Moses, it quickly becomes apparent that it was structured in ways that resemble Ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties. Moses' covenant consisted of the same three main elements that we have seen in these treaties. And this resemblance will help us understand that in a fundamental sense, God's covenants were the way he, as the great king of Israel, chose to administer his kingdom.

It will be helpful for us to look at one passage in particular at this point that reveals this resemblance. In Exodus 19:4-6 God initiated his covenant through Moses with Israel in this way:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:4-6).

These verses open the scene where God entered into covenant with Israel when the nation gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai on their way to the Promised Land, and they closely reflect the three central elements of a suzerain-vassal treaty.

You'll recall that suzerain-vassal treaties had three main concerns: the presentation of royal benevolence, the requirement of vassal loyalty, and the consequences of loyalty and disloyalty. And interestingly enough, these same three concerns appear in Moses' covenant as it was introduced in Exodus 19:4-6.

First, God reminded Israel of his divine benevolence demonstrated in the way God had graciously delivered them from slavery in Egypt. As he said in Exodus 19:4:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself (Exodus 19:4).

Like Ancient Near Eastern emperors, God reminded the Israelites that he had been their kind king; he had done great things in delivering Israel from Egypt, and it was in the context of his benevolence toward his people that he offered to enter into covenant with them.

Second, God called for human loyalty. Listen again to Exodus 19:5:

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession (Exodus 19:5).

Like Ancient Near Eastern suzerains, God required loyalty from his human vassals. Although Moses' covenant was based on God's mercy and not human good works, God still required his servants to be loyal, and Moses' law spelled out many of the ways they were to show their loyalty. The people were expected to obey the regulations of the covenant.

Third, Moses' covenant also entailed consequences for loyalty and disloyalty from God's people. This element becomes clear in Exodus 19:5-6:

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6).

Like Ancient Near Eastern emperors, God made it clear that if the people were faithful, they would receive great blessings — they would be a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests. And by implication, if they were unfaithful, they would not receive these great blessings but would be cursed instead.

So, we see that the threefold pattern of suzerain-vassal treaties appears in God's covenant with Moses. As suzerains claimed to be kind to their vassals, when God entered into covenant with Israel, he first established his divine benevolence toward them. The covenant went on to set forth the expectations of human loyalty to God, and the covenant specified the consequences of blessings and curses that the people could expect as they were loyal or disloyal to God.

The fact that the Mosaic covenant reflected these elements of suzerain-vassal treaties demonstrates that at a very basic level, when God made covenant with his people, he revealed himself to Israel as their great king, their emperor, and that he wanted his people to think of themselves as his vassals. Old Testament divine covenants were essentially royal arrangements. Kingdom and covenants go hand in hand because covenants were the means by which God ruled over his kingdom. They were God's kingdom administrations leading the kingdom of God toward its destiny of expanding to the ends of the earth.

Now that we have seen that divine covenants had the fundamental function of regulating or administering life in God's kingdom, we are in a position to look into our second topic: the historical developments of covenants in the Old Testament.

HISTORY OF THE COVENANTS

As we have seen in a prior lesson, the history of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament was very complex. God's kingdom went through many different periods, or epochs, as it developed toward the goal of reaching the entire earth. At this point, we will see that during each period or stage in the kingdom, God introduced covenants that addressed the particular issues that people were facing at each stage of the kingdom.

There are many ways we could handle the history of divine covenants in the Old Testament. But we will explore this history in three main stages: first, the universal covenants; second, the national covenants; and third, the New Covenant.

As we have already mentioned, there are six major divine covenants that span the entire history of the Old Testament: God's covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Christ. We will divide these six covenants into three groups aligned with the ways we described the historical stages of God's kingdom in the preceding lesson. We will speak of the universal covenants with Adam and Noah during the primeval history. We will speak of the national covenants with Abraham, Moses and David during the time when God drew close to the nation of Old Testament Israel as his special people. And we will speak of the new covenant in Christ during the New Testament phase of the kingdom. So, as we deal with the divine covenants, we will look into each of these three groups of covenants as they developed in the history of the Old Testament. Let's look first at the universal covenants that God established during the primeval history.

UNIVERSAL COVENANTS

We speak of the covenants with Adam and Noah as "universal" because they were made between God and all of humanity. During the primeval period, when these covenants were made, God had not yet identified Israel as his special people. Instead, Adam and Noah represented every person from every tribe and nation. And as a result, what happened to them impacted the lives of every human being to come after them.

These universal covenants met the need for an administration of the kingdom during the primeval period. This was the time when God established the most basic arrangements that governed his relationship with the entire human race for all time.

We'll investigate these universal covenants in chronological order, beginning with the covenant with Adam and then moving to Noah. Let's consider first God's covenant with Adam.

Adam

As we all know, Adam was the first human being that God created, so when we speak of the covenant with Adam, we are referring to the earliest period of human history imaginable. And not surprisingly, we find the Bible's teaching about Adam's covenant focuses on some of the most basic or foundational dimensions of human life.

The covenant with Adam appears in the creation narratives found in the first three chapters of Genesis. Now, we should mention that some Christians do not agree that God made a formal covenant with Adam. Most of these believers base their views on the fact that the term "covenant" does not appear in the first three chapters of Genesis, and some also argue that the basic contours of divine covenants cannot be found in these chapters. Nevertheless, three pieces of evidence strongly suggest that God did in fact establish a covenant with Adam as the representative of humanity. First, as we will see later in this

lesson, the basic elements of divine covenants are indeed present in Genesis 1–3. Divine benevolence, human loyalty, and consequences for loyalty and disloyalty do appear in these chapters.

A second evidence that God did enter into covenant with Adam is found in Hosea 6:7. There we read these words:

Like Adam [or “humanity,” as it may be translated], they have broken the covenant — they were unfaithful to me there (Hosea 6:7).

This passage compares the sinfulness of Israel with Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden, and speaks of both as breaking covenant. Israel had broken covenant just like Adam had in the Garden of Eden.

A third evidence that God entered into a covenant with Adam appears in Genesis 6:18. In Genesis 6:18, which is the first passage in the Bible where the term “covenant” actually occurs, God spoke to Noah in this way:

I will establish my covenant with you (Genesis 6:18).

This passage is significant because the term translated “I will establish” does not normally mean “to start” or “to initiate” a covenant but “to confirm” a covenant that already exists. Noah’s covenant was presented as a confirmation of a previously existing covenant, namely the covenant God made with Adam.

Whether or not we call the divine arrangement with Adam a “covenant,” it is clear that God entered a solemn relationship with Adam, and Adam represented the entire human race. The focus of this arrangement, or covenant with Adam, was to establish the most fundamental features of God’s relationship with humanity, and for this reason, we may call it a covenant of foundations. In this covenant, God set the fundamental patterns of life for all human beings living in his world. Adam and Eve were ordained to serve as God’s royal and priestly images, spreading his kingdom to the ends of the earth. They were tested and they failed. They suffered for their rebellion but were given hope. In short, the covenant with Adam laid out the parameters of humanity’s relationship with God for all time. It established the foundations of our role in his kingdom.

Noah

The second universal covenant is God’s covenant with Noah. There is much that could be said about this covenant, but we will simply introduce some of the more central issues that come to the foreground in the biblical account. The covenant with Noah was also established in the primeval period of God’s kingdom and concerned some of the most basic issues that face all of humanity.

God’s covenant with Noah is mentioned in two chapters of Genesis, Genesis chapters 6 and 9. Listen to what God said in Genesis 6:18:

I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark — you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you (Genesis 6:18).

As we have already mentioned, Noah's covenant was not a brand new covenant, standing on its own. It was actually the establishment — that is, the furthering — of the covenant or arrangement God had made with Adam.

What was the emphasis of this covenant with Noah? We find the answer to this question after the flood when God actually made the covenant. In Genesis 9:9-11 we read this account of that covenant:

I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with ... every living creature on earth... Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood (Genesis 9:9-11).

As we see here, God's covenant with Noah affected every living creature from that time on in some very important ways.

The Noahic covenant was introduced to assure stability in the created order, and for this reason it is rightly called a covenant of stability. As you will recall, in a prior lesson we saw that when Noah and his family left the ark, God acknowledged humanity's severe propensity toward sin and revealed a long-term strategy for fulfilling his kingdom purposes. As we read in Genesis 8:21-22:

Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease (Genesis 8:21-22).

In order to secure this strategy, God established his covenant with Noah, promising that nature would remain stable so that the human race could reach its destiny in this fallen world. This universal covenant, like the covenant with Adam, established basic structures for human existence that apply to all peoples in all places and at all times.

Now that we have seen how God established the basic order of his kingdom and secured his kingdom purposes through the covenants with Adam and Noah, we should turn our attention to the period of the kingdom where Old Testament Israel moved to center stage.

NATIONAL COVENANTS

As the kingdom of God moved from the primeval history to the period in which God focused especially on the nation of Israel, God established three national covenants. We may rightly call these “national covenants” because they were especially concerned with Israel as the special chosen people of God. We will look at the national covenants in

chronological order, beginning with the covenant with Abraham, then moving to Moses and finally David.

Abraham

Because the first national covenant was made with Abraham, Abraham is recognized as the father of all Israel. We find explicit references to Abraham's covenant in Genesis 15 and 17. The first mention of God's covenant with Abraham appears in Genesis 15:18:

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram (Genesis 15:18).

Here the expression "made a covenant," or literally "cut a covenant," is the normal way of indicating the beginning of a covenant relationship. Then, a number of years later, God clarified his covenant with the patriarch. In Genesis 17:1-2 we read these words:

I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you (Genesis 17:1-2).

In this passage, God "confirmed" or "established" the covenant he had initiated with Abraham in Genesis 15. This is the same terminology that we saw in Genesis 6:18 when God confirmed with Noah the covenant that had been previously made with Adam.

The covenant with Abraham was important because it set the people of Israel apart from among the many nations on earth to be God's special instruments in bringing his heavenly kingdom to the whole earth. The first step in this process was to create a vision for the nation by promising Abraham a large multitude of descendants as well as a homeland in which to build the kingdom. And for this reason Abraham's covenant may be characterized as a covenant of promise. As we read in Genesis 15:18:

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land" (Genesis 15:18).

And in Genesis 17:2:

I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers (Genesis 17:2).

These covenant promises created a permanent vision for all of Israel's hopes as the people of God's kingdom.

Moses

After the tribes of Israel had migrated to Egypt and suffered slavery there, God brought them to a second stage of national covenant, the covenant with Moses. The covenant with Moses was closely tied to the covenant with Abraham, and in many respects, it furthered the Abrahamic covenant. Moses did not see himself as beginning something brand new. On the contrary, Moses frequently appealed to the covenant with Abraham as the basis of his own kingdom work. Listen to the way Moses pleaded with God on behalf of the nation in Exodus 32:13:

Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever" (Exodus 32:13).

The national covenant with Moses was not a brand new covenant that replaced the covenant with Abraham. Rather, it was built on and in harmony with the national covenant that God had previously made with Israel under Abraham.

We find the primary record of God entering covenant with Israel through Moses in Exodus 19–24. As God gathered the twelve tribes at the foot of Mount Sinai, he was shaping them into a nation, a politically unified people. Although there had been rules and regulations for God's people before the time of Moses, like every new nation, one of the chief things Israel needed at this time was a system of law, a body of regulations to govern life in the nation. So God gave Israel the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant to guide the nation. For this reason, the covenant with Moses may be called a covenant of law.

In fact, Moses' covenant stressed the law so much that when the people of Israel agreed to enter this covenant, their commitment came in the form of a commitment to God's law. In Exodus 19:7-8 we are told these words:

So Moses ... set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has said" (Exodus 19:7-8).

So we see that the second covenant with the nation of Israel was the covenant with Moses, a covenant that stressed the law of God.

David

Now we should turn to the covenant that came to Israel during the days of King David, when Israel had become a full-fledged empire.

Now, David's covenant was also a national covenant and was therefore closely associated with the previous covenant with Moses. As Solomon made it clear in 2

Chronicles 6:16, God's promises to David were dependent on faithfulness to Moses' law. As we read there:

Now Lord, God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father the promises you made to him when you said, "You shall never fail to have a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your sons are careful in all they do to walk before me according to my law" (2 Chronicles 6:16).

David's covenant was built on the previous covenants with the nation of Israel.

We do not know precisely when in David's life God formally established this covenant, but one passage that explicitly states the content of David's covenant is Psalm 89. In Psalm 89:3-4 God's promise to David is presented with these words:

I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, "I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations" (Psalm 89:3-4).

This passage indicates that the David's covenant focused on kingship in Israel. Or to be more specific, it promised David that his line would always be Israel's ruling dynasty. When David became king over God's people, he blessed the nation by turning Israel into an empire; that is, he took them to a higher level of kingdom development. And to secure the future of this national blessing, God promised the stability of a permanent succession of kings, a dynasty. So we may call David's covenant Israel's covenant of kingship.

NEW COVENANT

Now that we have a basic understanding of the universal and national covenants, we should look at the covenant that governs the final stage of God's kingdom: the new covenant.

In addition to the five covenants we have already seen, the prophets of the Old Testament spoke of a new covenant that would come during the final stage of God's kingdom. They announced that it would be greater than any covenant that had come before it.

The new covenant is mentioned many places in the Bible, but Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 37 are two very important passages. Jeremiah 31:31 speaks of this "new covenant" in this way:

"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31).

And on several occasions, the prophet Ezekiel spoke of this same covenant as an everlasting covenant of peace. As we read in Ezekiel 37:26:

I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever (Ezekiel 37:26).

And as all Christians know, when Paul reminded the Corinthians of Jesus' words at the Lord's Supper, he made it clear that this everlasting new covenant of peace came to fulfillment in Christ. Paul recorded the Lord's words in 1 Corinthians 11:25:

This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me (1 Corinthians 11:25).

Through this new covenant in Christ, God administers his kingdom in its final stage, which we call the New Testament age. The new covenant was designed to govern God's people during the time when God would complete the kingdom goals that he had established during the primeval period and furthered through the nation of Israel. And for this reason, it is best thought of as a covenant of fulfillment.

This covenant of fulfillment was to govern God's people when he ended their exile and spread his kingdom to the ends of the earth. The new covenant is God's commitment to transform his people into a forgiven and redeemed race that is fully empowered to serve him without fail. Listen to the way Jeremiah described this transformation in Jeremiah 31:31-34:

"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

As we saw in the preceding lesson, the arrival of this final stage of the kingdom of God comes in three phases. It was inaugurated through the earthly ministry of Christ and the work of his apostles. It continues in our time, and it will reach its fullness only when Christ returns at the consummation of all things. Remembering these three phases of the kingdom in the New Testament is essential to understanding how God established the new covenant.

In a variety of ways, the effects of the new covenant also come in three phases. The transformations of the new covenant began to take effect at Christ's first coming. They continue throughout the entire history of the Christian church. But the ultimate reality of the new covenant will take place only when Christ returns. When that day comes, the new covenant will be the complete fulfillment of the entire history of God's covenants. It will bring to fruition God's purposes behind the covenant administrations in Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David.

Having seen that covenants are the means by which God administers his kingdom throughout history, we should turn to our third topic: the dynamics of the covenants. How did each covenant govern the interactions between God and his people?

DYNAMICS OF THE COVENANTS

Now before we can answer these questions, we need to make an important point. Some passages deal more directly with the moments when God formally entered into covenants or confirmed them, and these passages draw attention to the particular emphases of each covenant. But much more can be learned about the dynamics of covenant life that go far beyond these emphases.

Adam's covenant stressed certain foundational patterns established at the commencement of the world. Noah's covenant emphasized the stability of nature. Abraham's covenant accentuated God's promise. Moses' covenant emphasized God's law. David's covenant highlighted the Davidic dynasty as God's specially chosen royal family. And the new covenant stressed fulfillment. But these emphases are not comprehensive descriptions of covenant life; they merely touch on certain highlights. To see a fuller picture of the dynamics of living in covenant we must recognize that life in covenant with God involved much more than these emphases.

Adam's covenant relationship with God did not simply concern foundational matters. During the period of Noah, interaction between humanity and God involved much more than the stability of nature. Relationship with God during the period of Abraham entailed much more than promise. God administered the epoch of Moses with more in view than his law. God related to his people during the epoch of David in the light of more than David's dynasty. And life with God in the new covenant is more complex than its emphasis on fulfillment indicates.

As we explore covenant life, we will see that all divine covenants follow the same basic arrangement: the threefold structure we have already seen in Ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties. The dynamics of living in covenant with God always involved the benevolence of God, the requirement of human loyalty, and consequences for human loyalty and disloyalty.

To unpack the dynamics of Old Testament covenants, we will see how these three elements appear in each Old Testament covenant. First, we will look at the universal primeval covenants. Second, we will see these dynamics in the national covenants God made with Old Testament Israel. And third, we will see how these dynamics are present in the new covenant in Christ. Let's look first at the primeval universal covenants.

UNIVERSAL COVENANTS

During the primeval history God established a covenant of foundations with Adam and a covenant of natural stability with Noah. But life under these covenants also involved a broad range of issues that may be summarized under the rubrics of divine

benevolence, human loyalty, and consequences for human loyalty and disloyalty. We will look briefly at how this is true for each of the primeval covenants — first, the covenant with Adam and then the covenant with Noah.

Adam

In the first place, God showed much benevolence toward the first man and woman, even before they sinned. He prepared the world for humanity, taking it from chaos to a beautiful order. And he formed a splendid paradise and placed Adam and Eve within it, giving them all kinds of privileges. These acts of kindness prepared the way for God's first covenant arrangement with the human race.

In the second place, the covenant with Adam also required human loyalty. In addition to requiring Adam and Eve to serve as his images, God tested their loyalty with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. As he commanded in Genesis 2:16-17:

You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17).

Human loyalty was undeniably required in covenant life during the period of Adam's covenant.

And in the third place, there were consequences for Adam and Eve's loyalty and disloyalty. Quite explicitly, God told Adam and Eve that they would suffer the consequences of curse if they were disloyal and ate the forbidden fruit. As God told them in Genesis 2:17:

When you eat of it you will surely die (Genesis 2:17).

And by implication, if Adam and Eve had passed the test, they would have been greatly blessed as they served God and spread his kingdom.

So, Adam's covenant relationship with God involved consequences for loyalty and disloyalty as well. Now what was true for Adam and Eve was true for their descendants as well. Life with God continued to involve divine benevolence, human loyalty, and consequences.

Noah

In addition to the covenant with Adam, God also related to Noah and his descendants in term of all three covenant dynamics. First, God's benevolence prepared the way for Noah's covenant. When God determined to destroy the human race in his righteous judgment, he also determined to save Noah and his family. As we read in Genesis 6:8:

But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8).

God showed much kindness to Noah and his family.

Second, God required loyalty from Noah. He commanded him to build the ark and to gather animals. Listen to how closely the making of covenant with Noah is associated with Noah's responsibility in Genesis 6:18-19. There we read:

I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark... You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you (Genesis 6:18-19).

Noah was responsible to enter the ark with his family and to bring animals with him to keep them alive. Even after the flood, God reiterated Noah's responsibility to fulfill the role of humanity as God's image. Among other things, in Genesis 9:7 he said:

As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it (Genesis 9:7).

The emphasis of Noah's covenant on the promise of stability in nature did not eliminate the need for Noah and those whom he represented to be loyal to God.

Third, there were consequences for human acts of loyalty and disloyalty during the period of Noah. Noah himself was faithful to God. So, God was pleased with his sacrifice after the flood and blessed him with a stable world. As we read in Genesis 8:20-21:

Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done" (Genesis 8:20-21).

But God also made it clear that rebellion against him would have severe consequences of curse. For instance, in Genesis 9:6 God addressed the curse that would come upon murderers:

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed (Genesis 9:6).

The three dynamics of covenant life also continued through to Noah's descendants.

NATIONAL COVENANTS

Now, what was true for the primeval universal covenants was also true for the national covenants God made with Israel. The Abrahamic covenant emphasizing promise, the Mosaic covenant highlighting law, and the Davidic covenant accentuating the permanent dynasty of David's house, all followed the pattern of suzerain-vassal treaties. The dynamics of divine benevolence, human loyalty and consequences were present in each of these stages of divine covenants. Once again, we will look at each of these covenants in the order in which they appear: first Abraham; second, Moses; and third David.

Abraham

Abraham's covenant emphasized the promises of progeny and land for the people of Israel, but all three covenant dynamics were operative at this time. First, God showed much benevolence to Abraham. For example, in his initial call to Abraham, which preceded the covenant by many years, God demonstrated great kindness to Abraham. Consider Genesis 12:2 where God said:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing (Genesis 12:2).

Throughout Abraham's life God showed mercy to the patriarch, forgiving him of sin, counting him as righteous, protecting him from troubles.

Second, God also required loyalty from the patriarch. For instance, even in God's initial call, Abraham was required to obey. As we read in Genesis 12:1 God commanded him:

Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you (Genesis 12:1).

God required Abraham to leave his homeland and family to go to a land he had never seen. And listen to how God reminded Abraham of the requirement of loyalty when he confirmed his covenant in Genesis 17:1-2:

I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers (Genesis 17:1-2).

Although many Christians fail to see it, Abraham's covenant relationship with God was not entirely promissory. As with all covenants in the Old Testament, God required loyal obedience from Abraham.

Third, God also made it clear that there were consequences for Abraham's loyalty and disloyalty. Listen once again to God's demand that Abraham be faithful in Genesis 17:1-2, paying special attention to the consequences of blessing in verse 2:

I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless (Genesis 17:1).

And then in verse 2:

I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers (Genesis 17:2).

God explicitly stated that the increase of Abraham's descendants would be a consequence of loyalty. And correspondingly, God also said that disloyalty would result in severe curses. Listen to what he told Abraham in Genesis 17:10-14:

This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised... Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant (Genesis 17:10-14).

God required circumcision as a sign of commitment to covenant loyalty, so that anyone who was not circumcised among the men of Israel would suffer the curse of being cut off from his people, excluded from the blessings of covenant life. These three covenant dynamics that appear in close association with Abraham continued to regulate the life of God's people from Abraham to the next covenant in Moses.

Moses

Now the second covenant with the nation of Israel was the covenant with Moses. As we have seen, this covenant stressed God's law because it was established when God was forming the tribes of Israel into a unified nation. But it would be a terrible mistake to think that other covenant dynamics were absent from life under Moses' covenant. To illustrate the presence of all covenant dynamics in Moses' covenant, let's look briefly at the centerpiece of his covenant, the Ten Commandments.

Divine benevolence is evident in the Ten Commandments in the prologue that precedes God's laws. You will recall that the Ten Commandments begin in this way in Exodus 20:2:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery (Exodus 20:2).

The covenant of Moses was not a covenant of works; it was a covenant of mercy and grace. Even so, the Ten Commandments make it very clear that God required loyalty from his people. As the first commandment puts it in Exodus 20:3:

You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:3).

Divine grace was not contrary to human loyalty; rather, it supported and led to the requirement of faithfulness. Beyond this, the Ten Commandments speak of the consequences of loyalty and disloyalty in Exodus 20:4-6:

You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exodus 20:4-6).

The covenant dynamics that appear in the Ten Commandments extend to all of life from the days of Moses to the next covenant with David.

David

The last covenant with Old Testament Israel, the covenant with David, stressed that God was establishing David's line as the permanent dynasty to rule over Israel. Yet, when we look at the larger picture, it also becomes apparent that the gift of kingship to Israel came in the context of divine benevolence, human loyalty, and consequences. Listen to the way Psalm 89:3-4 comments on God's covenant with David:

You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, 'I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations'" (Psalm 89:3-4).

These verses reflect on the benevolence God showed to David. He chose David and established him and his descendants as the permanent dynasty over Israel. But God also required loyalty, and threatened consequences for disloyalty. Listen to Psalm 89:30-32:

If his sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes ... I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging (Psalm 89:30-32).

If David's sons forsook God's laws, they would be punished severely. On the other hand, great blessings would come to the sons of David who were faithful to God. When we read the history of Israel from David's day until the end of the Old Testament, it is evident that these covenant dynamics continued to characterize covenant life. So it is that all three covenant dynamics appear in each covenant period of Old Testament Israel.

With the dynamics of life in the universal and national covenants in mind, we are ready to turn to the new covenant, the covenant of fulfillment.

NEW COVENANT

The destiny of the kingdom of God administered through Old Testament covenants reached its climax through the work of Christ in establishing the new covenant. Even so, as in all other divine covenants, the basic dynamics of biblical covenants are evident in the new covenant in Christ. In the first place, the new covenant involves divine benevolence. God promised to show great kindness to his exiled people as he established the new covenant. As Jeremiah 31:34 reads:

For I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more (Jeremiah 31:34).

In this and many more ways, the new covenant clearly displays God's tender mercy.

At the same time, human loyalty is also a factor in the new covenant. God does not promise to do away with his laws, and he does not exempt anyone from obeying them. On the contrary, he requires loyalty. But God also promises in Jeremiah 31:33:

I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33).

This verse teaches that God will give his people a love for his law so that they earnestly obey him.

And finally, the consequences of loyalty are also evident. As Jeremiah 31:33 continues:

I will be their God, and they will be my people (Jeremiah 31:33).

This formula offered assurance that God would bring great blessings to his people because they would keep the obligations of this covenant.

Now, we must always remember that the new covenant comes into effect in three stages, following the pattern of the final phase of God's kingdom in Christ. The new covenant was inaugurated in the first coming of Christ and in the work of his apostles. Throughout church history the new covenant continues to come to fruition in a variety of ways through the power of Christ working in the church. And the new covenant will reach its completion when Christ returns in glory at the consummation of the age.

First, the new covenant is inaugurated because Christ finished his earthly ministry. Christ was faithful to all covenant requirements. From his birth, he never disobeyed his heavenly father. And more than this, because Christ died on the cross as a sacrifice for the sins of his people, his righteousness is credited to all who have saving faith in him. Christ's one sacrifice was so perfect that it never needs to be repeated. As the writer of Hebrews put it in Hebrews 10:12-14:

But when [Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God... because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy (Hebrews 10:12-14).

And because of this sacrifice, the new covenant has been inaugurated. As the author of Hebrews wrote in Hebrews 9:12-15:

[Christ] entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption... For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant (Hebrews 9:12-15).

God intervened in history to establish the new covenant by sending his son to keep every detail of God's law and to offer himself as a perfect and complete sacrifice for sin. His sacrifice brings eternal forgiveness to all who have saving faith in him.

Now despite the importance of Christ's saving work in his first coming, the great salvation of the new covenant also depends on Christ's continuing work as the mediator of the new covenant. Day by day Christ intercedes on behalf of his people before the throne of his father in heaven. Again the writer of Hebrews pointed to this reality. In Hebrews 7:24-25 he wrote these words:

Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them (Hebrews 7:24-25).

Because he reigns and intercedes on our behalf, we can be confident that Christ will bring all who have saving faith in him through the trials and troubles that we now face.

And finally, because Christ has paid for our sins and continues to intercede on our behalf, we can be confident that one day he will return and bring to completion the promises of the new covenant. As the writer of Hebrews explained in Hebrews 9:28:

Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him (Hebrews 9:28).

When that day comes, every person who has trusted Christ will receive complete holiness and the gift of eternal life in God's eternal kingdom of the new heavens and new earth. So, we see that as we read about covenants in the Bible, we are wise to remember the distinctive emphases of each covenant period. But we must also keep in mind that there was much more to life with God than these distinctive emphases. Each stage of life in covenant with God involved the full range of covenant dynamics.

Now that we have seen how life in covenant with God always entails the threefold dynamics of divine benevolence, human loyalty, and consequences, we should turn to our final topic: the people of the covenants.

PEOPLE OF THE COVENANTS

Who were the people of God's covenants? Who was included in and excluded from divine covenants? How did these various people relate to the dynamics of God's covenants? To answer these questions we will touch on two matters; first, we will explore the divisions of humanity; and second, we will see the application of covenant dynamics to these various divisions of humanity. Let's look first at the ways the human race is divided in relation to God's covenants.

DIVISIONS OF HUMANITY

Unfortunately, we live in a day when there is much confusion about the people of the covenants. For the most part, evangelical Christians think that there are two kinds of people in the world: believers and unbelievers; saved and unsaved. Now there is nothing wrong with these categories; the Bible speaks this way many times. But problems arise because many evangelicals equate believers with those who are in covenant with God, and unbelievers with those who are outside God's covenant. In this way of thinking, there are only two kinds of people — everyone who is saved is in covenant with God, and everyone who is not saved is outside of the covenant.

But when we look more carefully at the people of the divine covenants, it soon becomes apparent that this twofold division does not adequately describe the human race. To unpack a more adequate way of thinking about the divisions of humanity, we will look at two issues: first, the division of people within divine covenants; and second, the division between those who are included and those who are excluded from divine covenants.

Within Covenants

In the first place, it is important to see that an important division of people appears within every covenant in the Bible. Every covenant of the Old Testament included both believers and unbelievers. This is not difficult to see with the covenants with Adam and Noah. They are called universal covenants precisely because all people, whether believers or unbelievers, are bound to God by these covenants. The foundational principles established in Adam's covenant apply to those who have saving faith and those who do not. The promise of stability in nature in the covenant with Noah applies both to believers and unbelievers. So during the primeval history, there were two kinds of people in the world: true believers who were in covenant with God and unbelievers who were also in covenant with God.

Now, a similar situation held for the national covenants with Abraham, Moses and David. Each of these covenants also included both believers and unbelievers. As the Old Testament makes clear, throughout the centuries, the majority of Israelites proved to be unbelievers, even though they were in covenant with God. Within the entire nation as God's covenant people, only some truly believed and were eternally saved from their

sins. So, the covenants of national Israel included both believers and unbelievers. In this way, the people of the national covenants with Israel looked very much like the people of the universal covenants with Adam and Noah.

Now when we consider the people of the covenant with respect to the new covenant, another complication arises. The promise of the new covenant was that at some point, everyone within it would be true believers. Listen to the way Jeremiah stressed this fact in Jeremiah 31:34:

“No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:34).

The hope of the new covenant was that the people of God would be fully redeemed from sin, each one knowing the Lord without exception.

But while this is the destiny of the new covenant, we must remember once again that the kingdom of God in the new covenant is fulfilled in three phases. It was inaugurated in Christ’s first coming, it continues today in the church, and it will reach its consummation when Christ returns in glory. In other words, the hopes of the new covenant did not come about suddenly or completely when Christ first came to earth.

As a result, until Christ returns to bring full salvation, there are both believers and unbelievers in the new covenant. On the one hand, the people of the new covenant include men and women who have exercised saving faith in Christ. Whether Jews or Gentiles, they are true believers purchased by Christ’s blood and eternally justified by faith. On the other hand, people of the new covenant also include Jews and Gentiles who are not true believers but who have experienced a measure of the blessings of the new covenant, even though they have no saving faith.

Listen to the way the apostle John spoke of unbelievers in the church in 1 John 2:19:

They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us (1 John 2:19).

Here the apostle wrote about people who leave the Christian faith. He said in one sense they were “of us”; that is, they were part of the Christian church. But he says also that by leaving the faith, they made it clear that they did “not really belong to us”; that is, they were not true believers. And how did he know this? As he said, if they had really been of us, they would have remained with us. That is, they would have remained faithful to the end.

We all know that the rosters of churches include people who are saved from their sins and people who are not. No one claims that everyone counted among the people of the new covenant is truly saved. Even though we cannot always distinguish between them, the New Testament clearly teaches that until Christ returns, the church, the new covenant community, consists of both true believers and unbelievers.

Included and Excluded

In the second place, we must also recognize an important division among human beings between those who are included and those who are excluded from certain covenants. Now we understand that every person is included in the universal covenants with Adam and Noah; no one is excluded from the foundations and natural stability established in these covenants. But the situation for humanity changed once God chose Israel as his special people.

With the selection of the nation of Israel as the covenant people of God, a complication arose. Now, we have already seen that the covenants with Abraham, Moses and David included both believers and unbelievers. But these covenants were made with a select group of people, the Israelites, and with a few Gentiles who were adopted into Israel. This meant that, for the most part, Gentile nations were excluded from these covenants. To be sure, all people, including Gentiles, are people of the universal covenants, but the Gentiles were not people of the special national covenants made with Israel. Listen to the way Paul described the Gentiles in Ephesus before they became believers. In Ephesians 2:12 he wrote:

At that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12).

People outside the national covenants with Israel were without God and without hope. So, by the time we come to the national covenants, there are actually three kinds of people in the world: those who were in Israel's covenants with God as true believers; those who were in Israel's covenants with God as unbelievers; and those who were outside Israel's covenant.

The same threefold situation holds for the new covenant as well. As we have also seen, until Christ returns in glory, the new covenant has both believers and unbelievers within it. But in addition to these two kinds of people in the new covenant, we must add a third category: men and women who reject the gospel; those who do not claim to be Christian; those who are not part of the church. They are excluded from the new covenant. While during the Old Testament period of national Israel those outside of covenant were primarily Gentiles, now that Christ has come, those outside of the new covenant include both Jews and Gentiles who have no part in Christ or his church.

So we see that the Scriptures divide the human race in various ways in relation to divine covenants. The universal covenants include all people, both believers and unbelievers. The national covenants excluded the vast majority of Gentiles, but also included both believers and unbelievers within Israel. And until Christ returns in glory and purifies his church, the new covenant excludes Jews and Gentiles who have no part in the Christian faith, but also includes both Jews and Gentiles who are believers and unbelievers.

Now that we have seen how humanity is divided into various groups as they relate to God's covenants, we are ready to turn to another issue: How are the dynamics of

covenants — divine benevolence, human loyalty, and consequences of loyalty and disloyalty — applied to these various groups?

APPLICATION OF DYNAMICS

As we read the Old Testament seeking to understand its original meaning and how to apply it to our day, it is important to remember that both Old Testament Israelites who first read the Old Testament and we Christians who read it now face a similar threefold division of the human race: those outside covenant; unbelievers in covenant; and believers in covenant.

This means that if we hope to understand how the dynamics of covenant applied to people living in the days of the Old Testament and then relate those dimensions of original meaning to our own day, we must always think in terms of these three kinds of people. First, we must consider unbelievers excluded from the national covenants with Israel and unbelievers excluded from the new covenant. Second, we must consider unbelievers who are included in the national covenants with Israel and unbelievers who are included in the new covenant. And third, we must consider true believers included in the national covenants with Israel and true believers within the new covenant.

Let's look first at how covenant dynamics apply to unbelievers who were excluded from the covenants with Israel and the new covenant.

Unbelievers Excluded

Although these unbelievers actually live as lost people, they participate in the universal covenants with Adam and Noah; their lives are touched by all three dynamics of the covenants. In the first place, all unbelievers experience God's kindness through the mercy he shows to all people. As Jesus put it in Matthew 5:45:

Your Father in heaven... causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45).

We often call these blessings "common grace" because they are not saving mercies, but grace shown to all human beings.

In the second place, even unbelievers outside the national covenants and the new covenants are obligated to be loyal to their creator. Many unbelievers outside the exclusive covenants have at least some knowledge of the special revelation given to Israel and to the church, and this knowledge obligates them to be loyal. But beyond this, even those who have no specific knowledge of any Old Testament or New Testament faith have a basic understanding of their obligations to serve God that comes through general or natural revelation. As Paul put it in Romans 1:20:

Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood

from what has been made, so that men are without excuse (Romans 1:20).

So, even unbelievers outside the covenants with Israel and the new covenant have a basic obligation to worship and serve their creator.

In the third place, unbelievers outside the national covenants and the new covenant experience consequences for their actions. At times, God grants temporary blessings to unbelievers when they live according to the truth. Even among such unbelievers, wise living has benefits. And at other times God responds to their flagrant rebellion with temporary curses. Despite these mixed experiences for those outside of covenant, when Christ returns, these unbelievers will have no blessings from God. They will only suffer his eternal judgment. In these ways, unbelievers outside of Israel's national covenants and unbelievers excluded from the new covenant today experience the dynamics of the universal covenants.

Unbelievers Included

Now, the second category of humanity that concerns us is unbelievers who are in the covenants with the nation of Israel and in the new covenant. How do the dynamics of divine covenants apply to them? In the first place, God has shown much more kindness and mercy to these people than to those who remain outside of these covenants. True, they are not shown saving grace because they are not true believers. Yet, in the Old Testament there were still great advantages to being part of Israel, just as there are now great advantages to being part of the New Testament church. The apostle Paul reflected on the advantages of participating in God's special covenants when he described the benefit that came even to unbelieving Israelites. In Romans 9:4 he wrote:

Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises (Romans 9:4).

God shows greater mercy to unbelievers who are in the covenants with Israel and in the new covenant than he does to unbelievers outside of these covenants.

In the Old Testament, unbelieving Jews were delivered from Egypt. They received God's gracious law at Sinai. They conquered the Land of Promise. They were blessed by the reigns of David and his sons. In the same way, unbelievers in the New Testament church are ministered to by true believers; they hear the preaching of the word; they share in the work of the Spirit. In these and other ways, unbelievers in the special covenant community have been shown great kindness from God.

In the second place, along with receiving these benefits from being in covenant, unbelievers in the national covenants and in the new covenant have heightened requirements of loyalty. They have received greater knowledge of God's will than other unbelievers who are excluded from these covenants; therefore they are required to render even more obedience and service. As Jesus put it in Luke 12:48:

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded (Luke 12:48).

Those who hear the truth of God's Word, those who know his ways, are held responsible to be loyal to him.

In the third place, unbelievers in the national covenants and in the new covenant also experience consequences for their loyalty and disloyalty. On the one hand, they experience heightened blessings and cursings in this life, many different kinds of temporary blessings and curses. But on the other hand, when Christ returns, unbelievers in covenant with God have just one expectation: eternal curse, eternal judgment. Because they have not trusted in the promises of God in Christ, they remain lost in sin and destined to eternal punishment.

The writer of Hebrews warned against the heightened judgment coming against unbelievers in the new covenant. In Hebrews 10:28-29 he wrote these words:

Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy ... How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? (Hebrews 10:28-29).

Notice here that these people are "sanctified" by "the blood of the covenant." This does not mean that they were saved, but only that they were set apart to God, that they were in covenant with him. And when these people rebel against God, as they always do to some degree or another, there is only one expectation, namely, the eternal judgment of God, the judgment he has reserved for his enemies. And this judgment is all the more severe because the mercy shown to them was so great.

So, we see that for unbelievers in the national covenants and the new covenant, the dynamics of divine benevolence, human loyalty and consequences are heightened. But in the final analysis, if they do not repent and exercise saving faith, these unbelievers will still suffer eternal judgment from God.

Believers Included

The third category of human beings that must be of concern to us as we read the Old Testament and apply it today is true believers in covenant. These people are the wondrously special people of God destined irrevocably to eternal life in Christ. The divine benevolence shown to true believers is absolutely immeasurable, including forgiveness of sins and eternal fellowship with God. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:1-2:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:1-2).

At the same time, while we are free from the condemnation of God's law, we have also been called to loyal obedience out of gratitude for what God has done for us in Christ. This is why in Romans 8:7 Paul went on to contrast believers with unbelievers, saying these words:

The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law (Romans 8:7).

By contrast, the mind that loves God submits to his law. So, in Romans 8:12-13 Paul added,

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation... [to] put to death the misdeeds of the body (Romans 8:12-13).

In other words, believers have an obligation to live differently from unbelievers; that is, they have an obligation to submit to God's law, not to earn salvation, but to honor God.

Like Old Testament Israelites, Christians must follow Scripture's rules and regulations to test and prove their faith. True believers in the Old Testament were called to obey the law of Moses as a test of their faith. As Moses told the people in Deuteronomy 8:2:

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands (Deuteronomy 8:2).

Christians in the New Testament are called to the same kind of testing. As Paul told the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 13:5:

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you — unless, of course, you fail the test? (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Christ was the perfectly obedient Son of God, and his righteousness is credited to us so that our eternal salvation is secure. But as we live our daily lives, we are to prove the salvation that God has granted to us. As Paul encouraged the Philippians in 2:12:

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12).

In the third place, true believers in the Old Testament and New Testament experience the consequences of their loyalty and disloyalty. On the one hand, true believers experience both temporary blessings and curses from God. At a minimum, we are granted the blessings of God's Spirit, and beyond this, God often grants even physical blessings to his people. But the opposite is true as well. The writer of Hebrews explained that God trains his true children through discipline. In Hebrews 12:6 he wrote:

The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son (Hebrews 12:6).

Despite these mixed experiences here and now in this life, in the end there is a grand difference between unbelievers in covenant and true believers in covenant. There is but one final outcome for those who have saving faith. When Christ returns in glory, true believers will only experience the eternal blessings of God. As we read in Revelation 21:7:

He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son (Revelation 21:7).

As we continue to study the Old Testament in this series, it is essential that we always remember these three divisions of humanity and how covenant dynamics apply to them. When we remember the distinctions between unbelievers outside of the national covenants and the new covenant, unbelievers within these covenants, and true believers within these covenants, we will be equipped to understand what implications the Old Testament had for the ancient Israelites who first read it, and we will be better equipped to see how it applies to us today.

Every passage in the Old Testament warned and encouraged its original readers to consider their status in relation to God's covenants, and we must do the same today. At every point, the Old Testament called unbelievers outside of Israel's covenants to submit themselves to God and to enter into his covenants or suffer God's eternal judgment. The Old Testament calls on those outside the new covenant to do the same today. The Old Testament first called unbelievers in Israel's national covenants, and now calls unbelievers in the new covenant to exercise saving faith in the promises of God in Christ or face severe eternal judgment for violating their covenant relationship with God. And the Old Testament once called true believers in Old Testament Israel, and now calls true believers in the new covenant to remember the mercy God has shown them, to demonstrate their faith by living faithfully before God, and to continue to hope in eternal life in the new heavens and new earth that God will bring at the consummation of his kingdom.

When we remember how covenant dynamics apply to every kind of person living today, we can see how we should apply the Old Testament to our own lives and to the lives of others around us. As we read the Old Testament today, we are to ask how each passage calls for unbelievers outside of the covenant to enter into the new covenant, and we are to ask how each passage calls for unbelievers in the new covenant to move forward toward saving faith in Christ, and we are ask how each passage calls true believers in the new covenant to ever increasing faith and grateful faithfulness to the new covenant in Christ.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have introduced the biblical teaching of divine covenants. We have seen that God administers his kingdom through covenant arrangements. We have seen how each covenant in the Old Testament stressed particular things that the kingdom required at different stages of its history. We have explored the basic dynamics of a covenant relationship with God, and we have seen how these dynamics apply to different kinds of people living in the past and today.

As we move forward in this survey of the Old Testament, we will return to the theme of divine covenants time and again. Covenants formed the structures of the life of faith for Israel in the Old Testament, and they also form the structures of the life of faith even today.

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Kingdom, Covenants & Canon of the Old Testament

LESSON
FOUR

THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON



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Kingdom, Covenants & Canon of the Old Testament

Lesson Four

The Old Testament Canon

INTRODUCTION

When we take a long journey, it often helps to get detailed, reliable instructions from someone who knows the way. Yes, knowing the general direction to go can be very helpful; and it's always good to have a broad overview. But we often face complex situations along the way where we need to take just the right turn at just the right time. So, it helps to have detailed directions as well.

Well, something like this is true for followers of Christ. We are on one of the greatest journeys imaginable, and it is a journey that will end with the coming of God's kingdom to earth as it is in heaven. Now, it's good to have this ultimate destiny in mind; it helps to know the big picture. But traveling this Christian road can be so complex at times that we need more than broad concepts and general principles; we also need authoritative, detailed instructions. And God has given us these kinds of directions in the canon of the Old Testament.

This is the fourth lesson in our survey of the Old Testament called *Kingdom, Covenants and Canon of the Old Testament*. In earlier lessons, we have seen that the Old Testament is a book about God's kingdom and that God administers his kingdom through covenants. But we have entitled this lesson "The Old Testament Canon." The Old Testament is our "canon," an older word meaning our "standard" or "measure," and this canon provides God's people with authoritative, detailed instructions as they live in covenant with God and seek his kingdom.

In this lesson we will explore how the Old Testament canon presents rather specific guidance and how we may find it. As we will see, there are three main ways that the teaching of the Old Testament comes to the people of God, and we will describe these ways in terms of three metaphors. First, we will see how the Old Testament functions for us as a mirror, reflecting authoritatively on questions and themes that rise primarily out of our concerns. Second, we will speak of the Old Testament as our window to history, seeing how it provides authoritative records of significant events in the past that guide God's people as they serve him. And third, we will look at the Old Testament canon as a picture, as a series of literary portraits designed by their human authors to influence the people of God in particular ways in the past and to be applied throughout the ages.

Now, the differences in these approaches amount largely to matters of emphasis, but for the sake of our study we will look at them separately. Let's begin by looking at the ways the Old Testament canon is like a mirror, reflecting on questions and interests that we bring to reading it.

CANON AS MIRROR

Have you ever noticed that when you read a book with a group of friends, some things grab your attention and other things grab the attention of others? If you ask the group, “What is the most important thing you read in this chapter?” you’ll often get very different answers from different people. Now, many times it isn’t that one person is right and the others are wrong; rather, people focus on different aspects of what they read, because they all notice things that are particularly important to them.

When we read books, we often treat them as mirrors, seeing ourselves as the books reflect our interests and concerns. Men find things that concern them, women often find other things more interesting; old and young, this person and that person — to one degree or another, we all respond to what we read by focusing on what matters most to us. In much the same way faithful Christians often approach the Old Testament as if it were a mirror reflecting their interests. We look for what the Old Testament has to say about our concerns and our questions, even if those themes and topics are secondary or minor aspects of the biblical passages that we are reading. We will call this approach to the Old Testament canon “thematic analysis” because it emphasizes themes or topics that are important to us.

To explore thematic analysis of the Old Testament, we will touch on two issues: first, the basis of thematic analysis; and second, the focus of thematic analysis. Let’s look first at the basis of exploring the Old Testament with thematic analysis. What justification is there for this approach?

BASIS

There are at least two ways to see that thematic analysis is an appropriate tool for discovering the authoritative instructions of the Old Testament canon. First, the very character of Scripture encourages us to read it this way. And second, we have examples of biblical writers and characters using thematic analysis. Consider first how the character of Scripture validates thematic analysis.

Character of Scripture

Thematic analysis is an appropriate way to read the Old Testament, because like most well written texts of significant length, Old Testament passages touch on many different topics. They have implications for more than one issue at a time. Unfortunately, many well-meaning Christians often think of the meaning of Old Testament passages in far too simplistic terms. They act as if biblical passages presented a very thin laser beam of information. One passage means this and another means that. These believers often focus exclusively on the main or prominent themes of a passage and disregard the minor themes that the passage also touches.

But careful interpretation helps us to see that the meaning of Old Testament passages actually is much more complex. Rather than being like a laser beam, meaning

compares more closely to a gradually diffused beam of light. In the first place, some themes are quite important; the passage shines brightly on them. We may call these the prominent themes of a passage. In the second place, other topics are touched in a more peripheral manner, as if illumined by weaker levels of light. We may call these the minor themes of a passage. And in the third place, we should add that some topics or themes are so far removed from the concerns of a passage that we may say that, for all practical purposes, these passages shed next to no light on them. We may call these extraneous themes. Thematic analysis recognizes this range of themes and often draws attention to the array of secondary or minor topics that Old Testament passages address. When they are interesting to us, these minor topics become the primary objects of study for thematic analysis.

To see what we mean, let's look at the first verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:1. There we read:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).

Now, if we were to ask ourselves, "What does this verse teach?" at first glance we might think that the answer is very simple — Genesis 1:1 tells us that "God created the world." Most of us would probably agree that this is a fair way to summarize the main idea of this verse. But as true as this summary may be, if we restrict ourselves to this central topic, we ignore many other themes this verse touches.

Just how many themes or motifs appear in these words? Actually, the list is very long. Besides speaking of the fact that God created the world, this verse touches on theological themes like there is a God, and God existed before creation. It also tells us that God is powerful enough to create, and that God should be acknowledged as the Creator. Genesis 1:1 also touches on a number of matters that focus more on the creation. It tells us the fact that there was a creation event, that creation is not self-sufficient, that heaven is a dimension of creation, and that the earth is a dimension of creation. Because this one verse touches on all these minor themes, we can legitimately focus on any of them.

Now, if so many themes appear in just one verse like Genesis 1:1, imagine how many themes appear in larger passages. Most Old Testament passages speak of so many topics that they can have countless connections with the many interests and questions that we bring to them. So long as we are careful to distinguish prominent and minor themes from extraneous topics, it is quite appropriate to use thematic analysis to discern the Old Testament's authoritative detailed instruction.

Biblical Examples

Another way we can see the legitimacy of thematic analysis is to notice that inspired biblical writers themselves approached the Old Testament in this way. As we look at their examples, it quickly becomes evident that they often drew attention to relatively minor aspects of Old Testament passages because these aspects corresponded to their own interests. Consider the striking example from Hebrews 11:32-34:

Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies (Hebrews 11:32-34).

Now, anyone familiar with the stories of Jephthah and Samson in the book of Judges knows that Judges did not present these two men in a very favorable light. The prominent themes in the book of Judges consist almost exclusively of the personal and moral failures of Israel's leaders during this period of history, including Jephthah and Samson. In fact, as we will see in later lessons, these failures were highlighted to prove that the judges were not capable of leading the people of God.

Nevertheless, as relatively minor themes, the book of Judges does mention that both Jephthah and Samson achieved some victories over God's enemies when they turned to God in faith. Because of this, the writer of Hebrews was able to highlight the positive accomplishments of these men as he looked for answers to his own questions. Even though he was applying a thematic approach to the book of Judges, stressing themes that were important to him, the writer of Hebrews was remaining faithful to the text of Judges and was submitting himself to the Old Testament canon.

Now that we have seen that thematic approaches to the Old Testament's authoritative message are legitimate, we should turn our attention to the main concerns, or the focus of thematic analysis.

FOCUS

Because the themes that interest us vary so much from person to person, time to time, and place to place, we should not be surprised to find that there are many different thematic approaches to the Old Testament. At the same time, we can identify certain trends that Christians follow as they look for answers to their questions. We will speak first of a focus on doctrines; second, of an emphasis on examples; and third, of attention to personal needs.

Doctrines

Perhaps the most influential way the Old Testament has been approached through thematic analysis has been for the support of Christian doctrines. For millennia, the Old Testament has been viewed as a source of theological truths that theologians may arrange into doctrines.

One very fruitful way of thematic analysis is to ask questions that derive from the traditional categories of systematic theology. For example, we may ask, "What does this passage say about the character of God?" "What does it say about the condition of humanity?" "What does it say about the doctrine of judgment and salvation?" These

kinds of concerns are legitimate questions to raise with nearly every passage in the Old Testament because they are widely addressed in the Scriptures. But we should always be aware of the fact that they are not always the main concerns of particular passages we may be reading. They often rise out of our own interests prompted by our study of traditional theology.

This kind of thematic focus often takes the form of proof-texts, quick references to specific Old Testament passages to justify doctrinal positions. Nearly every time we read a book on systematic theology, a confession of faith, or an official doctrinal statement, we find a number of Old Testament references that are mentioned to support doctrinal positions. Unfortunately, sometimes the doctrines that proof-texts are supposed to support are actually extraneous to the verses cited. When the verses in view have practically nothing to do with the doctrine they are used to support, the doctrinal position can appear careless or even dishonest. In fact, some theologians have so grossly mishandled Old Testament texts in this way that others have rejected the process of proof-texting altogether. But to abandon proof-texting because of abuses is not the path of wisdom. Well-established proof-texts are usually valid and helpful ways of referring to themes in biblical passages, even when these themes are not central to the passages.

Examples

Another common form of thematic analysis is a concern for examples. Often, we look to the Old Testament for characters whom we should imitate or reject.

Unfortunately, some Christians have abused this approach to the Old Testament by mishandling the thoughts, words and actions of biblical characters. Because they do not keep the broader teaching of Scripture in mind, it is often the case that Christians exalt some Old Testament characters as models when, in fact, the characters are not so exemplary. This kind of abuse has been so widespread that many scholars have also rejected this type of thematic analysis. But despite its abuses, the thematic concern for examples can be very valuable.

For example, consider the well-known story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. Time and again preachers have appealed to David as an example. We frequently hear David extolled for refusing Saul's armor, for trusting in the power of God, and defeating Goliath. His attitudes, words and actions are treated as models of the ways we need to have faith in God and receive victory from him as well.

Sadly, in recent decades a number of interpreters have insisted that treating David as an example of faith in this passage completely misses the point. Now, it is true that the prominent theme of this story is that God raised David to replace Saul as Israel's king. But that in no way implies that this is the only theme of this passage. David's faith was his way to victory; it is a critical detail of this story because it explains one of the reasons that God established David and his dynasty. So it is right to notice David's faith as a minor theme in this passage, and it is right to follow his example.

The fact is that the Old Testament is full of examples to be imitated or rejected. And searching for these examples is a legitimate way to find the authoritative, detailed teaching of the Old Testament.

Personal Needs

In the third place, it is quite legitimate for Christians to use thematic analysis of the Old Testament to gain guidance in other sorts of more personal concerns, such as answers to questions that come from our personal struggles and needs. We have all heard sermons from the Old Testament on subjects like these: how to be a good father or mother, how to be successful at work, how to worship God, how to deal with personal and emotional struggles. Old Testament passages are often rightly viewed through thematic analysis as a way of addressing these kinds of practical concerns.

For instance, ministers often analyze David's failures as a father. They derive principles from Jacob's fourteen years of labor for his wife. Pastors turn to the story of Melchizedek and Abraham to illustrate elements of Sunday morning worship. They look at Elijah's emotional struggles after Mt. Carmel for the signs of spiritual depression.

Thematic analysis — treating the Old Testament as a mirror — is of such value that we must never ignore it. As we seek to discover the detailed authoritative teaching of the Old Testament canon, it is right for our attention to be drawn toward every theme that God presents, even the minor ones.

Now that we have seen that we may discern the authoritative, detailed teachings of the Old Testament canon by approaching it as a mirror through thematic analysis, we are in a position to turn to our second topic: approaching the Old Testament canon as a window to history.

CANON AS WINDOW

When we read a book that concerns events from the past, it is only natural for our attention to move toward those historical events it describes. Sometimes we are so engrossed in the history that we stop thinking about issues in our own lives, and we even ignore many aspects of the book itself, such as its style and its artistic presentation. Instead, we look through the book as if it were a window to the past, imagining how things must have been in the days it describes.

In a similar way, the Old Testament canon describes a world that existed long ago. And one of the ways Christians have submitted to the Old Testament's authority has been to use it as a window to discover events from the past — the history of salvation recorded in the Bible. Because of its focus on history, we will call this approach to the Old Testament canon historical analysis. In this approach, we learn about past events, ponder their significance, and apply the lessons of that history to our lives.

To one degree or another, faithful Christians have always treated the Old Testament as a window to history. Even in the early church when thematic analysis was dominant, the historical nature of the Old Testament was not ignored. But in the last four hundred years, especially in the last one hundred years, it has become clear that one of the most central features of the Old Testament canon is that it presents the history of God's dealings with his people. And as a result, in our day, we find many Christians

approaching the Old Testament canon with historical analysis, focusing their attention on the history to which the Old Testament refers.

To explore the historical analysis of the Old Testament canon, we will look at two issues: first, the basis or justification of historical analysis; and second, the focus of historical analysis. Let's look first at the basis upon which we may legitimately approach the Old Testament as a window to history.

BASIS

There are countless ways to justify historical analysis of the Old Testament, but we will have to limit our discussion to just two considerations. On the one hand, the character of Scripture itself encourages us to treat the Old Testament as a window to history. And on the other hand, biblical examples make it clear that we may rightly approach the Old Testament with historical analysis. Let's think first about the ways the character of Scripture provides a solid basis for historical analysis.

Character of Scripture

Following the teachings of Jesus and his apostles, Christians affirm that the Old Testament is inspired by God, that it is "God-breathed." As Paul put it in the well-known words of 2 Timothy 3:16:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

In these lessons, we will build our study of the Old Testament on the conviction that the divine origins of Scripture, the fact that they are God-breathed, means that when the Old Testament claims that something is true, then it is true.

We can put the matter this way — the Old Testament makes many claims about what happened in history. When we consider these claims and their relationship with actual historical facts, as followers of Christ we affirm that every historical claim the Scriptures make corresponds to actual historical events. When the Old Testament teaches that something happened, it speaks with the authority of God himself, so we can be sure that it happened. Nevertheless, everyone familiar with the Old Testament knows that the correspondence between the Old Testament and actual history must be qualified.

First, we must always keep in mind that the Old Testament is highly selective in the history it reports. It omits much, much more than it mentions. You will recall that the apostle John said this about the life of Jesus in John 21:25:

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written (John 21:25).

If it is true that the world cannot contain the books required to report everything about just one man's life, we should realize that the Old Testament only reports a tiny portion of the innumerable events that took place in the millennia that it describes.

In the second place, we have to admit that there have been many objections to the historical reliability of the Old Testament. Not everyone has accepted the correspondence between the historical claims of the Old Testament and the facts of history. Sometimes the correspondence between Scripture and history is questioned simply out of disbelief. After all, the Old Testament canon is no secular history; God and supernatural powers play major roles in the Old Testament outlook on history. So, unbelievers often find it difficult to believe that the Old Testament corresponds to real history. By contrast, of course, followers of Christ should have no problem believing in the supernatural world that the Old Testament describes.

But at the same time, some objections to the Old Testament's historical reliability even challenge believers because they come from the evidences raised by scholars. Many respected archaeologists, geologists and other scientists have pointed to data that they believe disproves the historical reliability of the Old Testament. Geologists raise questions about the creation account and the worldwide flood in Noah's day. Archaeologists question the date and the nature of the conquest of the Promised Land, as well as the dates of kings of Israel and Judah and the outcomes of wars and other events mentioned in the Old Testament.

Unfortunately, these scientific arguments sometimes persuade even Christians to deny the historical reliability of the Old Testament. In fact, today we often hear well-meaning theologians affirm that only a few of the major events in the Old Testament actually took place as reported. Sometimes they speak of the history of the Old Testament not as actual events in space and time, but as "salvation history" or "redemptive history," merely what primitive Israelites believed had happened, and things that sophisticated modern people know could not have happened. As far as these theologians are concerned, the Old Testament is fully reliable only in its theological and moral principles. But of course, the theology and moral teachings of the Old Testament are inextricably tied to its historical claims. To remove historical reliability from the Old Testament is to destroy theological and moral reliability as well.

Now, in addition to these qualifications, we should also admit that the correspondence between the Old Testament and history is not always easy to see. Why is this so? What kinds of things obscure the historical reliability of the Old Testament? There are at least three reasons why the Old Testament sometimes seems to be in tension with other sources of historical information. First, sometimes scientists misunderstand the evidence supporting their claims. As much as we should value archaeology and other sciences, it should be obvious that scientists make mistakes. Their conclusions are always subject to correction by further evidence. For example, two hundred years ago, many expert scholars insisted that the Old Testament was in error when it referred to the Hittite people. But in the last century archaeologists discovered the Hittite culture. In fact, many writings from the Hittites have provided very fruitful insights into Old Testament studies. In much the same way, a century ago it was a settled scholarly opinion that the Old Testament's date for the exodus and conquest around 1400 BC was much too early. In recent years, however, the archaeological data has been evaluated again, and strong arguments have been put forth even by unbelievers in favor of the biblical portrait. These

and countless other examples demonstrate that when the Old Testament does not correspond to scientific opinion, the scientists may simply be wrong.

Second, sometimes apparent incongruities between the biblical record and history arise from our misunderstanding the Old Testament. The classic example of this kind of situation is the struggle between Galileo and church authorities near the beginning of the 17th century. Galileo argued that the earth revolved around the sun, whereas the church argued that the sun revolved around the earth. Much of this controversy centered around Joshua 10:13 where we read these words:

So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped... The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day (Joshua 10:13).

For centuries, the church had taken this verse to mean that the sun literally stopped revolving around the earth for a time, and they ruled out the possibility of a solar system. Today, however, scientific investigation has established with much certainty that day and night are caused by the earth spinning on its axis. As a result, most modern Christians understand Joshua 10:13 differently from their historical predecessors. We know that daylight was miraculously extended for Joshua, but we also know that the halting of the sun was only an appearance of things relative to Joshua's position on the earth. We may now take this verse and others like it as ordinary phenomenological language, akin to the way we still speak in the modern world of "sunrise" and "sunset." The strength of scientific evidence for the solar system has not caused us to reject the historical reliability of the Old Testament; rather, it has helped us correct our interpretation of the Old Testament.

Third, sometimes both scientific opinion and our interpretation of the Old Testament are in error. Because we know that both scientists and biblical interpreters are prone to error, we must be open to the possibility that further research will demonstrate that both sides of the controversy are mistaken. Careful work both in science and with the Old Testament may one day demonstrate that the Old Testament actually does correspond to historical fact.

Now, we must always keep in mind that some apparent discrepancies between actual history and the Old Testament may never be solved. Human sin and limitations often make final resolutions unattainable. Every discipline of study will continue to present new challenges to our trust in the historical reliability of the Old Testament, and we should not expect to resolve them all. There are countless disagreements among competent scientists that seem to have no resolution, and the same is true in the interpretation of the Old Testament. We may often gain a degree of understanding, and even offer some possible solutions, but still not come to the point that all questions are eliminated.

No matter what tensions arise between the Old Testament and scientists, faithful followers of Christ must conclude that the inspiration of Scripture establishes the historical authority of the Old Testament, and as a result of this belief in the historical reliability of Scripture, we can rightly and thoughtfully approach the Old Testament as an authoritative window to history.

Now that we have seen how historical analysis of the Old Testament is supported by the character of Scripture, we should turn to a second foundation for this outlook: biblical examples.

Biblical Examples

In all of the Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures, there is not one instance of the biblical writers questioning the historical veracity of the Old Testament. We will mention just two telling passages by way of illustration.

First, consider the way the writer of Chronicles relied on the historicity of the Old Testament in his genealogies. In 1 Chronicles 1:1-4 he began his genealogies in this way:

Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, Noah. The sons of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japheth (1 Chronicles 1:1-4).

For modern Christians, the Chronicler did something remarkable here. He turned to the first five chapters of Genesis and treated them as historically reliable. He mentioned thirteen men from the opening chapters of Genesis. Most modern people consider the biblical record of these men to be legendary or fictional. But the Chronicler demonstrated a full trust in the historical reliability of the early chapters of Genesis. He used Genesis, as he did many other books in the Old Testament, as an authoritative window to history.

In a similar way, consider the example of Luke's record of Stephen's speech in Acts 7. Using various portions of the Old Testament, Stephen spoke of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, David and Solomon as historical figures, and he affirmed that the stories about them recorded in the Old Testament were factual. As far as Stephen was concerned, the history reported in the Old Testament was true, and that historical record served as a basis for calling his fellow Jews to repentance and faith in Christ.

Time and again biblical writers and characters demonstrated their belief in the correspondence between the Old Testament's historical claims and actual historical facts. They looked at the Old Testament as a window to history and drew theological conclusions for their own day from that history, and following their examples we must do the same today.

FOCUS

Now that we have seen that there is a legitimate basis for approaching the Old Testament canon as an authoritative window to history, we should turn our attention to a second issue: What is the focus of historical analysis? What is the goal of this approach to the Old Testament canon?

In the last century, one form of historical analysis has grown in popularity under the title “biblical theology.” Now, this is a fairly broad term that refers these days to several different approaches to the Scriptures. But one of the most influential forms of biblical theology can be described as focusing on two basic steps: first, creating a “synchronic snapshot,” looking at a period of time in the Old Testament as a unit; and second, performing a “diachronic trace,” looking at the connections between events through time. Of course, these two steps are inter-related and work together in countless ways. Biblical theologians constantly go back and forth between them. But for our purposes it will help to look at each of them separately. Let’s look first at the process of creating a synchronic snapshot.

Synchronic Snapshot

In the synchronic step, biblical theologians divide the Old Testament into periods of time and explore what the Scriptures tell us about those periods. They focus on a segment of biblical history and summarize the complex network of events that occurred at that time, treating them as a synchronized unit, a slice of time. Following the theological focus of the Old Testament, they usually concentrate on the ways these events characterize God’s interactions with his people. As a result, a synchronized snapshot is created for each epoch of the Old Testament.

Now, we need to be careful here. As we have seen in an earlier lesson, Old Testament history flows continuously, like a river flows toward the sea. Its history is developmentally unified, not dividing into distinct segments but moving forward in a continuum toward greater developments of the kingdom of God. So, dividing the Old Testament into periods is always somewhat artificial. It is like dividing the length of a river into distinct segments. Just as a river can be divided at different points along the way with different benefits, there are many beneficial ways to divide Old Testament history to create synchronic snapshots of the Old Testament.

In fact, the criteria we use to divide the Old Testament into ages heavily influence the divisions we create. For instance, in earlier lessons in this series when we had in mind the developments of God’s kingdom on earth, we spoke in terms of the primeval period and the period of Israel’s national history. And of course, we added the New Testament period to these Old Testament divisions. These divisions brought to light the major steps of God’s kingdom plan.

When we focused in another lesson on covenants, we spoke of the age of the universal covenants and the age of the covenants with Israel. And we added the New Covenant for the New Testament. Then we sub-divided the universal covenants into the times of Adam — the covenant of foundations, and Noah — the covenant of stability. And we sub-divided the period of national covenants into the times of Abraham — the covenant of promise, Moses — the covenant of law, and David — the covenant of kingship. And as always, we then added the new covenant in Christ — the covenant of fulfillment. These divisions helped us see how God used covenants to administer his kingdom.

Another way of separating the Old Testament into synchronized periods appears in the seventh chapter of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Following the criteria of

major changes in God's dealings with humanity before and after the fall into sin, the *Confession of Faith* divides Old Testament history into the time of the "covenant of works" before Adam sinned and the "covenant of grace" which covers the rest of biblical history. It then speaks of an important division in the covenant of Grace between the period called "under the law," meaning the time of the Old Testament, and the period called "under the gospel," meaning the New Testament.

In the last century, the widely respected biblical theologian Geerhardus Vos divided the Old Testament according to the criteria of major shifts in the form and content of divine revelation. He spoke of the pre-redemptive era before the fall; the first redemptive era following the fall and preceding Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden; the period leading from the fall to the flood of Noah's day; the period after the flood leading to the patriarchs; the period of the patriarchs; the period of Moses; and the prophetic period after Moses; and, of course, he spoke of the New Testament as well. Vos followed these divisions because he believed that the major changes that took place in the form and content of divine revelation moved history from one age to the next.

Now, once a period of time is identified, the job of the biblical theologian is to focus on the network of historical events that revealed God and his will in that period. Of course, in every historical period, all the events that took place were interrelated. But in a given period, some events have much larger formative roles than others. Biblical theologians typically focus on the more formative or central events of each period in the Old Testament.

For example, biblical theologians may focus on the slice of Old Testament history often known as the period of promise, the time of Israel's patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They often observe that God revealed himself in this time primarily through direct speech, visions and dreams. They note that there was a narrowing of the ethnic focus to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They see that the patriarchs performed worship at many altars. They describe the promise of many descendants given to the patriarchs, and they notice the importance of the promise of land to the fathers. These kinds of observations are attempts to characterize the patriarchal period as a whole, identifying formative events that play major roles throughout that timeframe.

Biblical theologians may also choose to focus on the period of law, the time of Moses who led Israel through the exodus and toward the conquest of the Promised Land. In these times, God revealed himself in a variety of ways, but primarily through the law of Moses. The narrowed ethnic focus on Israel grew into a national focus. The tabernacle was constructed and worship was centralized there. Israel had grown to large numbers, and God led Israel to possess the Promised Land. These kinds of events characterized the period of Moses as a whole and give us a snapshot of this moment in biblical history.

Diachronic Trace

In addition to synchronic snapshots of particular periods in biblical history, theologically-oriented historical analysis usually moves to a second step: a diachronic trace. The term "diachronic" simply means "through time." So, the diachronic trace focuses on the ways biblical events connect with each other through time, from one period to another.

We can summarize the process of establishing a diachronic trace in this way: As the formative events of each period are identified, it becomes apparent that closely associated events happen in each age. These events may be associated with each other for different reasons, but biblical theologians take note of these associations and trace how the resulting series of events reflect developments from one period of history to the other. Comparisons of events in each age often reveal vectors, directions or paths which the Old Testament followed. They give insights into the progress of God's kingdom.

Let's consider an example of diachronic tracing. We may begin our study synchronically with the patriarchal period of promise. For our purposes, let's concentrate on God's promise to give the land of Canaan to Abraham. In Genesis 15:18 we read these words:

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates" (Genesis 15:18).

As we have seen elsewhere, at this time God promised Abraham the land of Canaan for his descendants, and this event is very central to the entire network of formative events in the period of the patriarchs.

But understanding the event of God's promise of the land in the patriarchal period alone is not good enough. Biblical theologians also want to know what past events form the background to this promise of possessing the land of Canaan, and how do future events unfold its significance? So, they move to a diachronic approach to increase their understanding of this event.

Moving retrospectively, we may turn to the earliest period of biblical history, the primeval period stretching from Adam to Noah. As we have seen in another lesson, during this time God first established humanity as his vice-regents and instructed them to take dominion over the entire earth. As we read in Genesis 1:28:

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28).

When God first created humanity and ordained them as his vice-regents over the earth, the world was without sin, so dominion was an attainable goal that could be reached without hardship. But sin complicated the process of dominion, making humanity's efforts difficult and futile. As God himself said to Adam in Genesis 3:17-19:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground (Genesis 3:17-19).

Nevertheless, even after the fall into sin, God expected human beings to continue to strive for dominion over the earth. Even when humanity's wickedness grew so great that God was moved to destroy the world in the flood of Noah's day, God still maintained his plan to bring his kingdom to earth through faithful men and women. As God instructed Noah immediately after the flood in Genesis 9:1:

Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth (Genesis 9:1).

In the primeval record we learn that despite the difficulties caused by sin, God expected redeemed humanity to subdue and have dominion over the earth, just as he had ordained in the very beginning.

Knowing this background helps us understand that God's promise of land to the patriarchs was a step forward in the fulfillment of the call to humanity to have dominion. In the primeval times, God called his image to build his kingdom on earth by having dominion in a world of futility and sin. This dominion came to further expression in God calling Abraham and his descendants to take possession of the promised land of Canaan.

Now, this step of fulfillment in the patriarchal period was not an end in itself; the promise of a land to the patriarchs was a step toward an even greater fulfillment in the future. As God promised Abraham in Genesis 22:18:

Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed (Genesis 22:18).

This verse reminds us that God gave the Promised Land to Abraham and his descendants as a foothold, a beginning point from which they were to lead all families of the earth toward the blessings of redemption and God-honoring dominion over the entire earth as God originally ordained for humanity.

For this reason, our diachronic trace of humanity's dominion should move forward toward the period of the exodus and conquest, the days of Moses and his servant Joshua. In this period, God established Israel in the Promised Land as her national homeland. The promise to the patriarchs was furthered by God giving Israel the land in conquest. As God said to Joshua in Joshua 1:6:

Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them (Joshua 1:6).

The original ordination of humanity to have dominion, and God's promise of land to Abraham were furthered when Israel took possession of the Promised Land.

The initial possession of the land in the days of the exodus and conquest were also fulfilled further in the period of the empire when Israel had a king and temple. This was the time when Israel secured the land against enemies and matured into a great empire. The security of the land provided by the house of David was a further step toward solidifying and expanding the initial conquest of the land. But the imperial realities early in this period also anticipated a day in the future, a day when the righteous rule of the house of David would reach dominion over the entire earth. We read about this hope in David's house in Psalm 72:8-17:

He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth... All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him... All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed (Psalm 72:8-17).

The hope of the period of the empire was that David's house would prove to be faithful to the Lord and that the kingdom would expand, bringing redemption and dominion of the faithful over the entire earth.

Sadly, this great hope in the house of David faced a horrible collapse during the time of exile and failed restoration. Rather than being a time of further fulfillment, it was actually a time of failure. This period became a terrible setback for the dominion of God's people over the earth. God's judgment came against his people, and he sent both the northern and southern kingdoms out of their land and into exile. And more than this, this period even ended in failure. In his mercy God brought back a number of Israelites to the land and raised up Zerubbabel, the descendant of David, as the governor of his people and offered him great victory over the nations of the earth. As we read in Haggai 2:7-9:

I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory... The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house... And in this place I will grant peace (Haggai 2:7-9).

Had Israel been faithful, this victory would have occurred and the blessing of redemption and dominion would have begun to spread throughout the world. But time and again the Israelites who returned to the land rebelled against God, so that the offers of blessing and expansion never materialized. In fact, the restoration was a miserable failure.

The call for Adam and Noah to have dominion, the promise to the patriarchs, the establishment of a national homeland in the exodus and conquest, the successes of the monarchical period, and the hopes of the early restoration all collapsed. By the end of the Old Testament, the goal of humanity's dominion over the earth for the spread of God's kingdom was in ruins.

It is at this point that Christian biblical theologians turn to the final stage of biblical history, the climax of history in the New Testament. The New Testament assures believers that God acted in Christ to reverse the failures of the exile and failed restoration and to bring fulfillment of the dominion of redeemed humanity over the earth. Jesus came to reverse the curse of the exile, to bring freedom and redemption from sin, so that those who follow him may rule over the earth with him. As Jesus himself said in Revelation 2:26:

To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations (Revelation 2:26).

This illustration of historical analysis should make it apparent that historical analysis has much to offer. The Old Testament is God's authoritative record of his dealings with humanity. By looking through the Old Testament to the history behind it,

we can find many ways to follow the Old Testament canon as our authoritative, detailed guide.

Now that we have seen how the Old Testament gives us guidance both as a mirror through thematic analysis and as a window through historical analysis, we should turn our attention to a third metaphor for the Old Testament the metaphor of a picture.

CANON AS PICTURE

Perhaps you've been to a museum of fine art, or you've seen photographs of great paintings. It is wonderful to look carefully at a great painting, but it is also a great help to read a bit about the artists and the times when they painted. We can ponder paintings, giving special attention to their artistic qualities. But we can also notice how artists express their outlooks and feelings for others to see by the ways they use color, line, and texture.

In much the same way, we may approach the canon of the Old Testament as a picture through a process that we will call literary analysis. In this approach, we treat the Old Testament canon as a collection of literary works, books that were skillfully composed. We learn to appreciate the literary artistry in the Old Testament, but we also seek to understand how Old Testament writers conveyed their outlooks to their original audiences through their efforts. And as we explore the Old Testament with literary analysis, we will discover even more ways that the Old Testament canon exerts detailed authority over us.

Although followers of Christ have always taken the literary qualities of biblical books into account to some degree, it is only in recent years that this approach to the Old Testament has moved to the foreground. In the past, most theologians approached the Old Testament through thematic and historical analysis. But in recent decades, many scholars have emphasized that every attempt at communication, whether in the Bible or not, speaks to much more than the interests of interpreters and the facts of history. By and large, writers carefully construct their documents to express their own outlooks in an attempt to influence the opinions and lives of their readers. The goal of literary analysis is to uncover this intended communicative power of the writers of the Old Testament canon, their power over the people who first received it, and then to apply that same power to our lives today.

To explore how the Old Testament may be treated as a picture, we will take the same approach we have taken before. First, we will speak of the basis or justification of using literary analysis on the Old Testament. And second, we will look into the focus of literary analysis. Let's look first at the justification of literary analysis. Why is this approach to the Old Testament valid?

BASIS

The legitimacy of literary analysis can be established in many different ways, but in this lesson we will emphasize two familiar reasons why it is helpful to approach the

Old Testament with literary analysis. First, we will see that the character of the Old Testament itself points to the legitimacy of this approach. And second, we will note that examples from biblical writers indicate the importance of this perspective on the Old Testament canon. Consider first how the character of the Old Testament itself indicates the value of a literary approach.

Character of Scripture

In many respects, literary analysis is the approach to the Old Testament that requires the least effort to justify. It is validated by some obvious characteristics of the Old Testament: first, the Old Testament canon comes to us in books or literary units; second, these books display sophisticated literary qualities; and third, the books of the Old Testament represent a great deal of literary variety. Let's think first about the fact that the Old Testament comes to us in the form of books or literary units.

At a very basic level, literary analysis is based on the fact that the Old Testament is a collection of literature; it consists of literary units. A quick glance at the table of contents of a modern Bible reveals that our Old Testament's contain thirty-nine books. The list is familiar to many of us: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Now as important as it is to be familiar with this list of books, we should mention several qualifications that should be kept in mind as we approach these books from the perspective of literary analysis. First, the names of Old Testament books that we find in our Bibles are not original to the canon. Some titles come from older Jewish traditions, some come from the Septuagint, the influential ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. And some even come from much later Christian traditions. But the most important detail at this time has to do with 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. These six books in our modern Bibles were originally just three: Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. In addition to this, many interpreters have pointed out that it is likely that Ezra and Nehemiah were also originally one book. As we read the Old Testament with a view to literary analysis we are concerned with observing the books of the Old Testament as they were originally given. So it is important to keep these qualifications in mind.

Second, the order in which the books appear in the Old Testament has differed throughout history. The order of our modern Bibles depends heavily on the Septuagint, or Greek tradition. But in Jewish tradition, the last section of the Scriptures is different from ours. It is called the Writings, and contains the books: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles.

In all events, despite these variations, it is still clear that the Old Testament canon is a collection of literary works, so that it is only appropriate that we maintain the integrity of these literary units as we analyze them.

In contrast with thematic and historical analysis, treating the Old Testament as a picture by means of literary analysis is an attempt to pattern our understanding of the Old Testament after the patterns of the canon itself. In literary analysis we seek to arrange our theological assessments in ways that parallel the literary units in the canon. Now, of course, the only way completely to avoid rearranging what we find in the Old Testament is to leave the Old Testament canon precisely as it is: unanalyzed, un-interpreted and unapplied — even un-translated. So, some re-arrangement is unavoidable.

Nevertheless, literary analysis seeks to minimize rearrangement, looking for the literary units and priorities of the Old Testament itself. When we approach the Old Testament canon as a picture, we seek to discern the distinct theological concerns of Genesis as Genesis, of Exodus as Exodus, of Leviticus as Leviticus, of Numbers as Numbers, of Deuteronomy as Deuteronomy, and so on. And in addition to this, we try to give weight to what is weighty, to make prominent in our interpretation what is prominent in these books.

In addition to the fact that the Old Testament canon consists of literary rather than thematic or historical units, literary analysis is also justified by the fact that Old Testament books exhibit sophisticated literary qualities. If the books of the Old Testament were simple, colorless prose, literary analysis might not be so important. But the literary sophistication of Old Testament books calls for careful attention to their literary qualities.

From common experience, we all know that some kinds of writings exhibit much more sophisticated style and intricate literary artistry than others. It would be strange, for instance, to find a shopping list written with the flare of a sonnet. A quick memo seldom receives the artistic attention that an elaborate novel receives. When we come upon simple writings, we do not usually need to pay much attention to their literary qualities to understand them adequately. But when we read a wonderful novel or a lovely poem, when we see their intricacies, we find that in order to appreciate them more fully, we must concentrate on their elaborate literary qualities. Discerning the sophisticated literary techniques of the writers helps us understand their texts.

As it turns out, archaeologists have discovered a wide range of written materials from the world of the Old Testament. We have simple letters, lists, receipts and the like that do not exhibit much literary complexity. But archeologists have also discovered wonderful literary works from the ancient Near East. The great cultures of biblical days had elaborate myths and legends, complex legal documents, intricate ritual texts. Many of us have heard of *Enuma Elish*, the *Gilgamesh Epic*, and the *Baal Cycles*. These were outstanding literary works composed with great artistry.

But without a doubt, the books of the Old Testament are among the most elaborate literary works known from the ancient world. What drama could be more sophisticated than the book of Job? What narrative could be more intricately constructed than the book of Genesis? What poetry could be more memorable than the twenty-third Psalm? By most standards, Old Testament books equal or surpass the literary artistry of the greatest literature of the greatest cultures of the ancient world.

Unfortunately, Christians often overlook these literary qualities as they pursue thematic and historical interests. But in reality, it is the literary qualities of Old Testament books that enable their communicative power. The artistic qualities of Old Testament literature are the means by which Old Testament writers communicated their messages.

We understand the communicative force — the intended influence — of Old Testament books only when we learn how to appreciate their literary qualities. And for this reason, literary analysis is vital when it comes to submitting ourselves to the authority of the Old Testament canon.

In addition to employing literary analysis because the Old Testament comes in literary units and exhibits sophisticated literary qualities, we should pursue literary analysis of the Old Testament because of the variety of literature that it contains. The Old Testament canon is not a flat terrain with the same kind of writing appearing on every page. Instead, it is a varied landscape of mountains, rivers, lakes, fertile plains, deserts, and oceans. In other words, the books of the Old Testament represent a variety of genres or types of literature.

Some Old Testament books are predominantly narrative, such as Genesis, Numbers, Joshua, Judges and Ruth. These books have only slight mixing of other genres such as genealogies, poems, and worship and social regulations. Then there are other books that are predominantly poetry: the Psalms, Job, and Amos, for instance. Still other books are highly stylized prose, such as Ecclesiastes and Malachi. Beyond this, speeches characterize the book of Deuteronomy. The list goes on and on.

Realizing that there are various genres in the Old Testament is important because each genre has its own conventions, its own ways of communicating its influence. We must learn the ways each genre communicates the intentions of writers and apply that knowledge as we read the Old Testament. Law must be read as law, speeches must be read as speeches, stories as stories, poems as poems, aphorisms as aphorisms, visions as visions, genealogies as genealogies. To uncover the power of Old Testament passages to transform our lives, we must take into account what kind of literature Old Testament writers employed to communicate to their audiences. And genre considerations like these are at the very heart of literary analysis.

Biblical Examples

In addition to the character of Scripture itself, literary analysis is based on the fact that biblical characters and writers sought the guidance of the Old Testament canon in this way as well. In fact, we may say that every time biblical writers interpreted Old Testament passages with careful attention to the main concerns of the human writer toward his audience, they were employing a significant measure of literary analysis.

For instance, in Mark 10:4, Jesus focused on literary analysis as he dealt with the topic of divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1. As we read in this passage, some Pharisees challenged Jesus on this matter, saying these words:

Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away (Mark 10:4).

In Jesus' day, some Pharisees had interpreted this verse to teach that a man could divorce a woman for practically any reason, so long as he gave her a certificate of divorce. But Jesus corrected this false interpretation by focusing on literary considerations. Commenting on Deuteronomy 24:1, he said these words in Mark 10:5:

It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law (Mark 10:5).

Jesus pointed out that Moses had permitted divorce as a concession to the hard hearts of the Israelites.

For our purposes here, it is important to see that Jesus did not look exclusively at the text of Deuteronomy 24 and interpret its grammar or internal qualities alone. Instead, he explicitly viewed the passage in the light of what he knew about Moses as the author and the ancient Israelites as Moses' audience. He knew about the hardness of the Israelites' hearts, and he knew the concern Moses had for Israel when he gave them his laws. The Pharisees had failed to account for proper literary concerns, especially Moses' intentions toward his hardened audience. Jesus, however, knew the importance of these factors, and rightly concluded that Moses' regulation was actually a concession, not an ideal.

Another example of literary analysis appears in Galatians 4:22-24. Listen to what Paul wrote there about the Old Testament stories of Abraham's wife Sarah and her son Isaac, and Sarah's handmaiden Hagar and her son Ishmael:

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants (Galatians 4:22-24).

Now there is far more in these verses and their surrounding context than we can address at this time, but let's focus on the heart of Paul's interpretation here. In verse 24, Paul said that Abraham's interactions with Sarah and Isaac, and with Hagar and Ishmael, "may be taken figuratively" because they "represent two covenants." In other words, Paul understood that Abraham's interactions with these characters had grand theological implications for the ways people relate to living in covenant with God.

To grasp these theological implications, let's look first at the events in Abraham's life. The Genesis record made it clear that Abraham faced a choice of two ways of relating to God: Sarah and Isaac on the one hand, and Hagar and Ishmael on the other. On one side, Abraham was faithful to God when he relied on God to keep his promise of a child through Sarah. This path of relying on God and his promise was difficult, but it was the way to God's blessing. On the other side, however, Abraham was unfaithful to God when he relied on his own efforts to have a child through Hagar, the Egyptian handmaiden. This path of relying on his own efforts resulted in the judgment of God against Abraham. With these basic patterns in mind, let's turn to the ways Moses used these patterns as he led the Israelites toward the Promised Land.

Now, as Moses wrote about the life of Abraham, he was fully aware of the grand significance of Abraham's choices. In fact, he told these stories in Genesis so that they represented two ways of life that his Israelite readers faced in their day. On the one side, Moses called the Israelites to be faithful to God by relying on God to fulfill his promises of giving them possession of the Promised Land. Relying on God and his promise was

difficult, but it was the way of blessing. On the other side, Moses called the Israelites not to rely on human efforts by turning back to Egypt like Abraham had turned to the Egyptian handmaiden Hagar. Turning back would result in the judgment of God against Israel.

Following this direction of Moses' original meaning, Paul applied these stories to the choices facing the churches in Galatia. The Galatians had to make a choice between the true gospel from Paul and a false gospel that had come to their churches from representatives of Jerusalem. The true gospel was that salvation comes purely by trusting in the promises of God in Christ. The false gospel turned people away from faith in the promises of God to human effort of obedience to the law as the way of salvation. And as Paul said in Galatians those who follow the true gospel of faith in God's promises are children of Sarah and heirs of the promise, but those who follow the false gospel are children of Hagar and not heirs of the gift of salvation. Paul made it clear that the true gospel of faith in God's promises leads to blessings and the false gospel of obedience to the law leads only to judgment. It was Paul's concern with literary analysis, his attention to the ways Moses used literary figures in the stories of Genesis, that led him to apply Genesis so poignantly to the churches of Galatia.

Now that we have seen the basis of treating the Old Testament as a literary portrait, we should turn our attention to the focus of literary analysis. What is to be our concern in this approach to the Old Testament canon? On what should we concentrate?

FOCUS

There are many ways we could describe the concerns of literary analysis, but for our purposes it helps to think in terms of a threefold focus. First, we are concerned with the writer of a passage. Second, we focus on the original audience of a passage. And third, we are interested in the actual document or text we are studying. Let's think first of the importance of considering the writers of the Old Testament.

Writer

Now, without a doubt, God is the ultimate author of the entire Old Testament. He inspired and superintended the writing of the entire Old Testament canon. But as we have seen in another lesson, this inspiration was organic. God used the backgrounds, thoughts, feelings, and intentions of human writers to create the books of the canon, and we should be concerned with these human elements as we read the Old Testament. As we consider a focus on writers, we should look in two directions: on the one hand, we should be aware of a number of dangers; and on the other hand we should see a number of benefits.

Many dangers come from a focus on human writers of the Old Testament when we become involved in speculation. In the past, many interpreters have focused on writers in ways that produce tangled webs of psychological and sociological speculations. They have done this in part by pressing issues like the precise identification of the writer, the specific circumstances he faced, and the details of his theological motivations. As important as these kinds of issues may be, if we press for answers beyond what we know,

we can make our interpretations depend on flimsy speculations. This kind of overemphasis on the writer may be dubbed, “the intentional fallacy,” giving too much weight to our reconstructions of a writer’s intentions.

But on the other hand, there is great benefit in focusing on writers, if we are careful and responsible. As we will see in later lessons, we may not know as much about biblical writers as we would like to know, but we can still know much that can help us understand their writings. We can have varying degrees of general knowledge about their identities, about their broad circumstances, and about their basic theological motives.

Take, for example, the writer of Chronicles, or the Chronicler as he is often called. Now, we do not know with certainty who this man was. We do not know his name or his precise social standing, or exactly when he lived or wrote his book. We do not know very much about his psychological tendencies or about his personal strengths and weaknesses. So, to rely heavily on these sorts of considerations as we interpret his book runs the risk of building on wrong assumptions.

Nevertheless, we can derive valuable information about him from the Old Testament itself. For example, we know that the Chronicler lived and wrote sometime after the exile when a number of Israelites had returned to the Promised Land. This is certain because the genealogies of 1 Chronicles 9:1-44 list those who returned, and the last verse of his book, 2 Chronicles 36:23, mentions the command of Cyrus the Persian that the Jews should return to their land.

We also know that the Chronicler was among the educated elite of Israel. He quoted from large sections of the books of Samuel and Kings, and referred to other biblical books as well. And, more than this, in passages like 1 Chronicles 27:24, the Chronicler mentioned the content of royal annals. And in verses like 2 Chronicles 9:29 he referred to collections of prophetic oracles that do not even appear in the Old Testament.

Beyond this, by comparing his books with Samuel and Kings, we know that the Chronicler had a number of very important theological commitments. He was very committed to the rule of David’s house and the purity of the temple in Jerusalem. He repeatedly referred to the law of Moses as the guide for Israel’s faith and life. And by noticing how he piled up examples of immediate consequences for sin and obedience, we know that the Chronicler was very interested in the way God blessed and cursed his people within a generation of significant fidelity and infidelity.

There are a number of other things we could say about the Chronicler’s beliefs and hopes, but the main point is this: we have sufficient knowledge about the Chronicler to analyze the way he used literary techniques to influence his original readers. And we have even more information about other biblical writers, so that regularly focusing on the writer in our interpretations can be quite beneficial.

Audience

Now, in addition to focusing on the writer, responsible literary analysis of the Old Testament also considers the original audience. What was their situation? How were they to be influenced by the Scriptures they received? Once again, just as there are dangers and benefits as we consider the writers of Old Testament books, we also need to be aware of the dangers and benefits of focusing on the original audiences.

On the one hand, just as some forms of literary analysis speculate too much regarding the writers of Scripture, others depend far too heavily on detailed knowledge of the audience. They speculate as to the precise identification of the audience. They reconstruct specific details of the audiences' circumstances. They imagine the psychological conditions of the audiences. They go too far imagining their strengths and weaknesses. When these kinds of positions are too central in interpretation, we once again run the risk of psychological and sociological speculation, and for this reason, an overemphasis on the audience may be called "the affective fallacy."

For instance, in the case of Chronicles, we don't really know if the Chronicler just wrote for a select group of people such as the priests or the family of David, or for the general populace. We don't know how many people were resistant or compliant. We don't know for sure if they lived before, during, or after the times of Ezra and Nehemiah. Without a doubt, knowing these things might shed additional light on our interpretations. But at this time, we have no way to be certain of such things, and our interpretation is more responsible when we do not speculate regarding them.

At the same time, however, there are many benefits we can derive from considering the audience because we usually know lots of helpful general information. In very general terms, we know that the intended audiences could understand, if not read, ancient Hebrew. We often know their general location. And we frequently know some of the major events that they had experienced. And we know that as with most groups of people, some were faithful and others were unfaithful to their covenant responsibilities before God.

In the case of Chronicles, we still know much about the original audience. The fact that the genealogies in 1 Chronicles 9 end with a list of people who had returned to the land indicates that the Chronicler wrote in the Promised Land for people who lived there with him. We can also learn a lot about their general social conditions from books like Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Ezra and Nehemiah. These were difficult times. Contrary to the prophets' hopes, only a few Israelites had returned to the land. Temple worship was weak at best, and the throne of David was not re-established. The nation faced economic hardships. And Israel suffered repeated threats of conflict and war. We can know these kinds of things about the condition of the audience with great clarity and without involving ourselves in speculation.

What we know about the original audience helps us gain a deeper appreciation for the purpose and original meaning of Chronicles. And as a result, interpretations of every particular passage in Chronicles should proceed in the light of what we know about the original audience.

Now that we have touched on the importance of considering what we know about the writer and audience, we should turn to the third and primary focus of a literary analysis of the Old Testament — a concern with the document itself.

Document

As we will use the word "document," it refers to any portion of the Old Testament that we may have in view, whether it be just a sentence or two, a verse or two, a section of verses, a chapter, a section of a book, a whole book, a corpus or group of books, or

even the entire Old Testament canon. In all events, our focus on the document is central to literary analysis.

Unfortunately, in recent decades, a number of interpreters have urged that the document itself is all we need for interpretation. In an attempt to avoid the uncertainties entailed in considering the writer and audience, these scholars have argued that we must downplay the writer and audience. In reality, this is not a safe direction to follow because the same document, whether biblical or not, can mean very different things depending on who wrote it and for whom it was written. When interpreters try to focus exclusively on the document and ignore the writer and audience, they fall into a mistake that we may call “the graphic fallacy,” placing too much hope in the document by itself.

In order to illustrate the importance of looking carefully at the document in the context of the writer and the audience, we will examine the reign of Manasseh found in 2 Chronicles 33:1-20. When we study this passage, we have a great advantage of possessing a parallel account of Manasseh in 2 Kings 21:1-18. In fact, the writer of Chronicles copied, changed, omitted and added to 2 Kings 21 in ways that are very important for literary analysis. Let’s start by looking at the account of 2 Kings.

Second Kings 21 divides into five symmetrical parts: first, verse 1, the opening of Manasseh’s reign; second, verses 2-9, Manasseh’s sin of idolatry; third, verses 10-15, the prophetic condemnation of Manasseh; fourth, verse 16, Manasseh’s additional sin of violence; and fifth, verses 17-18, the closure of Manasseh’s reign.

As this outline suggests, in 2 Kings 21, Manasseh is characterized as evil from beginning to end. He is introduced as a great sinner. The second portion of the story elaborates on his idolatry; he defiled the temple with idols and led the people to do more evil than the Canaanites. The third part of the narrative amounts to a horrifying condemnation of Manasseh by the Lord’s prophets. According to these verses, Manasseh’s sins resulted in Jerusalem’s destruction and the exile of its people. The fourth portion of the narrative mentions that Manasseh also filled the streets of Jerusalem with innocent blood. Then the final portion simply reports that Manasseh died and was buried. In 2 Kings 21, there is not one redeeming quality in Manasseh’s life.

Now, let’s turn to the record of Manasseh’s reign in 2 Chronicles 33. This account does not contradict 2 Kings 21, but it is very different. 2 Chronicles 33:1-20 also divides into 5 main parts: first, verse 1, the opening of Manasseh’s reign which is largely copied directly from 2 Kings; second, verses 2-9, Manasseh’s idolatries are recounted with only slight differences from 2 Kings 21:1-9. So far, the Chronicler’s account closely resembles that of 2 Kings. In both records Manasseh is presented as a terrible sinner.

But the third, fourth and fifth sections of the account of 2 Chronicles 33 differ dramatically from 2 Kings. In the third section, verses 10-13 the Chronicler chose not to include the prophecy in 2 Kings that Judah would be exiled in the future. Instead, the Chronicler stated that Manasseh himself was exiled to Babylon in his own lifetime. While there, Manasseh repented of his sins and received forgiveness. Then, in the fourth section, verses 14-17, instead of mentioning Manasseh’s violence, the Chronicler reported that Manasseh returned to Jerusalem, rebuilt the city, and restored proper worship of God at the temple. And finally, in 2 Chronicles 33:18-20, the closing of Manasseh’s reign expands on 2 Kings by including another reference to Manasseh’s prayer of repentance.

By comparison with 2 Kings, the Chronicler's record is much more positive. Both accounts report Manasseh's terrible sins; 2 Kings reports the prophets' condemnation of Manasseh as well as Manasseh's violence against the people of Jerusalem. But the Chronicler omits these portions of the story in 2 Kings. Instead, the Chronicler added that Manasseh was exiled, repented and was forgiven. And he also added that Manasseh returned to Jerusalem and restored the city and temple. And finally, although both accounts end with Manasseh's death, 2 Chronicles adds a reminder of Manasseh's repentance. So, in a word, 2 Kings presents Manasseh as a consistent sinner, but 2 Chronicles presents him as a repentant sinner.

Considering these differences between the parallel accounts in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, we must ask another literary question: Why are these accounts so different? Why do they offer such different outlooks on Manasseh's life? In a word, the differences can be explained only by the fact that Kings and Chronicles were written by different people and for different audiences. Each writer had his own purposes for giving an account of Manasseh's reign.

As we will learn in a later lesson, the writer of Kings wrote primarily to explain to the exiles in Babylon why the destruction of Jerusalem had occurred, and why they had been driven from the Land of Promise. His answer was that Manasseh's sins had brought these curses upon the nation. But as we have seen, the Chronicler's situation was very different. He wrote his history after the exile in an attempt to motivate the struggling restored community to move forward in faithful service to God.

For this reason, the Chronicler omitted and added true things about Manasseh that fit with his purposes. He did this by bringing to light details from Manasseh's life that paralleled details in the lives of his own Israelite readers. Manasseh had sinned terribly, and they had done the same. Manasseh had been exiled to Babylon, and they had been too. Manasseh had repented and been forgiven, and so had they. Most importantly, once Manasseh had returned, he had rebuilt the city of Jerusalem and had restored proper worship, and this was the very challenge that the Chronicler's audience faced in his day. Would they follow Manasseh's example by rebuilding and restoring the proper worship of God in Jerusalem? The Chronicler's main point was this: If the king who had caused Judah's exile also rebuilt and restored the kingdom when he returned to the land, surely the Chronicler's own audience should do the same.

This brief literary analysis of Manasseh's reign in 2 Chronicles 33 illustrates the value of appreciating how Old Testament literature communicates its authoritative message. As we consider the writers, the audiences, and the literary qualities of Old Testament documents, we can discern the main purposes for which the various parts of the Old Testament canon were written. And knowing these purposes will help us understand the Old Testament's authoritative message not only for its original audience, but also for us today.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have explored the Old Testament as a collection of authoritative books, a canon designed to guide the people of God in the situations they faced. We have

seen how God's people have submitted to the authority of the Old Testament canon in three main ways. In our exploration of the Old Testament as a mirror through thematic analysis, we have learned the value of looking at all of the themes in Old Testament passages, including minor themes, for answers to the questions that arise in our own lives. Through using the Bible as a window, in historical analysis, we have seen the significance of the historical events that the Old Testament reports. And by looking at the Old Testament as a picture through literary analysis, we have learned how to discern the main purposes or influences Old Testament passages were designed to have over God's people.

As we continue this survey of the Old Testament canon in future lessons, we will return to these three approaches time and again. Exploring the Old Testament from these three vantage points will not only help us understand how the Old Testament canon led God's people in the past. It will help us see the many ways it is our authoritative guide even today.

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