

Written For Our Admonition: A Survey of the Old Testament

Lesson 1 | *Is the Old Testament Relevant for the Christian?*

Outline:

- I. The Old Testament is *Not* Relevant for the Christian.
 - A. The Old Testament is Huge!
 - B. The Old Testament is Different!
 - C. The Old Testament is Inferior!
- II. The Old Testament *Is* Relevant for the Christian.
 - A. The Old Testament Comprises Seventy-Seven Percent of the Christian Canon.
 - B. The Old Testament Deals with Some Doctrines More Completely than the New Testament.
 - C. The Old Testament Provides Perspective on God’s Work Throughout History.
 - D. The Old Testament Was Highly Valued by Jesus Christ and the Apostles.
- III. Toward a Resolution
 - A. The Old Covenant Affects the Text of the Old Testament to Varying Degrees.
 - B. The Essence of the New Covenant is the Internalization of the Moral and Spiritual Principles of the Old Covenant.
 - C. The Old Testament continues to serve as a witness to the unchanging character of God.

Introduction: This series surveys the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament, summarizing their background, structure, theme, and application. At the outset, however, it is important to defend and explain the relevance of the Old Testament to the Christian. Believers often struggle to appreciate the Old Testament and could feasibly wonder about the value of spending thirty lessons on this ancient section of Scripture. The answer to the question “Is the Old Testament relevant for the Christian” is both “no” and “yes.” As with other areas of biblical doctrine, we must learn to deal with a theological tension. In this case, however, the tension does not leave us with a mystery that must simply be accepted by faith. It is instead a matter of understanding the different senses in which the Old Testament does and does not serve as a guide for the believer.

- I. The Old Testament is *Not* Relevant for the Christian.
 - A. The Old Testament is Huge!

As a starting point, we must acknowledge the overwhelming size of the Old Testament. The New Testament contains 260 chapters but the Old Testament 929. Furthermore, the New Testament covers about one hundred years of history while the Old Testament, going all the way back to Creation, spans perhaps 4500 years. It is a daunting task just to read all this material—not to mention understand it—as anyone can attest who has

tried to read through the Bible in a year. The following information will serve as a first step toward managing the size of the Old Testament. (Lesson 30 will conclude this series with further discussion of the “big picture,” particularly the Old Testament’s Christological flow.)

1. Chronology

It is essential to develop a sense of the Old Testament’s chronological flow. Following is a ten-period breakdown based on the most significant events (dates approximate). Every believer would do well to memorize these categories or write them in the front of his Bible.

- Creation–2166 Prepatriarchal era
- 2166–1876 Patriarchal era (from Abraham’s birth to Jacob’s descent to Egypt)
- 1876–1446 Sojourn in Egypt
- 1446–1406 Exodus & wilderness wanderings
- 1406–1043 Conquest & judges
- 1043–931 United kingdom (reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon)
- 931–722 Divided kingdom (from the rupture of kingdom to the fall of Samaria)
- 722–586 Single kingdom (ending with fall of Jerusalem)
- 586–538 Exilic period (ending with Cyrus’ decree for Judeans to return)
- 538–430 Post-exilic Judaism (ending with the ministry of Malachi)

2. Content

This series will depart from the order of the Old Testament books in the English Bible and will follow a roughly chronological order. However, the English organization by content and genre does have an advantage. It groups material together in logically connected sections. Each section has a distinctive thrust.

a. The Pentateuch: The Constitution of Israel

Following the foundation-laying book of Genesis, the climax of this section is Yahweh’s mighty deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and His constituting of them as a nation at Mount Sinai. The bulk of what follows is literally a constitution—a series of covenant documents specifying the guidelines for the new relationship between God and His people. Here there are both *laws* that spell out the expected holiness (613 of these—245 negative, 365 positive) and a *sacrificial system* setting forth basic principles for relating to God.

b. The Historical Books: The Rise, Fall, and Restoration of Israel

The ebb and flow of the history focuses on two issues. First there is the story of the *land*—how the Israelites obtained it by divine enabling, how they lost it through sin, and how they got it back because of Yahweh’s faithfulness and sovereignty. Second, the Historical Books address the question of adequate *leadership* to guide the Israelites in covenant obedience.

c. The Poetical Books: Worship and Wisdom in Israel

Whereas the Historical Books deal mostly with the direction of the nation as a whole, the Poetical Books are more focused on the individual. The Psalms provide insight into how individual Israelites strove to acknowledge God’s worth—whether in formal worship settings or in responding to the vicissitudes of life. The Wisdom Books explore further how a God-oriented person can navigate skillfully through many specific areas of life.

d. The Prophetic Books: Preaching and Predictions for Israel

The prophets were preachers whose basic text was Deuteronomy 28—the covenant curses and blessings. God sent them to call His people back to covenant loyalty, especially by detailing the coming consequences of their choices. They warned of impending judgment, particularly in terms of national captivity. But they also anticipated God’s restoration of His people, in various stages: the return from exile, the arrival of the Messiah to remove the sin responsible for the judgment, and the establishment of the Messiah’s glorious kingdom.

B. The Old Testament is Different!

Beyond the sheer size of the Old Testament, we struggle with the fact that it is a collection of ancient documents originally written for people vastly different from us.

1. Literary Differences

Modern Westerners are often unfamiliar with the characteristics of ancient Near Eastern literature. We find biblical genealogies to be boring and impractical. The Psalms and the Prophetic Books may appear to be unnecessarily repetitive if we do not appreciate the use of synonymous parallelism and cyclical development. The point of many of the figures of speech used escapes us. For a humorous example, see Song of Solomon 7:4.

2. Historical Differences

Here again the ancient Near East is outside our general knowledge base. Yet the Old Testament is full of references to people like Shishak and Tiglath-pileser, nations like the Hittites and the Girgashites, and places like Beersheba and Lachish.

3. Cultural Differences

The Old Testament also assumes knowledge of ancient cultural elements such as family inheritance customs and sacrificial ritual, including the strange worship practices of Baalism. Some of the cultural issues present theological dilemmas for the Christian. Why did Abraham use Hagar as a surrogate wife? Why did God tolerate polygamy and slavery? Why did He command the Israelites to exterminate the Canaanites?

4. Dispensational Differences

In spite of their disagreements, all theologians acknowledge that there have been some major changes in God's program since the days of the Old Testament. For example, no one argues for the offering of animal sacrifices today because the Book of Hebrews so clearly teaches these have been abrogated. Many other elements would fall in the same category—the kosher laws, the laws of leprosy, Israel's yearly festival calendar, the building instructions for the tabernacle, etc.

C. The Old Testament is Inferior!

The dispensational differences are so great that the New Testament actually teaches that God's arrangement with Israel was significantly inferior to what we experience today. Consider three key passages.

1. John 1:17

For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

Though this verse does not imply that there was no grace under Moses or that there is no law under Christ, it does point out the general emphasis of each Testament. Who would not naturally want to read more about the climax of God's redeeming grace in Christ than about the demands of the Mosaic Covenant?

2. Hebrews 7–10

These chapters are ruthless in their negative statements about the Mosaic Covenant, particularly the sacrificial system. Chapter 8 includes these words:

But now He [Christ] has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. . . . When He said, 'A new covenant,' He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear (vv. 6-7, 13).

3. 2 Corinthians 3

Note the contrasts Paul makes in defending his New Covenant ministry.

Verses	Old Covenant	New Covenant
6-8	Death-dealing letter	Life-giving Spirit
9-10	Condemnation	Righteousness
11	Temporary	Permanent
12-13	Concealment	Clarity
14-17	Blindness	Vision

II. The Old Testament *Is* Relevant for the Christian.

Given the factors above, it is no wonder that from its inception the church has struggled to incorporate the Old Testament into its theology and practice. This question brought together the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, and it has proved a challenge ever since. In fact, Walter Kaiser writes that “it is no exaggeration to claim that this question outranks every other problem in biblical interpretation; it is *the* problem in Christian theology” (*Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament*, 9). Nevertheless, there are many compelling motivations to sort through the difficulties and give careful attention to the Old Testament.

A. The Old Testament Comprises Seventy-Seven Percent of the Christian Canon.

Orthodox Christians believe that the only documents authored by God are those found in the Bible, and over three-quarters of these documents were given in the first place to ancient Israel. If only out of respect for God’s Word, we should listen closely to the Old Testament.

B. The Old Testament Deals with Some Doctrines More Completely than the New Testament.

Christians also believe in progressive revelation—God gave His truth gradually, beginning with seed ideas that He clarified and expanded over time. Nevertheless, progressive revelation does not apply equally to all doctrines. The bulk of our knowledge of key subjects comes from the Old Testament. For example, how much would we know

about Creation without Genesis 1–2? Other heavily Old Testament doctrines include the attributes of God, sin, Satan, and even the millennium.

C. The Old Testament Provides Perspective on God’s Work Throughout History.

One can use various illustrations to show the importance of background and perspective. What would it be like to show up to a college class for the first time during the last month of school? How would one feel if he sat down in a theater during the final act of a play? “Without the New Testament, the Old is going nowhere, it is only a might-have-been, an unsubstantiated longing. And without the Old, the New lacks explanation. Its very words require Old Testament definition, and its central event, the cross, is inexplicable without the Old Testament’s teaching, in Leviticus and elsewhere, about its sacrifices” (J. A. Motyer, *The Story of the Old Testament*, 10).

D. The Old Testament Was Highly Valued by Jesus Christ and the Apostles.

Surely this is the most motivating truth of all. The fact is that the New Testament continues to view the Old Testament documents as divinely authoritative and applicable to God’s people in this age. Again we note three key passages.

1. Matthew 5:17-19

¹⁷Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus affirms that He did not come to abolish the law or the prophets—a summary of the entire Old Testament. He goes on to encourage people to do and to teach even the least of the Mosaic commandments.

2. 2 Peter 1:19-21

¹⁹So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. ²⁰But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, ²¹for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Peter describes Spirit-produced Old Testament prophecy—what we often consider the dark part of the Bible—as a light that shines in a dark place. We should pay attention to it with corresponding intensity.

3. 2 Timothy 3:14-17

¹⁴You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, ¹⁵and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

This is the foundational passage on the doctrine of inspiration and the profitability of Scripture. But what is often missed is that Paul is speaking here specifically of the Old Testament—the “sacred writings” Timothy had grown up learning as a Jewish boy (v. 15). Thus, it is the Old Testament that teaches, reproves, corrects, and trains us in righteousness in order to equip us thoroughly for every good work (vv. 16-17). Chapter 4 goes on to urge Timothy to preach this Old Testament “word.” Walter Kaiser appropriately calls this passage “the most definitive statement from the New Testament on how the Old Testament is to be used and what roles it must play in the life of believers” (*Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament*, 26).

III. Toward a Resolution

How can the Old Testament be both irrelevant and relevant? Three facts will help solve the problem.

A. The Old Covenant Affects the Text of the Old Testament to Varying Degrees.

The New Testament’s negative statements about the Old Testament are directed at the Mosaic Covenant, not the Old Testament documents themselves. In fact, there are some parts of the Old Testament whose teachings are basically untouched by the Mosaic Covenant because their events occurred prior to it (Genesis, Job). Actually, the Genesis provides the framework in which to understand the role of the Mosaic Covenant in God’s redemptive program for all nations. In other cases, an Old Testament book was given in the general context of the Mosaic Covenant, but the connection is slight. For instance, most of the truths in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes apply equally to Israelites and Gentiles. In fact, some books have a strong Gentile element (the prophets’ oracles against the nations, Daniel). Even books that seem very “Jewish” may not be focusing on a *temporary* aspect of the Old Covenant but on broader theological truths (Ruth, Esther, many of the Psalms).

B. The Essence of the New Covenant is the Internalization of the Moral and Spiritual Principles of the Old Covenant.

What is passé about the Old Covenant is the arrangement with Israel as a theocratic nation that was designed to demonstrate man’s sinfulness and lead man to faith in the provision made by Christ (Galatians 3:21–4:7). Nevertheless, the New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31-34 involves the writing of God’s law on people’s hearts. Given Jeremiah’s background, this law must in some sense be continuous with the Mosaic law. Hebrews 8 teaches that it is in fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy that we are saved today. Verses 7-8 indicate that the problem was not with the commandments themselves but with the law’s failure to enable people to obey. Though many of Mosaic laws are culturally bound and focused on national Israel, they are all based on moral and spiritual principles that transcend the ages. The New Covenant not only upholds these principles but gives the internal ability to follow them (see, for example, Romans 13:8-10).

C. The Old Testament continues to serve as a witness to the unchanging character of God.

The principles remain relevant because they reflect God’s way of thinking about life, His values. The New Testament contains multiple examples of reasoning from a specific Old Testament revelation back to a theo-centric principle and then forward to a New Testament application. These examples include every major Old Testament genre: law (1 Corinthians 9, based on Deuteronomy 25:4), narrative (1 Corinthians 10:1-13, based on the wilderness wanderings), poetry (Romans 15:1-4, based on Psalm 69:9), and prophecy (1 Peter 1:10-16, based on Messianic predictions). The chart below visualizes the kind of procedure underlying such passages. Such an approach provides an exciting way for the believer to profit from the Old Testament’s riches and will be illustrated in the ensuing lessons.

