

The Role of the Old Testament for Us in the New Testament

Romans 15:4

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It's been 23 years since I was an associate pastor. I love being a senior pastor, but I also loved being an associate pastor. One of the benefits of senior pastoring is you get to preach each Sunday. One of the benefits of being an associate pastor is you get to hear preaching most Sundays. I do miss that. Now all I have is the sound of my own voice. Frankly, I don't know how you put up with it.

For five years at College Park Church in Indianapolis I sat under the preaching ministry of Kimber Kauffman. It was my first real exposure to expository preaching. Kimber was a very good preacher, and he was exceptionally good in the Old Testament. Most of the five years I was there, Kimber preached from Joshua through 2 Kings. College Park grew up into a large church via Old Testament narrative preaching. The pattern was predictable: Kimber would preach a chapter or so of the story, then he would stop, and nearly every Sunday, put on the screen the verse in Romans we are studying today. Week after week after week. This verse was his transition from exposition to application.

I was astounded at how helpful, insightful, and practical the Old Testament is. Today, we are tackling this one verse that I saw every week, which summarizes the role of the Old Testament in the life of the New Testament believer.

Have you ever asked yourself, why is there an Old Testament and a New Testament? "Testament" is a legal term, like someone's last will and testament. We could properly call them Old Covenant and New Covenant. The Old Testament is 75% of the Bible; three quarters of God's special revelation to mankind. What's it there for? After today, you're going to know. Here's our verse:

"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

As we have seen, this whole section is dealing with Christian liberty issues, which Paul says, really are issues of love. In 15:1-3 Paul puts forward Jesus' example of placing our needs ahead of his own. As a proof text, he quotes from Psalm 69 that our reproaches to God fell on Jesus. Where? His cross as he bore our guilt.

Then you have this verse. It doesn't really fit liberty issues or what follows. *Hey, Paul, why the explanation of the role of the Old Testament? You're sort of breaking the train of thought aren't you?* This verse is a parenthesis. Paul quotes the Old Testament extensively in Romans, some 80+ times.¹ Yet this is the one he chooses to freelance on a bit and explain the role of the Old Testament.

¹ United Church of God, "Paul Regularly Used the Old Testament as the Authority for His Teaching," *Beyond Today*, February 2, 2011, <https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/booklets/the-new-covenant-does-it-abolish-gods-law/paul-regularly-used-the-old-testament-as-the-authority-for-his-teaching>.

"For whatever was written in former days was written." Obviously, he isn't saying anything that was written by anybody anywhere. He isn't extolling Homer or Aristotle. He has just quoted Psalm 69. *"Whatever was written"* is referring to Psalm 69, all the other Psalms, and all the other Old Testament Scriptures.

"For whatever was written in former days was written." Let's just pause and give thanks that these things were written down! By whom? In one sense by the Old Testament writers, but in another sense by God himself. God is the author of the Old Testament. Did he use human authors? Yes! How? This is the precious doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible and how it happened is described in 1 Peter:

"Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20–21).

When Paul wrote Romans, Paul wrote Romans. But God was so directing Paul as he wrote Romans that what he wrote was what he wanted to write AND exactly what God wanted him to write. The result is that all Scripture bears a divine source and stamp.

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

What is often lost on us is that the Bible of the first-century Christians was the Old Testament. Further, few, if any, had their own copy of the Old Testament. These were scrolls in the synagogues which measured up to 30 feet long. Normal people didn't have them. There were some letters from Paul and other apostles circulating in the first century but the complete 27 books of the New Testament, known as the canon of the New Testament, wasn't settled until the late fourth century. Jesus never read the New Testament. Peter and Paul never read the whole New Testament. No first-century Christian did. But they did read and treasure the Old Testament.

Paul's tangent in 15:4 is a brief tribute to the value of the Old Testament. He says all of the Old Testament Scripture holds three incredible blessings for us: It is instructive, encouraging, and hope-giving.

Instruction

"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction" (Romans 15:4). A primary purpose of the Old Testament is for us to understand and learn. You say, *learn what?* We discover what it means to be human. We were created by God. Who are we? Image bearers of God. Our purpose is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Our future is eternity either with God or under his judgment. All this is found in the Old Testament.

But we could add so much more: like God's purpose for gender, marriage, family, government, law, morality, worship, ethics, and many others. We also mustn't forget that the Old Testament itself is literature, and in it we discover a variety of literary genres, all of it a tribute to art, beauty, and human creativity. When we read the Old Testament, we sing the Psalms with David, and sit in prison with Joseph, and lament in sackcloth and ashes with Jeremiah, and delight in marital intimacy with Solomon, and glean from the sage wisdom of Proverbs, and stand in awe with Moses on Mt. Sinai. All of it instructive, insightful, and critical to a Christian worldview. But here are a few essential themes of instruction.

God

Is there any more foundational truth than God? How does the Old Testament start? "*In the beginning, God...*" (Genesis 1:1) The Old Testament is about God. The self-existent one. Self-named *Yahweh*. The great and eternal I Am. The self-revealing God who walks in the garden with Adam and Eve, appears to Moses in the burning bush, acts on behalf of his people in the exodus.

What do we learn about God? He exists. He is there. He transcends creation as Creator, blunting the claims of pantheists like Hinduism and Buddhism. He speaks. He spoke the universe into existence and whispered to Elijah in the breeze. He writes things down—laws on stone tablets and judgment on the wall of a Babylonian emperor. God is holy, he judges sin and did so dramatically in the Fall. God is a saving God and did so with an ark. He loves his people, describing his love as *hesed*, steadfast, covenantal love. He has benevolent love for all humanity and sent Jonah to Nineveh. On and on we could go.

When we read the Old Testament, we meet the central figure for everything and everyone. Yahweh. God himself. By this we discover our primary purpose: to love God and enjoy him forever.

Salvation history

The Old Testament is rich with much more than simply dates and times, but redemptive history. It's a story told for a purpose, and the thread of redemption runs through it like a melody in a symphony. If all we had was the New Testament, we would wonder what all the hubbub was about when Jesus was born. Why did he have to come? Who is God and how does he have a son? Death for sin? Blood for redemption? Holiness? Wrath? Righteousness? These are all deep truths of the Old Testament which is the prequel that the New Testament fulfills and enhances.

"The Old Testament may be likened to a chamber richly furnished but dimly lighted; the introduction of light brings into it nothing which was not in it before; but it brings out into clearer view much of what is in it but was only dimly or even not at all perceived before. The mystery of the Trinity is not revealed in the Old Testament; but the mystery of the Trinity underlies the Old Testament revelation, and here and there almost comes into view. Thus, the Old Testament revelation of God is not corrected by the fuller revelation that follows it, but only perfected, extended and enlarged." (B.B. Warfield)²

Let me address one common misconception about God in the Old Testament and God in the New Testament. Some people say, *I prefer the God of the New Testament because he's a God of love. The God of the Old Testament was so wrathful and judgmental! I like the New Testament God!* Really? Have you read what God does in Revelation? In the Old Testament, God exterminates a few people groups. In Revelation he judges billions to hell forever.

He is the same God in both testaments. What changes is not God but the basis for our relationship with him. Remember, Jesus said in the upper room, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this...in remembrance of me.*" (1 Corinthians 11:25) The New Testament or New Covenant changes the basis for our relationship from the Levitical to the Christological. From the blood of bulls to the blood of Jesus.

² Benjamin B. Warfield as quoted by Justin Taylor, "B.B. Warfield's Analogy for the Trinity in the Old Testament," www.gospelcoalition.org, April 17, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/b-b-warfields-analogy-for-the-trinity-in-the-old-testament/>.

There was a second-century teacher named Marcion who basically said, I don't like the God of the Old Testament, so let's carve the Old Testament out of the Bible. He was condemned as a heretic, but we also practice subtle heresy if all we do is preach the New Testament, read the New Testament, carry around our pocket New Testaments, and ignore God's Old Testament. Poor Marcion was missing out on precious truth.

Major Old Testament themes

Law	Our God is Righteous!
The exodus	Our God sets us free!
Monarchy	Our God rules and reigns!
Promised Land	Our God gives us a home!
Covenant	Our God makes promises!
Prophecy	Our God knows and foretells the future!
Messiah	Our God provides a Savior!

These and others tell us who God is, what he is like, who we are, what God expects, and why we so desperately need a Savior.

In fact, a significant theme of the Old Testament is longing. There hangs over the Old Testament a cloud of expectation and unfulfilled yearning. Something or someone is missing. Hebrews describes all the Old Testament saints as looking forward to something but only seeing it from a distance. Like Moses, all the Old Testament saints spiritually die on the other side of the Jordan, never fully entering the Promised Land of realized Messianic fulfillment. They hope. They long. They look. This longing is summarized well in the Christmas hymn, *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*:

*"Come, Thou long expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart."³*

Encouragement

"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures..." (Romans 15:4, emphasis added)

Here is where the value of the Old Testament shines so spectacularly. The Old Testament is so encouraging! Is all of it? All of it can be. You may say, *what about those long genealogies or some dry section of Ezekiel? Those aren't that helpful.* Admittedly, not every passage is as pastoral or devotional or immediately applicable as other sections. But all of it is encouraging in some way. How?

³ Charles Wesley, "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus," 1744.

Truth for life

The entire Old Testament is the divine revelation of God, his character, his purpose, and his glory. As such, it provides truth by which I can live my life. David celebrates this in his amazing tribute to the Scriptures in Psalm 119. One verse says, "*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*" (Psalm 119:105). It provides direction in practical things, explanation in difficult things, and comfort in devastating things. The Old Testament is truth for every stage of life.

Examples to warn/inspire

It is also encouraging as it provides living, breathing examples of people like us succeeding and failing, sinning and repenting, struggling and overcoming. Teaching is great but don't we often learn more from living, breathing examples? The Old Testament is filled with them.

Don't hate your brother, like Cain. Build a preposterous ark if God tells you to. Listen to God and do what he says, even if your name isn't Abraham. God judges sexual immorality—look at Sodom if you can find it. Even when things are dire, God sends heroes—see Judges—but don't look too carefully, because all heroes have flaws. David is an example of the destruction of lust and the power of confession and forgiveness. Elijah won at Mt. Carmel and then ran like a schoolgirl from Jezebel—just like us. Esther was courageous and God used her wonderfully. Dare to be a Daniel. I could go on and on. All of them were so flawed yet so wonderfully used by God. The Old Testament is encouraging. It instructs. It encourages. And it gives us...

Hope

"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

Do see the equation here? **Instruction + Encouragement = Hope**

Hope for what, exactly? Hope is about the future. Not the past. Not the present. The future. The hope of the Old Testament centers on a person. The already mentioned Messiah. In fact, the connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament is Jesus. How does Matthew begin his gospel? Does he just start with Mary and Joseph? No. He starts with a genealogy from the Old Testament. Why? He is connecting what God does in the New Testament with what God does in the Old. The "*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham*" (Matthew 1:1).

Indeed, the Old Testament sets the stage for the glory of the incarnation of Jesus. In many ways, you cannot understand the Old Testament properly without Jesus. As Augustine said, "*In the Old Testament the New is concealed; in the New, the Old is revealed.*"⁴ This is what Jesus points out to the disciples after his resurrection on the road to Emmaus,

"And he said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:25-27).

⁴ Augustine as quoted by Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 100.

What might Jesus have said to the disciples as he exegeted himself out of the Old Testament? Maybe something like this:⁵

Genesis – Ram at Abraham’s altar
Exodus – Passover Lamb
Leviticus – Faithful High Priest
Deuteronomy – City of our refuge
Joshua - Scarlet thread in Rahab’s window
Judges - Our Judge
Ruth - Kinsman Redeemer
1 & 2 Samuel - Our trusted prophet
1 & 2 Kings & 1 & 2 Chronicles - Reigning King
Ezra - Faithful scribe
Nehemiah - Rebuilder of everything that’s broken
Esther - Mordecai sitting faithful at the gate
Job - Redeemer that ever lives
Psalms - My shepherd
Proverbs & Ecclesiastes - Wisdom
Song of Solomon - Beautiful bridegroom
Isaiah - Suffering servant
Jeremiah & Lamentations - Weeping prophet
Ezekiel - Wheel within a wheel
Daniel - Fourth man in the fiery furnace
Hosea - My lover forever faithful
Joel - Baptizes us with the Holy Spirit
Amos - Our burden bearer
Obadiah - Our Savior
Jonah - Missionary to all the world
Micah - Messenger with beautiful feet
Nahum - The avenger
Habakkuk - Watchman praying for revival
Zephaniah - Lord mighty to save
Haggai - Restorer of our lost heritage
Zechariah - Our fountain
Malachi – Son of Righteousness

Hey disciples, can’t you see, the Old Testament, it’s all about me! When we hear the melody of the Messiah in the Old Testament, it instructs, it encourages, and it gives us hope.

Christians, read and relish the first three quarters of your Bible because if you like the Old, you’re going to love the New.

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⁵ I got this list somewhere more than 20 years ago. My best attempt at a source is a musical entitled, *God with Us*.