



Class 1 - Introduction to the Old Testament

Old Testament Seminar - Immanuel Church

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As we get started this morning, I'd like to give a bit of context as to why we are offering this class. On one level, it is driven by what I acknowledged as a personal deficiency - I found myself sitting in church or Bible studies, hearing the speaker refer to various passages, and wondering why certain books were even in the Bible. Why did God choose to include the book of Ezra? How should Leviticus shape my daily walk with Christ? What role do the books of the Old Testament have in the story of the Gospel? These are all questions we aim to address over the next few weeks as part of this study. In this manner, you all get to (should you choose to) come along for the ride as I study these things and work out the answers to these questions.

On another level, a group of us were talking about Core Seminars and the topics that should be covered. A number of ideas were thrown around, from individual book studies to more practical issues such as a biblical view of finances. The more we talked, the idea emerged that we would have a few foundational - big picture sorts of courses that would be offered on a regular basis and provide the backdrop for more focused courses. This course, and the Biblical Theology course Sherril is teaching are the fruit of that conversation. This course, and its companion in the Spring, are designed to provide a "big picture" view of all of Scripture - how does the Bible fit together? What is the thread that connects Genesis to Revelation? That is the aim of this course... to help us see that thread. In many ways, this course is based on the two courses that Sherril has been teaching - how to study your Bible last fall and now Biblical Theology. The premise behind Biblical Theology is that *all of Scripture points to Christ...* the Old Testament points forwards towards Christ and the New Testament books point backwards to Him. It is the study of properly interpreting all of Scripture in light of what Christ did. This course will do just that - my goal is to focus on the *redemptive-historical* view of Scripture - meaning - we are going to take a Biblical Theology view of the Bible. If you haven't yet, I'd encourage you to take Sherril's courses at some point... they will help you in your Bible study and walk with Christ.

Now, let's talk about where we are going. Over the next 14 weeks we are going to cover the 39 books of the Old Testament. You don't have to be too good at math to figure out that we

are going to have to cover multiple books some weeks. We are going to have to move quickly. The material we are using for our study was originally developed by Capitol Hill Baptist Church and they designed it to be covered in 26 weeks. We are going to be taking two of their lessons each week. One ramification of this is that I will spend more time referring to my notes than I normally would - there is so much material to cover and I don't want to miss critical things due to chasing rabbits (I'm quite good at that) - so I apologize for this failure in presentation style - I hope the content and presentation will still be engaging. Another outcome of trying to cover so much material is that we aim to start right at 9:15. Please feel free to walk in at any point during the hour, but we won't be able to wait until 9:20 or 9:25 to get started and still get through all of the material.

Resources: Each week I will be posting the handouts online as well as some additional materials. I am going to try to post my notes and slides as well. My goal is that this material will be an on-going resource to you and be used to help you grow in your walk with Christ. Further, I'm not sure how cramming two weeks into one is going to go, so the resources page is also a backstop in case we don't get finished each week... the manuscript should be there for you to review should you choose. There are also a number of books I'm using in my study and I will post links to those in case any of you are interested in picking up any of them. All of these materials will be available at iknox.org/ot

Attendance: I would, of course, love it if every one of you were here every week. I am also keenly aware that many of us will have family events, sickness, and other things that prevent us from being here at church every single week. Each week of this course will stand on its own, so you should feel free to come one week even if you missed the prior. Since we are aiming to provide a survey, the whole should be greater than the sum of its parts - but I don't want anyone to drop out because they can't make it every week and are concerned they will be lost. The online resources can also be a help in this case.

With that background, let's dive in to our study.

Why study the Old Testament

Let's start with the most basic of questions... Why should we study the Old Testament? Is it merely to have literary context for the New Testament? Let me lay out two purposes for studying the Old Testament.

1. First, the Old Testament *reveals the character of God in a way that the New Testament does*

not. In the New Testament, we have the benefit of great clarity, and the benefit of considering God this side of Christ. But whereas the New Testament was written in a generation, the Old Testament spans thousands of years. Further, we see God's character manifest through history in the Old Testament, there is a certain depth and richness that we take away. The difference is between a crystal-clear snapshot (as seen in the New Testament) and a slightly grainy, but hour-long movie on the other. It's one thing to read about God's patience in 2 Peter, for example ("The Lord is not slow in keeping his promises... but is patient with you.") (3:9). It is quite another to see God's patience with his rebellious people in the desert of Sinai. And again in the promised Land, through the judges, and the monarchy, through exile, and even beyond. *Same* God. *Same* promises. *Same* rebellion. *Same* patience. The Old Testament offers a different lens with which to view the character of God. There is a depth and richness that we just can't experience in the New Testament.

2. Second: the Old Testament tells us about Jesus, and it does it in three ways:

1. It is the context for the events of the New Testament, both historically and thematically. From Abraham's sacrifice on, for example, God spent 2,000 years getting us ready for the idea of a substitute sacrifice on our behalf. That's how we understand what Jesus did on the Cross
2. The Old Testament is the source of, by one count, 295 references and 600 allusions in the New Testament that help us understand who Jesus is. The New Testament writers clearly expect a working knowledge of the Old Testament.¹
3. And, more than just an aid for knowing the New Testament better, Jesus Himself says that the Old Testament teaches about him (Luke 24:44). This was the Jesus who made the astonishing claim that he came to *fulfill* the law and the prophets (5:17). The Bible, in its entirety, is a book about Jesus.

If I could summarize the entire Old Testament in a simple phrase, it would be "promises made." We learn of our *need* for God's promises - we are sinners, unable to save ourselves and condemned to hell by a just God. But we also learn of our promise-making God, who in his mercy promises us what we could never achieve ourselves. Similarly, as we'll see next Spring, the message of the New Testament is "promises kept." Particularly in Jesus Christ.

So, what does "promises made" look like? Before we look at the first part of Genesis, I'm going to run through the Old Testament from beginning to end. Not once, but three different times. The

¹These statistics come from Roger Nicole, "The New Testaments Use of the Old Testament," in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 135-51, reprinted in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Text?*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 13-14.

first time will be just to set your bearings - introducing you to each book of the Old Testament. Then we'll step back and run through again, this time looking at our need for God's promises, the story of his holiness and our sin. Finally, we'll look at the story of his promise, which ultimately carries us into the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Historical Overview

The Bible begins, on page 1, in Genesis 1:1, with God's creation of the universe - from *nothing* and the crown of his creation, mankind, made in his image, to reflect his character. This is chapters 1 and 2 of the Bible. Then, in chapter 3, God's first humans disobey him and the whole cosmos falls into ruin as a consequence.

The narrative continues with things going from bad to worse. In Genesis 12, God begins his plan of redemption, calling Abraham to be the first of his new people. God leads him - and ultimately his family - to his place, the promised land of Canaan. After a series of providential twists, these people end up as slaves in Egypt, yet they also quickly reproduce and become a great nation.

Moses then brings the nation out of Egypt. God gives Israel the law, marking them off as his special people. He gives them the land he has promised where this special people is to live and display God's character to the nations. But, instead of displaying God's character, moral and political confusion follows during the rule of leaders called judges.

After some centuries, the people ask for and receive a king in the person of Saul, and then David follows Saul. David's reign best represents the archetype of a kingdom in which God's chosen man and God's Word rule over his people in his chosen place. The kingdom arguably reaches its peak in the type of prosperity and the building of the temple by David's son, Solomon. But David is sinful and his descendants are worse; clearly this is not the fullness of God's plan. The kingdom divides into two. Both parts of the now-divided nation fall into idolatry, until God finally destroys the northern half through the Assyrian empire. A little over a century later, he exiles the southern half to Babylon. Several generations pass in exile, and then the people return and rebuild the temple and Jerusalem's wall. And there the Old Testament history ends, with the people reduced to a position of utter desperation and dependence on God.

This is the narrative taken up by the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament. You can divide them out by putting the first seventeen books in one category, the narrative from Creation to the return of the exiles from Babylon. The next section of Scripture are called the Writings: Job to Song of Songs. And the last seventeen books are the Prophets: Isaiah to Malachi. I'll take

each in turn.

Narrative Books

- *Genesis* describes how the world and the first humans were made - the perfection of that unspoiled creation, how sin entered the world, and how God initiated his plan of salvation through Abraham. But despite God's instructions to Abraham to live in the promised land, Genesis closes with this people in Egypt.
- *Exodus* finds Abraham's descendants as slaves in Egypt and constitutes God's grand entry onto the stage of world history as he routes the most powerful nation on earth to bring his people back to their land as his own.
- *Leviticus* presents a digest of God's laws given to his people in the wilderness. Holiness is the theme of Leviticus.
- *Numbers* mostly tells the story of the people journeying toward the Promised Land, their rebellion, and God's persevering faithfulness.
- *Deuteronomy* presents the second giving of the law (deutero=second, nomos=law).
- *Joshua* describes the conquest of the Promised Land some 400 years after God's people left.
- *Judges* is the depressing account of life in the Promised Land: the people continually revert to lawlessness, and the times were summed up by the phrase, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." (Judges 21:25)
- *Ruth* is a story set during the days of the judges, preparing the way for King David.
- *1 and 2 Samuel* are about the last judge, Samuel; a "false-start" king named Saul; and the first real king, David.
- *1 and 2 Kings* follow David's royal descendants as they lead the people into idolatry, and eventually into annihilation for the Northern ten tribes and exile for the Southern two.
- *1 and 2 Chronicles* tell that same story. But, instead of explaining why the exile happened - the message of Kings - they point ahead to God's final salvation.

The last three books of history are about the exile and the return from exile:

- *Ezra* describes the return of the Jews from their captivity and the rebuilding of the temple.
- *Nehemiah* continues the story by describing the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, a partial fulfillment of God's promises of restoration to his people.
- *Esther* is the last book of history: a story of God's providential deliverance of the Jewish community during the exile.

The Writings

The middle books of the Old Testament are largely collections of wisdom literature, devotional poems, and ceremonial literature from the temple.

- *Job* is a story about a righteous man who is tried by God
- *Psalms* are poetic prayers of praise, confession, and lament to God.
- *Proverbs* presents the wisdom of Solomon and others concerning practical life issues.
- *Ecclesiastes*, again probably by Solomon, recounts one man's search for the path to happiness and meaning in this world.
- *Song of Songs* is the collection of love songs between a bridegroom and his bride.

The Prophets

The final collection of books in the Old Testament is the Prophets. These seventeen books present God's commentary on Israel's history, particularly Israel's disobedience.

- *Isaiah* was a prophet in the Southern kingdom, called "Judah". The first thirty-nine chapters are prophecies leading up to the captivity. The last chapters point to a future restoration and redemption.
- *Jeremiah* prophesied in Jerusalem during the years the city was besieged. He continued to prophesy for seven years after the city fell in 586 B.C.
- *Lamentations* is Jeremiah's lament over the destruction of Jerusalem
- *Ezekiel* prophesied in Babylon during this time about the coming fall of Jerusalem and God's ultimate restoration of his people
- *Daniel*, part prophecy and part history, chronicles how God showed himself to be the ruler of the world even as his people were in captivity in Babylon.
- *Hosea* prophesied to the northern kingdom (called Israel) at the same time as Isaiah. God used Hosea's adulterous wife as a living example of Israel's unfaithfulness.
- *Joel* preached about the coming judgment of God on the southern kingdom - and God's blessing that would follow their repentance. That's really the outline for most of these prophets.
- *Amos*, another contemporary of Isaiah, predicted the judgment and restoration of the northern kingdom.
- *Obadiah* uttered his very short prophesy of judgment against one of Judah's neighbors, Edom.

- *Jonah*, when called to prophesy to the Assyrian city of Nineveh, fled and was swallowed by a great fish. In the belly of the fish he prayed, repented, was delivered, and obeyed.
- *Micah* prophesied at the same time as Isaiah and Hosea. He spoke to both Israel and Judah.
- *Nahum*, who live a century after Jonah, proclaimed the coming judgment of God on Nineveh - and a future deliverance for Judah.
- *Habakkuk* asked God why bad things happen to good people, and good things to bad people. God's response is a call to faith and trust in his promise of restoration.
- *Zephaniah* promised that judgment would come on Judah as he called them to repent.

The last three prophets prophesied after the exile, as Jerusalem was being rebuilt.

- *Haggai* prodded the people to get on with rebuilding the temple.
- *Zechariah* prophesied two months after Haggai and presented a series of wild dreams that attacked the religious lethargy of the people and foresaw the messianic age.
- *Malachi* also attacked religious apathy and promised a coming Messiah. He was the last Old Testament prophet.

Well, that's the Old Testament from end to end. But what does that grand sweep of history teach us? The first theme that we see is God's passion for holiness, and our passion for sin.

The Story of Sin and Holiness

The Old Testament teaches that all people are sinners² and the story line as a whole quickly leads to the conclusion that people are not able to deal with sin themselves. Adam and Eve sin so God wipes the slate clean and starts over with Noah. But he and his descendants sin. God picks one family to bless - but they sin too. And God's miraculous rescue of Israel from Egypt is followed only by grumbling and rebellion. Arrival in the promised land finds things getting only worse; the book of Judges suggests that the problem is that they have no king. But, even a king as good as David sins and subsequent kings *lead* the charge to idolatry. God warns his people and then disciplines them through exile. But when they return from that crucible of chastisement, they go back to their wicked ways. What is needed, we find, is not a second chance, *but a new heart*. We are sinful, and no solution for that problem is achieved in the Old Testament. God must do something new.

That's a huge problem, because God's purpose for his people was for them to live lives together that proclaimed the perfection of his holy character to the nations around them. As Ezekiel puts

²1 Kings 8:46, Psalm 14:3, Proverbs 20:9, Eccles. 7:20

it, the people intended to *proclaim* God's name instead *profaned* it. What is to be done?

This is where references to atonement are significant. A number of images are used to describe atonement in the Old Testament, but the most prominent is sacrifice. Sinners could seek to restore their relationship with God through sacrifice. Able's sacrifice is the first described explicitly in Scripture. And then Noah's shows that sacrifice pleases God. Abraham's sacrifice of a ram instead of Isaac introduced the idea of a sacrifice of a substitute - and at the first Passover, a substitute by which God's wrath was turned aside. And the sacrificial laws in Leviticus introduced the idea not just of a substitute, but of a penal substitute - a substitute who bore the punishment we deserved. A penal substitute who made atonement, as on the Day of Atonement, where punishment was not merely served, but relationship with God was restored.

Do you see how the Old Testament gradually builds up this idea of sacrifice? Do you see what God was teaching his people? First, he was teaching about his holiness and his passion for holiness. Second, he was teaching that sin is serious - deathly serious - because it's such an aberration from his holiness. And third, he was teaching that atonement could be accomplished when an innocent one dies in place of the guilty. In and of themselves, Levitical sacrifices were never the point. Ironically, sacrifices were most appropriate when the person offering the sacrifice realized that the offering was *not* sufficient to atone for sins. So you have the psalmist saying, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned." (Ps. 51:4). *Sacrifices were not efficacious except by God's grace.*

The ineffective nature of sacrifices can be seen most clearly through the Jewish Day of Atonement. That's a day on which a special sin offering was made for the whole nation. What's striking is that this ritual had to be repeated annually. Calendar-driven, not event-driven. Why? Because the people were in a *state* of sin, and no animal sacrifice could ultimately remove their guilt. There was no perfect sacrifice. If there had been, the people could have stopped offering them (Heb 10:1-3). Instead, these imperfect sacrifices emphasized the fact that God is holy, that sin separates us from God, and that he provides a way of forgiveness. So the Old Testament explores so many different potential solutions to the problem of sin, but ultimately comes up empty-handed. That's one reason why it is bookended with God's curse. Think of Genesis 3: because of sin, God curses the serpent, the man, and the woman. And does anyone know the last word of the Old Testament? Turn to the last page of Malachi. Referring to the second Elijah, who would be John the Baptist: "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse" (4:6). "Curse" at the beginning. Still under the curse at the end. In the same place where we began in Genesis 3.

This brings up a question I would call the "riddle of the Old Testament." In Exodus 34, the

Lord describes himself to Moses saying “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished” (Ex 34:6-7a). Forgiving... yet not leaving the guilty unpunished? How can that be? Perhaps there is still hope?

The Story of the Promise

There is hope, and it is in another story we see in the Old Testament: the story of promise. Yes, the Old Testament ends where we started in Genesis 3. But it also gives us a promise of hope.

How will God forgive, and yet not leave the guilty unpunished? It all comes down to his promise. And the story of promise begins in the most unlikely of places. It begins in the words of God’s curse after the fall. Adam and Eve had chosen to disobey God, and so he brought upon them the just punishment for their sin. But, in the very sentence of condemnation, God makes a promise: “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” (Gen 3:15). God promises to create division and opposition between his people, the seed of the woman, and Satan’s people, the seed of the serpent. And he promises that one day, a son will be born who will defeat Satan and deliver his people from their sin. The promise comes out of the blue. Adam and Even have done nothing to merit it, yet he makes it.

Notice the promise has two sides: the seed of the serpent will strike at the seed of the woman; yet the seed of the woman will triumph. The story of the Old Testament is the story of that promise being placed in jeopardy again and again - but against impossible odds, God ensures that his promise prevails.

Cain murders Abel - the line of the woman - but God preserves that line through Seth.

Humanity is captured by sin and deserving of God’s judgment, but God’s promise endures and he preserves Noah and his family. Then, to ensure his promise of deliverance is kept, God makes another promise - never again to destroy all humanity by flood.

Centuries pass; people go from bad to worse. But with Abraham, God picks up that eternal promise and begins to flesh it out. “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... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:2-3).

A generation later, rivalry between Isaac's two sons almost destroys Jacob. But Jacob is the chosen seed and the Lord preserves him. But, once again, God's promise is challenged by a famine that threatens to destroy the whole family. How can God's promise prevail if this family of the promise perishes? Amazingly, God uses Joseph's enslavement, imprisonment, and suffering to save his family. He takes what his brothers meant for evil and turns it into salvation and deliverance not just for the chosen family but of the surrounding nations as well.

Again, the seed of the serpent rears its head as the descendants of Jacob are enslaved in Egypt, and a whole generation of boys is slaughtered at Pharaoh's command. Again, God is faithful and remembers his covenant with Abraham. He preserves the life of Moses, and then uses him to deliver his people from their slavery.

At Mount Sinai, God makes a covenant with Israel, in much the same way he did with Adam and Eve before the fall. If the people obey, they will stay in the Promised Land. But if they rebel, God will cast them out. Of course, their rebellion begins almost immediately. God judges his people, but he remains faithful to his promise and to Abraham and to Adam.

A new generation, led by Joshua, is raised up, and God gives them the land he had promised their forefathers. Against all odds, they conquer the Canaanites. Though the people continue to rebel, and God continues to punish them, he also raises up judges. These are successors to Moses and Joshua who rescue the people and defeat their enemies.

Finally, in an ultimate act of rebellion, the nation of Israel rejects God as their King and asks for a king like all the other nations (I Samuel 8). In mercy, God anoints a king after his own heart, David, who will be like a son to him. But the serpent event tries to chase down and destroy David from within Israel itself - first through Saul and later through David's son Absalom.

Yet God, who is gracious and faithful, makes yet another promise to David. This is a promise that's really just an extension of his promise to Abraham and that gives further shape to the promise of Genesis 3. God promises David that he will always have a son to rule on his throne, and that son will rule in righteousness (2 Sam. 7:11-16). The promised seed of Genesis 3 and 15 is in fact to be a king who will deliver his people.

At first it appears that son is Solomon. But it's not. Solomon proves unfaithful and judgment follows. Division comes first. The kings in the north are progressively more wicked, until God sends the northern kingdom into an exile from which they will never return. In the south, there are periodic renewals, but the renewals are never complete and they never last. Finally, God sends Judah into exile, and it seems that his promise has failed.

But even in the context of judgment and exile, God reveals that he has not forgotten and he has not failed. The prophets are given a message of hope, that God will make a new covenant with his people (Jer. 31:31-34). After seventy years in exile, Judah returns to the Promised Land. The walls are restored and the temple is rebuilt - but God never comes back to dwell in that temple. The new covenant has not yet arrived. When will God finally keep his promise?

Well, this is the expectation we are living in when, after four hundred years of silence, God speaks and the New Testament begins.

Conclusion

So, can you start to see how these pieces all fit together? On the one hand, the Old Testament is a story that moves sideways... never progressing. Solution after solution to our sin is suggested and tried, only to result in failure. So much so that by the end of Malachi, we are no better off than we were in Genesis 3, except that we know for a fact we cannot save ourselves. But, on another level, the Old Testament *is* a story of forward motion because it's the story of promise. God gradually reveals more and more of his perfect plan to redeem a people for himself. And as that promise takes shape, hope is born out of the despair of sin and the stage is set for Jesus Christ. He would live as the perfect Israel and die as our substitute, the perfect Passover lamb. Through his death on our behalf and his resurrection from the dead, he would reconcile us to God. As Paul puts it in Romans 3, "[demonstrating God's Justice] at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:25-26). Just and the one who justifies sinners? Forgiving and the one who does not leave the guilty unpunished? The promises God made through all those centuries find their answer in Jesus - the answer to the riddle of the Old Testament. That is the message of the Hebrew Scriptures.

This material is adapted from a course with the same name developed by Capitol Hill Baptist Church. It has been modified for our purposes and has been condensed to fit our time schedule. The original version is available on their website at <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/resources/core-seminars/series/old-testament-overview/>