

INTRODUCTION

to the **BIBLE**



FREEDOM
CHURCH

INTRODUCTION to the BIBLE

Reading and Understanding God's Written Word

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Chapter 1: What Is the Bible?

Our view of what the Bible is greatly impacts the role we allow it to play in our lives. Throughout history, followers of Jesus Christ have considered the Bible to be much more than a collection of human writings; they have recognized the Bible as the written Word of God. What exactly is the Bible and why have followers of Jesus Christ held this view?

The Bible at a Glance

The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books written in three languages over many centuries. Thirty-nine of these books constitute what we call the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible), and the other twenty-seven books comprise the New Testament. Roman Catholics and those in the Greek Orthodox church consider an additional collection of books, known as the Apocrypha, to be canonical (that is, among the authoritative texts included in the Bible) as well. Most of these books were authored after the writings of the Old Testament and before the writings of the New Testament. They were not generally accepted as Holy Scripture by either Jews or early Christians, and for this reason Protestant Bibles do not include them.

With the exception of a few passages in Ezra, Jeremiah, and Daniel, which were written in Aramaic, the Old Testament documents were originally written in Hebrew, the language of the ancient Israelites. The New Testament documents, on the other hand, were written in Koine (pronounced "KOY-nay") Greek, the language of the marketplace in the Greco-Roman world of the first century. Many of the books of the Bible are formally anonymous, and for some books it is difficult to identify the date and place of composition with certainty.

The books of the Bible have traditionally been divided into several sections. The Jews, for example, divided the Hebrew Bible into three parts, likely referred to by Jesus in Luke 24:44:

Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.

Luke 24:44

1. *The Law of Moses*, also known as the Torah (meaning “law” or “teaching”) or Pentateuch (meaning “five books”), consists of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.
2. *The Prophets* include the historical works of Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, the “major” prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and the twelve smaller books bearing the names of prophets, collectively referred to as the “minor” prophets.
3. *The Writings* (sometimes called the Psalms, even though this category also contains additional writings) consist of the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 & 2 Chronicles.

Christians typically divide the contents of the Old Testament into slightly different categories.

1. *The Pentateuch*;
2. *The Historical Books* including Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Ruth;
3. *Poetry or Wisdom Literature*, containing Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs; and
4. *The Prophets* including the major and minor prophets, Lamentations, and Daniel.

The writings of the New Testament naturally fall into three categories: the four Gospels and Acts, the epistles (formal letters), and the book of Revelation.

The Bible As the Word of God

At one level, the Bible is obviously the work of human beings written in ordinary human languages and expressing many elements of the human

authors' cultural environments. Why should we then think of the Bible as something more than a collection of human writings expressing merely human observations and opinions? To answer this question, it is helpful to consider 1) the picture of God that emerges in the writings of the Bible; and 2) the sort of writing the Scripture presents itself as being.

The God presented in the Bible is a God who has chosen to make himself known to human beings. In an essay titled "Approaching the Bible," biblical scholar D.A. Carson outlines a small sampling of God's acts of revelation presented in the Bible.¹

- After creating the first humans, God blesses them, communicates certain responsibilities to them, and meets with them in the garden he created for them. (See Genesis 1-3.)
- God engages a man named Abram (later renamed Abraham), promises to bless him and his family, and makes a covenant (a formal, promised commitment) with him. (See Genesis 12 and 15.)
- God reveals himself to Moses through a burning bush (and later in the tent of meeting), to Egypt through a series of plagues, and to all Israel through terrifying smoke, thunder, and lightning on Mt. Sinai as he gives them the Law. (See Exodus 3-12, 19-20, 33-34.)
- Throughout the Old Testament history God reveals himself in providential events (for example, the story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50), in angelic visitations, in miracles, in messages through prophets, and in poetry and songs.
- God also promises to bring a more definitive revelation through a descendant of Israel's famous king, David, who will bear the names Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. (See Isaiah 9:1-7.)
- In addition to this variety of "special revelations" of God (as theologians often refer to them), he has more generally revealed himself to all men through the created world (see Romans 1:19-20 and Psalm 19:1-6), through the human conscience (see Romans 2:14-16), and through his providential care for humanity (see Acts 14:14-18).

The obvious conclusion of these observations is that God communicates with human beings; through varied means he makes himself known to us. If the God presented in the Bible is a "talking God," it is not a big leap to imagine that God would work with and through human beings to have his word committed to writing. In fact, as we examine the writings in the Bible, we find that, collectively, Scripture often presents itself as something more than a compilation of human documents.

- Some passages in the Bible are presented as direct speech from God. (See, for example, Exodus 20:1-17.)
- The prophets often claim that they are communicating God's words. Jeremiah, for example, regularly begins his messages with the words, "This is what the LORD Almighty says."
- Some passages show God instructing a man to write down God's words. (See Exodus 34:27.)

In addition, later authors often regard earlier writings as divinely inspired.

- David considered the Law of the LORD to be perfect. (See Psalm 19:7-11.)
- Jesus and the apostle Paul operated from the paradigm that what Scripture says, God says. See, for example, Matthew 19:5 (in which Jesus refers to a verse in Genesis as something God says) and Romans 9:17.
- Jesus claims that everything written in the Old Testament must be "fulfilled." This implies that the Old Testament is God's binding word. (See Luke 24:44-45.)
- Peter indicates that the Old Testament Scripture is inviolable because it is spoken by the Holy Spirit (see Acts 1:16), and that the prophetic material in Scripture is a result of men speaking from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (see 2 Peter 1:21).
- Paul summarizes the contemporary Jewish view of the Scriptures in 2 Timothy 3:16:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...

2 Timothy 3:16

As we read the Bible and learn more about the God presented in the Bible we discover that it is actually God's words, not just human words, which we are encountering.

What are some different ways that God reveals himself to human beings? Explain the sense in which the Bible has both human authors and a divine author. Do you see any parallels between Jesus being both human and divine and the Scriptures being both human and divine? Explain. Why do you think it is important that God provided human beings with his word in written form?

Jesus and the Bible

A somewhat different approach to recognizing the divine authority of the biblical writings is to begin by examining the New Testament Gospels primarily as first-century historical documents. What can we surmise if we approach the Gospels from this perspective? To begin with, we find that there are a number of reasons to be confident that the Gospels communicate a great deal of reliable information about Jesus.

1. The Gospel writers were intending to write accurate historical accounts (according to the standards of their ancient cultural context). Consider the following observations.

- In the prologue to his Gospel, Luke explains his intention to put together an orderly account of the things that have been fulfilled so that the reader may know "the certainty of the things you have been taught." (See Luke 1:1-4.)
- Luke also gives careful attention to detail and regularly records events in their proper historical context. He specifically mentions all of the following leading figures in his two biblical volumes (the Gospel of Luke and Acts): the emperors Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius; the Roman governors Quirinius, Pilate, Sergius Paulus,

Gallio, Felix, and Festus; Herod the Great and some of his descendants — Herod Antipas, Herod Agrippa I and II, Bernice and Drusilla; and the Jewish leaders Annas, Caiaphas, Ananias, and Gamaliel, the greatest contemporary Rabbi.

- The apostles considered their mission to be telling others about actual events that had taken place, and they felt that it was very important that they were eyewitnesses to these events. (See, for example, Acts 1:21-26.)
- Honesty and integrity were considered to be non-negotiable values for early Christians. In 112 AD Plinius Secundus (also known as Pliny the Younger), governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan asking his advice on how to deal with the troublesome sect of Christians who were embarrassingly numerous in his province. According to the evidence he had secured by examining some of them under torture,

“they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang an anthem to Christ as God, and bound themselves by a solemn oath not to commit any wicked deed, but to abstain from all fraud, theft and adultery, never to break their word, or deny a trust when called upon to honor it; after which it was their custom to separate, and then meet again to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.”

2. The Gospel writers were in a position to successfully write accurate accounts.

- The Gospels were written relatively soon after the events they describe. Scholars estimate the date of composition of the Gospels to be somewhere in the following windows: Matthew, 55-100 AD; Mark, 50-70 AD; Luke 60-85 AD; and John, 60-100 AD.
- By comparison, the two earliest biographies of Alexander the Great were written more than 400 years after Alexander’s death in 323 BC. Even so, historians consider these biographies to be generally trustworthy.

- In addition, we can trace much of the Gospel material to even earlier dates. The Gospel writers almost certainly had earlier written sources available to them. And, by the example of Matthew's and Luke's use of Mark, we know they handled their sources very responsibly.
- Very early tradition also indicates that Mark recorded in his Gospel information he learned directly from the apostle Peter. And Luke, as a traveling companion of the apostle Paul (see the use of "we" in Luke 16:11), similarly had access to eyewitness sources.

3. Paul's New Testament letters give very early corroborating accounts of many key elements in the Gospels. Examples include the following.

- The human ancestry of Jesus can be traced to David and Abraham.
- Jesus lived under the Jewish Law.
- Jesus was betrayed, and on the night of his betrayal instituted a memorial meal of bread and wine.
- Jesus endured the Roman penalty of crucifixion.
- The responsibility for his death was placed on representatives of the Jewish people.
- He was buried, rose the third day, and was thereafter seen alive by many eyewitnesses.

Paul would have received much of this information extremely early. In fact, Paul spent a couple of weeks with Peter and Jesus' brother, James, several years before 40 AD (by most scholars' reckoning; see Galatians 1:18-19).

Once we recognize that the Gospels contain accurate information about Jesus, we can make an extremely strong historical case that Jesus was raised from the dead as he predicted. On very sound historical grounds, then, we know that Jesus lived an exemplary moral life, that he taught very boldly about the Kingdom of God in agreement with centuries of Jewish tradition, that he performed many astonishing miracles and

exorcisms, and that he ultimately predicted his own death and resurrection. It is reasonable, therefore, to give great weight to his view of the Old Testament Scriptures when we consider the view we will adopt.

So what was Jesus' view of the Old Testament writings? John Wenham in his book *Christ and the Bible* makes the following observations.²

- Jesus consistently treats Old Testament historical narratives as straightforward records of fact. He references Abel, Noah, Abraham, the institution of circumcision, Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, Isaac and Jacob, the miraculous manna, and many other elements in the Old Testament narratives.
- Jesus considers the teaching of the Old Testament to be completely authoritative. In his confrontations with Jewish religious leaders, the issue is never the authority of the Old Testament; the authority of the Old Testament is always taken as a given by both Jesus and his adversaries. It is only the proper interpretation and application of the Old Testament that is debated. Jesus quotes from the Old Testament in his confrontation with Satan (see Matthew 4:1-11), considers the Old Testament completely authoritative in ethical matters (see, for example, Matthew 19:1-6), and refers to the Old Testament when asked about eternal life (see, for example, Matthew 19:16-19).
- Jesus considers the Old Testament writings to be inspired; that is, the Scriptures are the Word of God. The Scriptures have a prophetic character; they are God's revelation of his purpose and await "fulfillment." (See, for example, Luke 18:31-33 and Luke 24:25-27.) Jesus' use of the phrase "It is written..." to communicate the authority of Scripture underscores the fact that it is God's voice that is heard throughout the Scripture.

In summary, Jesus considers the Old Testament Scriptures to be true and authoritative because they are the very words of God.

What about the New Testament writings? During his earthly ministry, Jesus indicated that he was inaugurating a new covenant (see Luke 22:20), and, in the Jewish context, covenants had associated covenant

documents (see Exodus 24:12). Jesus appointed twelve men whom he entrusted to pass along his new covenant teaching and to whom he promised to give further insight and revelation through the Holy Spirit (see John 16:12-15). The early church then employed the following criteria to help them recognize which books God intended for them to incorporate into the New Testament (that is, which books should be included in the "Canon").

- Canonical books should be connected with Christ's apostles.
- Canonical books should be in agreement with the orthodox Christianity recognized as normative in the churches.
- Canonical books should have enjoyed widespread and continuous use by the churches.

One trio of scholars made the following observation about the New Testament Canon.

*The fact that substantially the whole church came to recognize the same twenty-seven books as canonical is remarkable when it is remembered that the result was not contrived. All that the several churches throughout the Empire could do was to witness to their own experience with the documents and share whatever knowledge they might have about their origin and character. When consideration is given to the diversity in cultural backgrounds and in orientation to the essentials of the Christian faith within the churches, their common agreement about which books belonged to the New Testament serves to suggest that this final decision did not originate solely at the human level."*³

What was Jesus' view of the Old Testament writings? Explain. Why should this impact our view of the Scriptures? How would you go about explaining to a friend why you consider the Bible to be the word of God? Do you give the writings of the Bible great authority in your own life? Explain.

¹ "Approaching the Bible," *Collected Writings on Scripture*, [Wheaton: Crossway, 2010]

² John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, [Wipf & Stock, 2009]

³ Glenn W. Barker, William L. Lane, and J. Ramsey Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks*, [Harper & Row, 1969], p. 29

Chapter 2: Reading the Bible

Choosing a Good Translation

As we noted in the Chapter 1, the biblical documents were originally composed in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Our English Bibles are translations directly from these original languages. Which English translation should we choose? To answer this question, it is helpful to know something about the underlying original language texts that scholars work from when producing translations into other languages.

We do not have any of the original documents produced by Ezekiel or Isaiah or Paul or any other biblical authors. The original documents were probably written on papyrus or leather scrolls, and such materials, except in very rare circumstances (as in the case of the Dead Sea Scrolls), typically do not survive for twenty or more centuries. What we have are copies (or copies of copies, or copies of copies of copies, etc.) of the originals. At present we have over 3,000 Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament, more than 1,500 Greek translations of the Old Testament (known as the Septuagint), and roughly 5,700 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.¹

When we compare these copies of the biblical documents with one another, we find that small differences exist between them. Almost all of these differences are obvious copying errors: inadvertently leaving out a word, writing the same word twice, misspelling a name, or substituting a word for another word with a similar sound. Scholars use the science of textual criticism to reconstruct the most probable original text. In the case of the New Testament, more than 99% of the text is not in question.

Because of continued discoveries of ancient texts and breakthroughs in textual criticism, modern translators are able to start from versions of the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament that more accurately reflect the original documents than what translators working several centuries ago had. In addition, the cumulative results of centuries of research have provided modern scholars with a better understanding of the ancient languages. Relatively recent English translations, then, are not

only more readable than older translations, they are typically more accurate as well.

Among modern translations of the Bible, translation philosophies differ. For example, the English Standard Version (ESV) and the New American Standard Bible (NASB) typically follow more of a word-for-word translation methodology (when possible). This approach often gives a better sense of the structure of the underlying languages but sometimes results in an awkward rendering into English. The New International Version (NIV) embraces a thought-for-thought approach, which typically results in a relatively smooth rendering into English. The New Living Translation (NLT) is a very smooth rendering into English, but takes more liberty in expressing biblical concepts with different words. Each of these translations (and a number of others) are good choices for an English Bible.

Reading the Bible

How should we go about reading the Bible? Do we need to read the Bible differently than we read other pieces of literature? When it comes to understanding the meaning of the biblical texts, the short answer is no. Although ancient authors sometimes employed literary techniques that we are not accustomed to, or literary genres that are not typically used today (like the apocalyptic style used in the book of Revelation), we can go a long way just by approaching the text as we would any other piece of literature. We should ask the same questions we would ask of any other text: “What is the point of this story?” or “What is the letter writer’s basic argument here?” or “Why would the author feel it was important to include this material?”

Today it is not uncommon for Christians to read one verse of Scripture in isolation from that verse’s surrounding context. In a few places this is reasonable. The book of Proverbs, for example, has a number of pithy statements that are intended to stand on their own. In general, however, it is important for us to consider the role of a single verse or paragraph in the broader context.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:9. How is the meaning of verse 9 affected by verse 10? Now read all of chapter 2. Is Paul teaching that believers do or do not have an understanding of what God has given to us?

The following are a few helpful principles for reading, interpreting, and applying the biblical material.

1. Try to imagine how the original hearers would have understood the passage.

It is tempting to begin with the question, “What does this mean for my life?” But we should not forget that many of the biblical documents were originally addressed to a specific audience of people who were in circumstances quite different from our own. The recipients of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, for example, were under pressure to begin living according to the Law of Moses, even though most of the Galatian believers were not Jewish. What would Paul’s admonitions have meant to that audience? (See the exercise below.)

Sometimes it is helpful to consult resources that provide insight on various cultural practices or contemporaneous political conditions that are relevant to the biblical text. This kind of material can often be found in study Bibles that contain introductions to the biblical books and commentary on the text.

Read Galatians 5:1 in the context of the verses following that text. How would Paul’s original audience have understood what he was communicating in verse 1?

2. Consider the literary genre of the passage you are reading.

The Bible contains a wide variety of material, and we should not apply precisely the same rules of interpretation to each of the varied genres that we encounter. For example, some biblical statements hold true at all times and in all places, and are intended to be understood by the reader in such absolute terms. Hebrews encourages believers that God has said: “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” (See Hebrews 13:5.) This is true for the believer always — in every place or circumstance. Proverbs, on the other hand, supplies a number of broad principles of wisdom that will not necessarily hold true in every conceivable situation. For example,

Proverbs 12:21 states: “No harm overtakes the righteous, but the wicked have their fill of trouble.” In general, when justice is being maintained in a community, this is true. But, of course, there are plenty examples of righteous people in the Bible who suffered greatly.

As another example, the New Testament letters often provide direct instruction on how we should live. When we read Old Testament narratives, however, the behavior of the individuals involved is not always explicitly evaluated by the narrator. It is left to the reader to infer whether the individual’s behavior should be imitated or rejected.

The Psalms constitute yet another genre, and this collection contains a wide variety of songs. Some of these songs include very raw and emotional cries for deliverance or judgment. These psalms help believers give words to the deep pain or anger that they might be feeling. But this does not mean that believers should generally harbor an attitude of hatred or vengeance toward their enemies or that they should personally attempt to break the teeth of the wicked. (See Psalm 3:7.)

3. Take into consideration where we are in God’s unfolding story of redemption.

In a later chapter, we will consider the overarching narrative of the Bible. For now, we should note that we are not the people of Israel living under the old covenant established through Moses, nor are we believers who are already living in resurrected bodies on a new earth. This means that when we read about the laws, customs, and practices of the ancient Israelites, we should not assume that they apply unchanged in our context. For example, although the Israelites were instructed to apply the death penalty for a number of offenses, the church does not have the authority to apply the death penalty to anyone. The strongest discipline under the new covenant is excommunication from the church.

In addition, many important regulations under the old covenant such as food laws, circumcision, and observing the Sabbath are not binding for believers under the new covenant. (See Galatians 6:15 and Colossians 2:16-17.)

In a somewhat different direction, believers also should not expect that this life will be painless and completely fulfilling. God's work of redemption is not yet complete, and believers often continue to suffer from the consequences of their own sin and the sin of others. (See 1 Corinthians 4:8-13.)

Read Psalm 20. To whom do you think the "you" and "your" is referring in verses 1-5? (Compare verse 9.) How do you imagine this psalm was used in ancient Israel? What are some ways our application of this psalm should differ from how it was probably used in ancient Israel?

4. Recognize that there is often a very real distance between our cultural context and that of the biblical text's human author.

God has regularly chosen to work *through* human beings rather than *around* human beings. The biblical documents were written in a variety of cultural contexts and often display perspectives, practices, or conditions that feel foreign to us. Some of these examples of cultural distance are relatively minor, like Paul's repeated instruction to greet one another with a holy kiss (a command that would not sound unusual in many places around the world today). Other practices or instructions are more jarring, such as Old Testament regulations concerning slaves, or commands to engage in holy war, or the practice of polygamy, or Paul's instructions about women wearing head-coverings and remaining silent in church meetings.

In each of these cases, it is important to understand the practice or command in its cultural context. Slavery as regulated in the Old Testament, for example, was by no means desirable, but it was also different in many significant ways from American slavery. Although we have benefited from centuries of moral reflection and teaching, including the often revolutionary contents of the Bible itself, we should guard against the temptation to assume that we are in all cases morally superior to ancient peoples, including the authors of the biblical documents.

5. Be careful about trying to answer questions that a text is not addressing.

We often read the Bible because we are looking for answers concerning issues we are currently facing in our own lives. This can take on a variety of forms. Perhaps we want to know whether to move forward with a job change or a new relationship. It is tempting (but unwise!) to go to the Bible looking for a “sign” indicating which decision we should make.

In a somewhat different direction, when we encounter certain subjects in the Bible, we may think of questions that seem important to us that were not important to the original authors of Scripture. It is tempting in these situations to try to squeeze information out of the text that is just not there. For example, many people today read the creation accounts in Genesis with a number of scientific questions in mind. For the most part, however, scientific questions are not addressed by the opening chapters of Genesis. The age of the universe was just not an important question to the ancients and the Genesis text is intended to address other concerns more relevant to ancient near eastern peoples.

Similarly, we may look in the Bible for subjects that are not really addressed at all. Many western people today, for example, are highly motivated to live a healthy lifestyle. Most ancient people just wanted to have enough food to survive. So we are not likely to discover in the biblical texts the ideal diet for losing excess weight. This simply was not a major concern in the ancient world.

Read Ezra 9:1-4. Should we deduce from this passage that interracial marriages are sinful today? If not, how should we think about this passage and what, if any, applications can we make from it in our context?

¹ “The Reliability of Bible Manuscripts,” *The ESV Study Bible*, [Crossway, 2008]

Chapter 3: The Story of the Bible

Although the Bible consists of many documents addressing a wide variety of subjects, an overarching story, or metanarrative, running through its many parts can be identified. This grand story can be thought of as a play with six acts:

- Act 1: Genesis 1-2, The Story of Creation;
- Act 2: Genesis 3-11, The Story of Sin;
- Act 3: Genesis 12 - Malachi, The Story of Israel;
- Act 4: Matthew - John, The Story of Jesus;
- Act 5: Acts - Revelation 20, The Story of the Church;
- Act 6: Revelation 21-22, The Story of the New Heavens and New Earth.

In this chapter and the next we will briefly investigate each of these acts.

Act 1: The Story of Creation

¹In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. ³And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

²⁶Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

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

Genesis 1:1-5, 26-28

How should we approach a text like this? As modern readers we are likely to come to this passage with modern questions: How long ago did these events happen? What does this passage have to say about the Big Bang or biological evolution? How does divine activity intersect with the normal operation of the laws of nature?

As we noted in the previous chapter, although the text sets a framework for addressing these modern questions, the text is probably not intending to directly answer any of them. Instead, God has given us an account of origins that is meaningful in a wide variety of cultural contexts. Simply and artfully, we are provided with essential truths about God's nature and power, about his relationship to all created things, and about the status of human beings in the created order.

It is interesting, however, to compare the Genesis account to prominent creation myths that were widely known in the ancient near east. When we do this, we find that the Genesis account is a polemic against many of the beliefs of ancient Israel's neighbors. How so?

- 1. There is no description of God's origin.** There is no account of God coming into existence. He just is. This is markedly different from the many accounts of the origins of the gods in the ancient ear east.

The mythology of both Mesopotamia and Egypt makes clear that the gods had origins. They exist in familial relationships and there are generations of gods. When the texts speak of theogony (origins of the gods) they include a number of elements in the presentation. In Egyptian literature it is most common to think of the earliest gods coming into being through bodily fluids (the creator god spitting, sneezing, sweating, or masturbating), while

the later deities are simply born to a previous generation of deity. ... Since the forces of nature are expressions and manifestations of the attributes of deities, cosmogony and theogony become intertwined as the natural world comes into being along with the gods who embody the various elements of the cosmos.

John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*¹

- 2. The physical world is "demythologized."** In the biblical creation accounts, the universe and its various parts are not in any way divine; rather, they are clearly distinguished from God. By contrast, in the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish*, for example, a heroic god named Marduk battles an ancient goddess named Tiamat. After Marduk kills Tiamat by firing an arrow down her throat that splits her belly, he turns half of her carcass into the heavens and the other half into the earth.

Outside of Israel, ancient people saw the various cosmic bodies as indistinguishable from their associated gods. They acknowledged sun gods, moon gods, storm gods, and many others. But in the biblical story, the sun and moon are not even named! They are referred to as the "greater light" and the "lesser light" so they will not be mistaken for deities.

Therefore, even though the account in Genesis should probably not be considered scientific, its demythologizing of the cosmos paves the way for modern science to come into existence.

- 3. God has power over darkness and chaos.**

In the polytheistic religions of the nations surrounding Israel, the sea is deified as a chaotic entity and set over against the gods of order. Israel's poets pick up this imagery and use the names of various mythical deities who oppose creation — Leviathan, Yamm(Sea), and Rahab (Proud) — to depict [God's] triumph over the primordial chaos.

Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*²

When God speaks light into the darkness and tames the primordial waters by bringing habitable land out of them, he is demonstrating his absolute authority over darkness and chaos. This should be an encouragement to us that God can deliver us from any darkness and chaos we may be experiencing in our lives.

4. Human beings are the crown of God's creation.

In Mesopotamia the cosmos functions for the gods and in relation to them. People are an afterthought...

John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*

Compare this to what we find in Genesis 1:26-28.

²⁶Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

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

Genesis 1:26-28

In the Genesis account, human beings are made in his image. In a very real sense we are like God. We can have fellowship with him. In addition, God blesses human beings. In other words, God loves us. He desires our good. And God has given us something to do! We are to be fruitful, to increase, to fill, to subdue, and to rule.

These three observations have far-reaching implications: 1) Each human being has value because every human being is made in the image of God; 2) God loves us and desires our good; and 3) God has a mission for us to fulfill in this life.

What are some questions we can legitimately answer from the material in Genesis 1? Are there any questions an ancient reader might have been prone to ask that we, as modern readers, might not? What are some questions that are probably not addressed by the material in Genesis 1? How does Genesis 1 establish important foundations for the possibility of modern science?

At Home In God's Presence

In Genesis 2, we are presented with another perspective on creation, this time with particular emphasis on man's dwelling place, man's work, and man's relationships. Comparison with other biblical texts and ancient near eastern writings leads to an interesting discovery: man's home in the garden is presented as a temple, God's earthly dwelling place. How do we arrive at this conclusion?

We will begin by examining some key passages in Genesis 2 and 3.

⁸Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹The 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.

¹⁰A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. ¹¹The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. ¹²(The gold of that land is good; [bdellium] and onyx are also there.) ¹³The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. ¹⁴The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

⁸ ... the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day...

²⁴After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Genesis 2:8-15; 3:8, 24

Consider the following observations.

1. The garden of Eden was where God walked.

...the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day...

Genesis 3:8

This is the same way that God's divine presence is described in later sanctuaries.

¹¹I will put my dwelling place (literally 'my tabernacle', a sacred tent) among you... ¹²I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people.

Leviticus 26:11-12

2. After Adam's and Eve's disobedience, Cherubim (angelic beings) were stationed on the east side of the garden in order to guard it.

This implies that the entrance to the garden was on the east. Not coincidentally, the entrances to the tabernacle and, later, the temple in Jerusalem were also on the east.

In addition, in the ancient near east, Cherubim were traditionally considered to be the guardians of holy places.

In Solomon's temple two [Cherubim] guarded the inner sanctuary (1 Kings 6:23-28). Two others on top of the ark formed the throne of God in the inner sanctuary (Exodus 25:18-22) and pictures of [Cherubim] decorated the curtains of the tabernacle and walls of the temple (Exodus 26:31, 1 Kings 6:29).

Gordon Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story"³

3. The garden of Eden contained lush foliage and the tree of life.

Lush, life-giving trees were a regular part of ancient near eastern temples. In addition, when Moses was given instructions for the tabernacle furnishings, he was instructed to make a golden lampstand shaped like a tree — a tree representing the tree of life in the garden.

4. The instructions given to Adam in the garden use key words that are later used to describe the work of priests.

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

This combination of verbs — “work” and “take care of” — only appears in the Pentateuch three more times, always referring to the priests’ duties of guarding and ministering in the sanctuary.

5. Rivers were often associated with temples in the ancient near east.

This emerges in multiple places in the Bible.

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.*

Psalms 46:4

The prophet Ezekiel’s vision of a renewed temple contains the following imagery.

¹The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar.

¹²Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will

bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing."

Ezekiel 47:1, 12

6. Finally, the garden is associated with precious substances including gold, bdellium, and onyx. Gold is prominently featured throughout the tabernacle furnishings. The entirety of the inner sanctuary of the Temple was overlaid with gold. Bdellium, on the other hand, is rare in the Bible. The only other mention of bdellium occurs in Numbers 11:7, where manna is compared to it. Onyx was widely used in decorating the tabernacle, the temple, and the priestly garments.

An ancient reader encountering the imagery of Genesis 2 and 3 would have associated Eden with a holy place, a sanctuary for God's presence. The implication is that all human beings — not just those specifically appointed to be priests — were meant to live in God's presence, to experience his glory, and to do his will.

Made for Relationship

Genesis 2 records a striking observation:

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

We were made not only to be in relationship with God, but to be in relationship with one another. Later portions of Scripture indicate that God, though one, also exhibits plurality, and, therefore, is relational in his fundamental nature. It should not surprise us, then, that human beings, made in God's likeness, would be made to live in relationship with other human beings.

The first peer relationship that God created for human beings was not merely a friendship (as profound as such relationships can be), but the covenant relationship of marriage.

²⁴That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

²⁵Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Genesis 2:24-25

In a discussion with Jewish religious leaders concerning divorce, Jesus referred to this important passage.

³Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

⁴"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' ⁵and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? ⁶So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Matthew 19:3-6

In these passages we discover four important aspects of God's plan for the marriage relationship. A biblical union is:

- Between a male and female;
- Exclusive (Jesus speaks of a man and his wife and no others);
- Comprehensive (the two become one);
- Permanent (let no one separate).

When we come to the New Testament, we will discover that, in addition to natural family, God intends for us to live in "spiritual" family.

What are some implications of the reality that the Garden of Eden, the original home for human beings, was also God's sanctuary? Do you have a desire to be in God's presence? How can we experience God's presence in our lives? According to the opening chapters of Genesis, what is the purpose of marriage? How does a biblical understanding

of marriage compare with contemporary views on marriage and divorce?

Act 2: The Story of Sin

¹Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

²The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

⁴"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. ⁵"For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

⁶When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

⁸Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

¹⁰He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

²³So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. ²⁴After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden

cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Genesis 3:1-10, 23-24

There is a dark and powerful temptation to reject God's gracious, just, and rightful rule over our lives. In fact, in the next chapter, God will say to a man named Cain:

"...sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."

Genesis 4:7

Some people respond to temptation by seeking to reject the biblical paradigm through an insistence that there really are no divinely mandated moral obligations. But this never works. The fact that we find ourselves so often making judgments about the behavior of others or justifying our own actions to others is a reminder that we are incurably moral creatures. There really is a God whose very nature defines what is right and good, and the temptation to act in a contrary fashion is real.

Unfortunately, each of us has replicated the rebellion of the archetypal pair in the garden a thousand times over. The book of Proverbs asks rhetorically:

Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin"?

Proverbs 20:9

David writes in Psalm 51:

*³For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.*

*⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.*

⁵*Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*

Psalms 51:3-5

As Genesis 3 clearly spells out, our sin has serious implications. The consequences of sin impact our work, our marriages, and our families. Even more significantly, the text indicates that God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden. As our observations from the previous section imply, being cast out of the garden is equivalent to being cast out of God's presence. It is God who has power over darkness and chaos, and who is the source of life. So when human beings are separated from God, darkness, chaos, and death will inevitably result.

There is no enduring life apart from God. We may occasionally experience a sense of happiness, success, or purpose. But we will not have lasting life until we have God.

Therefore, according to the biblical story, the most fundamental problem we face is not sickness, or loneliness, or boredom, or busy-ness, or an uncertain future, or a poor economy, or a lack of opportunity, or corrupt leaders, or a host of other very serious issues. The most fundamental problem we face is separation from God.

This is dramatically illustrated in the New Testament in an account of a paralyzed man whose friends bring him to Jesus to be healed. Jesus responds to their faith by declaring: "Friend, your sins are forgiven." Given the paralyzed man's desperate physical condition, Jesus' surprising comment implies that nothing is more debilitating than sin.

Act 2 of the biblical story paints a bleak picture. Human beings are separated from God. Curse and trouble and difficulty mark our work and our relationships. In our most honest moments we are confronted with our nakedness and shame instead of God's image and glory. Are we destined for a meaningless existence that ends in eternal death?

Already in Genesis 3 there are clues that human sin will not be the last word. God tells the serpent:

*...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

A few verses later we read:

"The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them."

Genesis 3:21

Immediately God began to do something about our nakedness and shame. But the history of redemption really begins to accelerate in the next act.

What did the serpent say to tempt the woman? How are the temptations we experience today similar? In what areas of your life do you currently experience significant temptation? What was the first consequence of Adam's and Eve's sin (see Genesis 3:7)? Why is this significant? What is the most fundamental human problem? Explain how other significant human problems are related to the most fundamental human problem.

Act 3: The Story of Israel

¹The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

*²"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.*

*³I 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

In Genesis 12, the third act of the biblical story begins: the story of Israel. God chooses a man and his family through which he will bring blessing to all nations. In fact, scholars have noted that the word "blessing" appears five times in this passage, precisely balancing the number of times the word "curse" has appeared up to this point in the biblical narrative.

The call of Abram demonstrates to us that even in spite of our sin, God still desires to bring blessing to humanity and to accomplish his purposes in the earth through human beings.

After centuries of working through Abraham's descendants, God forms them into a nation under the leadership of Moses. On Mt. Sinai, God makes a covenant with the Israelites. We find a very important passage concerning this covenant in Exodus 19.

¹On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt — on that very day — they came to the Desert of Sinai. ²After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

³Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now 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, ⁶you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

Exodus 19:1-6

Scholar Kenneth Laing Harris writes the following about this passage.

When the Lord calls Israel a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, he is not referring exclusively to the role that Aaron and his sons will fill as priests, but also to what Israel's life as a whole is to represent among the nations. By keeping the covenant, the people of Israel would continue both to set themselves apart from, and also to mediate the presence and blessing of the Lord to, the nations around them.

Kenneth Laing Harris, *ESV Study Bible*⁴

The Israelites are to display God's holiness and to mediate God's blessing and presence to the world. And so God gives to the Israelites a whole variety of instructions for social, civil, and religious life. Because our culture is so far removed from the culture of the ancient near east, the significance of some of these instructions may be lost on us. But the overall motivation remains clear. Multiple times in the book of Leviticus, God tells the Israelites, "Be holy, because I am holy."

In addition to rules for living, God gives Moses instructions for constructing a sacred tent, called a tabernacle, where God will manifest his presence. The presence of God that was lost because of sin is being restored, if only partially.

How successful is Israel in accomplishing her mission of embodying God's holiness and mediating God's presence and blessing? According to the prophets, not very successful. In fact, the sin of the Israelites is so severe that God expels them from the land. It is the failure of the garden all over again. Several of the prophets declare that God will have to make a new covenant with His people. An example is found in Jeremiah.

³¹*"The days are coming," declares the LORD,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.*

³²*It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,*

*because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,"
declares the LORD.*

*³³"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time," declares the LORD.*

*"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.*

*³⁴No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, '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

Jeremiah is teaching that our sinfulness goes deeper than we really understand. An external law is not enough. God must do something more profound in our hearts.

We might be prompted to ask if God was surprised by all this. Was he shocked that the Mosaic covenant didn't seem to work? Pastor and author Timothy Keller has made a helpful observation. He remarks that it is not sufficient for us to be *told* about sin's presence and power. It must be *shown* to us. Until we really understand the depth and nature of our sin, we will not understand the extent of God's mercy and grace.

To this end, one of the reasons that God allows us to experience hardship is to reveal our sin to us. We're masters of self-deception. The prophet Jeremiah writes:

*The heart is deceitful above all things
and beyond cure.
Who can understand it?*

Jeremiah 17:9

God, therefore, had two purposes in giving the law to Israel. On the one hand, he intended to show them how to live to bring him glory and to mediate his presence and blessing to the nations. But on the other hand, he also intended to expose the depth of sin in the human heart. Our sin problem is not only our most fundamental problem, it is far deeper than we realize.

How would you summarize God's mission for Israel? How do you think this relates to the mission for followers of Jesus today? What hindered Israel's success in fulfilling this mission? What hinders us from fulfilling the mission God has given to us? Why did God give the Law of Moses to Israel? What was the Law able to do and what was it unable to do?

¹ John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, [Baker Academic, 2006]

² Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, [Zondervan, 2007]

³ Gordon Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story" in *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood* edited by Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura, [Eisenbrauns, 1994]

⁴ *The ESV Study Bible*, [Crossway, 2008]

Chapter 4: The Story of the Bible Continued

Let's briefly summarize the story of the Bible through the first three acts. Human beings were created by God to display his image, to live in his love and blessing, and to be fruitful and rule on the earth in joyful relationship with one another. The entrance of sin compromised each of these purposes.

The people of Israel (comprised of the physical descendants of Abraham's grandson, Jacob) were set apart to display God's holiness and to mediate God's presence and blessing to the nations. Even in Israel's best moments, however, these goals were only partially fulfilled. At this point in the story, many great redemptive themes initiated by God in Israel seem hopelessly incomplete.

- Abraham was promised that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through his offspring, but Israel has been dominated by one regional superpower after another.
- Moses told the people that after God punished their disobedience by uprooting them from the land, he would regather them, make them prosperous, change their hearts, and punish their persecutors.¹ But the Jews who have returned to Palestine are suffering under the pagan rule of the Romans, millions of diaspora Jews are still living outside of Palestine, and the Jewish people are being influenced by the culture around them more than they are influencing their neighbors.
- David, the greatest king in Israel's history, was promised that his descendants would rule on the throne forever.² But by the first century there hasn't been a Davidic king for hundreds of years.
- Through the prophet Ezekiel God promised that he himself would personally shepherd the people of Israel, but his presence and blessing seem far away.³

- Isaiah spoke of a mysterious suffering servant who would be punished by God for the sins of others, but it's unclear whom the prophet was speaking about.⁴
- Daniel saw a vision of a human being who was given authority, glory, and sovereign power, and who received the worship of all the nations, but nobody knows who that individual might be.⁵

The Jewish people in the first century, then, are trying to understand what is going on in their story.

The Story of Jesus

Centuries after Abraham, Moses, David, and Isaiah a man named Jesus of Nazareth enters history. And all across Galilee he makes the following pronouncement:

*"The time has come... The kingdom of God has come near.
Repent and believe the good news!"*

Mark 1:15

God's Kingdom was being inaugurated through the man Jesus of Nazareth. In Genesis 1 the wind of God hovered over the darkness and the chaos of the deep before God brought light and life to his creation. And now, once again, the Spirit of God is hovering, this time over the man Jesus, in order to overturn the death and darkness brought about by sin.

¹⁷ *...the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:*

¹⁸ *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,*

*to set the oppressed free,
19to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Luke 4:17-19

God was breaking into history to establish his reign in the person of Jesus Christ. It is impossible to overestimate the significance of Jesus' (approximately) three-year public ministry. We will here focus on three fundamental components of Jesus' mission: 1) To show us God; 2) to give us an example to follow; and 3) to provide for our salvation.

1. Jesus shows us God.

The author of Hebrews writes:

1In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. 3The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being...

Hebrews 1:1-3

The prologue to the Gospel of John, speaking of Jesus as the "Word," declares:

1In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

14The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:1, 14

In our discussion of creation, we saw that the first thing God did after creating human beings was bless them, demonstrating his love for humanity. In Jesus' public ministry, we find Jesus healing people, delivering them from darkness, feeding them when they're hungry, placing his hands on them to bless them, and weeping over their stubbornness when they reject him. Why? Because Jesus has the heart of

God the Father for humanity. There is no better way to know the Father than in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Explain why Jesus is the ultimate demonstration of who God is? What are some ways that Jesus shows us what God is like?

2. Jesus gives us an example to imitate.

We may be prone to consider Jesus' life as completely exceptional and, therefore, essentially useless as a model for our own lives. But Jesus intended just the opposite. In fact, multiple times in the Gospels we find Jesus saying, "Come, follow me." With this imperative Jesus is intending for his life to be imitated. He makes this explicit in multiple places.

¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

John 13:14-17

Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

John 14:12

We should make it our goal to be like Jesus.

What aspects of Jesus' life does he intend for us to imitate? On the other hand, what are some ways that Jesus is completely unique? What is one way you would like to better imitate Jesus?

3. Jesus provides for our salvation.

We noted that the Old Testament seemed to close with a number of loose ends all related to the great salvation that God was going to bring to and through his people. Where is the anointed one who will bring blessing to

the nations and will rule on David's throne? Who will establish a new covenant and bring God's Holy Spirit to all his people?

Many of the Jews of Jesus' day were looking for a Messiah who would declare war on Israel's Roman oppressors. Instead, Jesus declared war on an even bigger foe: sin and death. As we observed in the previous chapter, our biggest problem is not outside of us; it is inside of us. We often want our circumstances to change, but God wants to give us a new heart.

Through Moses, God had given to the people of Israel a law inscribed on stone tablets. But Jeremiah was looking forward to a new covenant when God would write his laws on human hearts. On the night before his crucifixion, during the last supper, Jesus speaks about this new covenant with his disciples.

¹⁴When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. ¹⁵And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

¹⁷After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. ¹⁸For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

¹⁹And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

²⁰In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

Luke 22:14-20

The next day Jesus bore our sins in his body on the cross. We should observe that the last supper and Jesus' crucifixion occur during the Festival of Passover, an annual memorial of the first passover when the Jewish people in Egypt sacrificed a lamb so that their firstborn sons would be spared. Jesus is our substitute, our sacrificial lamb.

⁴*Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.*

⁵*But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.*

⁶*We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

Isaiah 53:4-6

After his suffering, on the first day of the week, Jesus rose bodily from the grave. Over a period of forty days, Jesus appeared to his disciples and reminded them of the things he had taught them and the mission he had for them.

...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Acts 1:8

A few days later, on the day of Pentecost (50 days after Passover) the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on Jesus' followers, and a new community of God's people was birthed — the church.

Explain how God provided for our salvation through his Son Jesus. What are some ways that you could help another person understand the relevance of Jesus Christ to his or her own life? What is the significance of Jesus establishing a new covenant? What are some ways the new covenant differs from the old covenant (that is, the covenant with Israel established through Moses)? Are there any ways in which the new covenant is similar to the old covenant?

The Story of the Church

The Bible indicates that we can think of the church as a family on a mission. During his public ministry, Jesus applied the language of family to his disciples.

³¹ ...Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. ³²A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

³³"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

³⁴Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

Mark 3:31-35

The apostle Paul continued this use of family language when giving instructions for the church to his assistant, Timothy.

¹Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, ²older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.

1 Timothy 5:1-2

The author of Hebrews similarly speaks of God's people as a family.

¹¹Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. ¹²He says,

"I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the assembly I will sing your praises."

Hebrews 2:11-12

Followers of Jesus Christ, then, are in two families: their natural families (through physical birth, adoption, or marriage) and God's family, the church (which the Scriptures speak metaphorically of happening through

Spiritual rebirth, adoption, and marriage). Although present experiences of family are quite varied, the use of family language in an ancient Jewish context would have carried great significance. Family members in the first century were expected to demonstrate great devotion and commitment to one another.

How should the fact that we are now incorporated into a spiritual family, expressed in the context of a local church, affect how we live? Is it difficult for you to think of the church as a family? Explain.

The Mission of the Church

In the previous chapter we briefly explored the mission God gave to the people of Israel in Exodus 19. Israel was called to be a holy people and a kingdom of priests. Stated differently, Israel was to display God's character and to mediate God's presence and blessing to the world.

In the New Testament, Peter, one of Jesus' twelve apostles, applies the same words from Exodus to the newly reconstituted people of God — the church — which now contains both Jews and Gentiles. Peter writes:

⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

1 Peter 2:9-10

The church, like Old Testament Israel, is to demonstrate God's holiness and to mediate God's presence and blessing to the world. The story of the church is the story of mission. This mission is perhaps most famously recorded at the conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew.

¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything

I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Matthew 28:18-20

Jesus instructs the church — in a way reminiscent of God's command to human beings in Genesis 1 — to multiply. Disciples are called to make disciples. Throughout the book of Acts, Luke (the author) regularly takes note of the growth of the church.

⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 2:46-47

...many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

Acts 4:4

...more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

Acts 5:14

The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Acts 6:7

The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Acts 11:21

At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed.

Acts 14:1

...the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Acts 16:5

God intends to gather people into his church from “every nation, tribe, people and language” (Revelation 7:9).

What is the primary mission of the church? Why should believers want the church to grow? What are some ways growth can be uncomfortable? By what means should the church grow? What are you doing to help the church grow?

The Story of the New Heavens and the New Earth

¹Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

⁵He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

⁶He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. ⁷Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. ⁸But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and

all liars — they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

Revelation 21:1-8

The “act”, or stage in God's redemptive plan, we are living in now will not last forever. We have the great expectation of a new heavens and a new earth. We should make several observations in connection with this passage in Revelation.

1. The suffering that followers of Jesus Christ experience in this life will not last forever.

‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Revelation 21:4

2. The final act is not an escape from physical existence. It is a renewed physical existence. Jesus’ body was raised from the dead and transformed into an incorruptible, glorified body. And so shall it be with our bodies.

Note also that in this passage our final home is described as a city. This imagery strongly suggests that there will be activity and culture and work and discovery in the next life. In fact, in some of Jesus’ parables, faithful stewardship in God’s kingdom in this life is rewarded with greater responsibility in the new creation.⁶ The presupposition in these parables is that the next life will include many parallels to our present experience of culture.

3. Not everyone will participate in the Holy city, the new Jerusalem.

Jesus came to the earth, died on the cross, and rose again so that we may dwell with God in the Holy city forever. But for those who persist in their sin and do not receive the salvation that Jesus offers, death and judgment await.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

John 3:36

For this reason, Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

2 Corinthians 5:20

God's grand story of redemption weaves through the pages of the Bible from the beginning to the end. Understanding this overarching narrative helps us interpret and apply the individual components of God's rich revelation.

What is the biblical picture of life after death? Does this differ from your previous understanding of the afterlife? Are you afraid to die? How can a better understanding of the afterlife affect how we live in the present? Should followers of Jesus Christ fear the judgment we will all face after death? Explain. Should the "physicality" of the afterlife impact our view of the material world in the present?

¹ Deuteronomy 30:1-10

² 2 Samuel 7:5-16

³ Ezekiel 34

⁴ Isaiah 52:13-53:12

⁵ Daniel 7:13-14

⁶ For example, Matthew 25:14-30

Chapter 5: Learning from the Old Testament

Even though Paul, the other apostles, and Jesus himself regularly preached and taught from the Old Testament, understanding and applying the Old Testament is difficult for many of us. The Old Testament does not read like a novel. In fact, if we read directly through the contents of the Old Testament as they are arranged in our English Bibles, we may lose track of the development of the story. The literary genre often changes not just from book to book, but from chapter to chapter.

Additionally, some of the material in the Old Testament might not seem relevant to us on a first reading, particularly when we encounter passages including genealogies, law codes, and detailed instructions about sacrifices. The cultural distance between us as modern readers and an ancient audience is significant.

So what do we do? The early church clearly found the Old Testament immensely profitable, yet we often stumble over cultural and literary difficulties. In this chapter we will make some important observations that will help us benefit from the Old Testament writings.

Humans Are Humans

¹For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ²They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

⁶Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ⁷Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry." ⁸We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. ⁹We should not test Christ, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. ¹⁰And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.

¹¹These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.

1 Corinthians 10:1-11

Although our world is different in so many ways from the world of the ancient near east, human nature has not changed significantly over the last 3,500 years. When we read Old Testament narratives the cultural customs we encounter may feel very foreign to us, but the matters of the heart are familiar friends. For this reason, Paul tells the church in Corinth that the events recorded in the Old Testament are examples for us.

Consider one of the examples Paul gives to the Corinthians in this passage. In 1 Corinthians 10:7, Paul alludes to the following event narrated in Exodus 32.

¹When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."

²Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me."

³So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD." ⁶So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

Exodus 32:1-6

There are obviously a number of elements in this account that, on the surface, are very different from our own experience.

- We are not physically in the wilderness of Sinai.
- We are not waiting for instructions from an aged prophet who, we are told, is somewhere on a mountain spending time with God.
- And most of us would not feel the slightest temptation to scrape together our precious metals in order to fashion a calf to serve as a focal point for our worship.

Even so, we have all known times in our lives when everything seemed to be stalled and God didn't seem to be speaking. In these moments, we may be tempted to do what the people in the culture around us are doing in order to get what we think they are getting.

What are some ways you experience this in your own life? When serving God feels unsatisfying or God seems too intangible, what are you tempted to pursue as a substitute?

To learn from the examples we encounter in the Old Testament, it is helpful to read slowly and to take time to think carefully about what the men and women were experiencing. Old Testament narratives typically do not provide as much detail and explanation as modern writings, and we can easily race through a passage that has a great deal to teach us. As we read, we should ask questions such as, "Why would it have been significant for this individual to leave the promised land?" or "Why would God warn this king about forming an alliance with a foreign nation?"

Read Jonah 3-4. Why is Jonah angry? How does God want Jonah to feel about the city and people of Nineveh? What are some ways that

our emotions and concerns get tied to the wrong things? What can these chapters in Jonah teach us?

The Law of Moses

One of the more subtle questions for followers of Jesus Christ is determining what role the Old Testament laws should play in our lives. In the passage from 1 Corinthians with which we began this chapter, Paul gives several warnings including:

- Do not be idolaters;
- Do not commit sexual immorality;
- Do not test Christ.

Each of these commands are restatements of well-known Old Testament laws. Idolatry was prohibited by the second of the Ten Commandments (see Deuteronomy 5:8-10). Various forms of sexual immorality were prohibited by laws including the seventh commandment (see Deuteronomy 5:18) and those found in Leviticus 18. And Deuteronomy 6:16 states: "Do not put the LORD your God to the test..." Paul clearly saw these laws as having continued relevance and authority under the new covenant.

In another place, however, Paul writes:

⁴ ...my brothers and sisters, you... died to the law through the body of Christ... ⁶ ...by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

Romans 7:4, 6

How do we reconcile this with Paul's obviously high regard for the law in 1 Corinthians and other places? It is helpful for us to recognize that God intended the Law of Moses to play multiple roles, not all of which have the same relevance in the present.

1. The law is a revelation of God's nature and character and of his will for human behavior.

As Paul articulates in Romans 2, the Jewish people were proud of having received God's revelation, and they felt that their knowledge of the law positioned them to educate others concerning God's will for human behavior.

¹⁷Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; ¹⁸if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth...

Romans 2:17-20

An examination of the Law of Moses reveals that a great number of the commands contained in this law are relevant and binding for human behavior at all times and in all places:

- Do not steal;
- Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength;
- Honor your father and your mother;
- Do not pervert justice, and many others.

2. God intended the clear revelation of his will in the Law of Moses to magnify the reality of human sinfulness.

Paul writes:

The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase.

Romans 5:20

What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law.

Romans 7:7

Although, for example, it is reasonable to expect human beings to recognize that they should honor their parents, articulating this obligation brings out all the more clearly the sinfulness of its neglect.

3. The Law of Moses detailed God's requirements for the people Israel, with whom he was establishing a covenant.

The people of Israel were to demonstrate their acceptance of God's gracious covenant by committing to obey all of the laws God gave to them through Moses. This is expressed in passages like the following from Exodus 19, which occurs just before God begins giving his laws to Moses.

³Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now 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, ⁶you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

Exodus 19:3-6

It is for this reason that, for Jewish men and women, salvation was inseparable from a commitment to be faithful to the Law of Moses. To reject the Law of Moses was to reject God's covenant. And so, for example, when a Jewish religious leader asks Jesus about eternal life, Jesus responds as we should expect, by referencing the Law of Moses.

²⁵On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

²⁶"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

²⁷He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

²⁸*"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."*

Luke 10:25-28

4. The Law of Moses established Israel as a theocracy, and provided laws that governed the social, judicial, and political affairs of Israel.

²*"If a thief is caught breaking in at night and is struck a fatal blow, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed; ³but if it happens after sunrise, the defender is guilty of bloodshed.*

"Anyone who steals must certainly make restitution, but if they have nothing, they must be sold to pay for their theft. ⁴If the stolen animal is found alive in their possession—whether ox or donkey or sheep—they must pay back double.

Exodus 22:2-4

¹⁰*When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. ¹¹If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you. ¹²If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city.*

Deuteronomy 20:10-12

We should note that if God were ever to establish a new covenant, the people involved in such a covenant might not be limited (primarily) to the people of Israel and the stipulations of the covenant might change. This, in fact, is what happened when God established a new covenant through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Such a new covenant was already anticipated by some of the prophets who ministered before the time of Christ. For example, Isaiah declares:

*"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.*

*I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."*

Isaiah 49:6

Because the Law of Moses is so closely tied to the covenant God made with Israel, followers of Jesus Christ have to make decisions about which Old Testament commands represent God's unchanging will for human behavior and which were primarily intended to play a temporary role in the life of ancient Israel. In many cases this is already clarified by the writings of the New Testament authors.

Paul writes the following in his letter to the Colossians.

¹⁶Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

Colossians 2:16-17

Here Paul indicates that a number of regulations in the Law of Moses were intended to foreshadow God's ultimate act of salvation in Jesus Christ, and therefore no longer need to be practiced. Among these regulations are Israel's food laws, annual festivals like the Feast of Unleavened Bread, observance of the Sabbath, and circumcision (which is specifically addressed in other passages).

Many Old Testament laws are associated with the Temple which was destroyed in 70 AD and which has been superseded by the direct presence of the Holy Spirit in God's people (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; 1 Peter 2:4-5). Similarly, the Old Testament sacrifices have been fulfilled by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:1-18).

Other Old Testament laws deal with the punishment of criminal offenses or engaging in war, as we saw in the passages from Exodus 22 and Deuteronomy 20 quoted above. Under the new covenant, the people of God do not constitute a political body, and God has not given the church the authority to punish criminal offenses. This responsibility is given to political leaders (Romans 13:1-7).

Similar considerations must be kept in mind when examining other Old Testament laws. Although many Old Testament laws no longer have a direct application, they often communicate a principle that is instructive for followers of Jesus Christ.

Read Leviticus 19. What is your overall impression of the laws contained in this chapter? Are there any commands that you were surprised to find in this ancient law code? For each of the commands in this chapter, decide whether 1) The command can be applied without modification in your context; 2) There is a clear principle underlying the command that can be applied in your context; or 3) The command is basically not applicable under the new covenant or in your cultural context. Explain your reasoning.

Navigating Cultural Differences

What do we do when we find in the Old Testament (or the New Testament) things like legalized slavery, people groups seeking to destroy and displace other people groups, a strongly patriarchal society, polygamy, capital punishment for offenses besides murder, and a number of laws and practices that strike us as strange or even immoral?

First, it is important to examine particular practices within the context of the worldview and cultural location of the practitioners. It is unfair to extract a certain behavior out of the context of an ancient culture and examine it as one isolated element against the backdrop of our own culture. Note Paul's comments on how God judges people.

¹²All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.

¹⁴(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their

consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.)

Romans 2:12-15

It seems that God, in his wisdom, chose not to introduce radically new and unintelligible cultural forms and structures to the Israelites. Instead, God revealed himself through the existing cultural forms of the ancient near east with the intention of incrementally breaking down the less than ideal structures that had developed throughout human history.

As an example, consider slavery in the Old Testament. First of all, much of the "slavery" discussed in the Old Testament law is probably better understood as something more along the lines of indentured servanthood. It was a last resort for the person who hit rock bottom financially and had no relatives to help him out. In this case, a man could voluntarily indenture himself or his wife or one of his children to a wealthier Israelite for some period of time in order to pay off a debt, or to keep from going into debt.

God established specific laws governing this practice to protect these "slaves," often with the ultimate goal of helping them recover economically. Consider Deuteronomy 15:12-18.

¹²If any of your people—Hebrew men or women—sell themselves to you and serve you six years, in the seventh year you must let them go free. ¹³And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed. ¹⁴Supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to them as the LORD your God has blessed you. ¹⁵Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today.

¹⁶But if your servant says to you, "I do not want to leave you," because he loves you and your family and is well off with you, ¹⁷then take an awl and push it through his earlobe into the door, and he will become your servant for life. Do the same for your female servant.

¹⁸Do not consider it a hardship to set your servant free, because their service to you these six years has been worth twice as much as that of a hired hand. And the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do.

Deuteronomy 15:12-18

Even though a version of “slavery” is being practiced here, we can see that God’s purposes are redemptive.

An interesting law dealing with what seems to be slaves from foreign lands appears later in Deuteronomy. If a slave was attempting to escape from oppressive foreign masters by seeking refuge in Israel, the Israelites were to take him in.

¹⁵If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand them over to their master. ¹⁶Let them live among you wherever they like and in whatever town they choose. Do not oppress them.

Deuteronomy 23:15-16

Again we see God’s redemptive intentions.

Other passages dealing with non-Israelite slaves are more troubling for modern people. (And again, we should emphasize that it is modern people that find this troubling. Slavery existed everywhere throughout the ancient near east.) This passage has to do with foreign slaves acquired by the Israelites.

⁴²Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. ⁴³Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God.

⁴⁴“Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. ⁴⁵You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property. ⁴⁶You can bequeath them to your children as inherited

property and can make them slaves for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly.

Leviticus 25:42-46

Even here, where we are likely to be troubled, we should note a couple of things. Firstly, it's not the case that all foreigners or people of a certain race were forced into slavery. In fact, the very next verse talks about foreigners living in Israel who became wealthy enough to have Hebrew servants.

⁴⁷“If a foreigner residing among you becomes rich and any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to the foreigner or to a member of the foreigner's clan, ⁴⁸they retain the right of redemption after they have sold themselves. One of their relatives may redeem them...”

Leviticus 25:47-48

Secondly, slaves in Israel could not be treated viciously. There were specific laws protecting slaves, which was an anomaly in the ancient near east.

²⁶“An owner who hits a male or female slave in the eye and destroys it must let the slave go free to compensate for the eye. ²⁷And an owner who knocks out the tooth of a male or female slave must let the slave go free to compensate for the tooth.”

Exodus 21:26-27

Thirdly, foreign slaves were often circumcised along with Israelite boys so that they could participate in worship.

⁴³The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “These are the regulations for the Passover meal:

“No foreigner may eat it. ⁴⁴Any slave you have bought may eat it after you have circumcised him, ⁴⁵but a temporary resident or a hired worker may not eat it.

Exodus 12:43-45

What we see in these Old Testament laws is that although Israel was permitted to continue certain practices that none of their ancient near eastern neighbors questioned, God introduced laws to protect both Israelites and non-Israelites from abuse. Rather than instantly crushing the cultural structures that Israel and her neighbors were familiar with, God chose to work through less than ideal cultural forms as he introduced a redemptive program that would ultimately tear down every cultural structure that is a result of human sin.

Is there anything in the Old or New Testament that you find jarring or morally troubling? Explain. Does reading this material with the original cultural context in mind impact how you react to it? Do you think there were any ancient cultural practices that God permitted and regulated but which he ultimately intended to tear down? If so, give some examples.

Jesus in the Old Testament

Consider again 1 Corinthians 10:1-4.

¹For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ²They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

1 Corinthians 10:1-4

Note what Paul is doing in this passage: He is reflecting on key events in the history of Israel, and now, from his new perspective as a disciple of Jesus Christ, he is seeing connections to the gospel. This was certainly a novel way to read many portions of the Old Testament. Jesus' own statements concerning his relationship to the Old Testament suggest, however, that this type of reading originated with Jesus himself.

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me...

John 5:39

[Jesus] said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Luke 24:44

Following are three ways that we "find" Christ in the Old Testament.

1. There are some passages in the Old Testament that explicitly anticipate a coming anointed king.

A good example is Isaiah 11:1-3, 10.

*¹A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.*

*²The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—*

³and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

¹⁰In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

Isaiah 11:1-3, 10

Knowing now that Jesus is the Messiah (see, for example, Mark 14:61-62 and Acts 2:36), we recognize that the messianic passages of the Old Testament speak to Jesus' public ministry, death, and resurrection and to his future reign on a new earth.

2. There are a number of religious structures and practices in the Old Testament that Jesus in some sense embodies in a deeper way.

Paul writes:

¹⁶Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

Colossians 2:16-17

The Gospel writer John gives us several more examples in the first chapter of his Gospel. God directed Moses to build a tabernacle (a large tent), and, later, Solomon to build a temple to be centers of worship where God would manifest his presence. But, as expressed in passages such as John 1:1-2, 14 and Matthew 12:5-6, Jesus is a greater manifestation of God's presence among us than the tabernacle or temple.

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning.

¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling (literally "tabernacled") among us.

John 1:1-2, 14

⁵Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? ⁶I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.

Matthew 12:5-6

In addition, recall that the sacrifice of the "passover" lamb is what spared the firstborn sons of Israel from death when God brought judgment upon the sin of Egypt. Later in John 1 we read that when John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him he declared, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

- 3. On a number of occasions God had his people go through experiences which he providentially arranged to be recorded in such a way that they would foreshadow the redemption brought by Jesus Christ.**

This occurred many times in the lives of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A particularly striking example is God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Other examples can be found in many of the songs that were birthed out of the life experiences of the psalmists.

Consider Psalm 22. This psalm begins with a powerful, but almost paradoxical, combination of deep despair and enduring trust.

¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

⁹Yet... you made me trust in you...

Psalm 22:1, 9

In the second section of the song, circumstances become so bleak that the psalmist can see his death coming to pass. He is crying out for his life.

¹⁴I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. ¹⁵My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.

Psalm 22:14-15

And then something shifts. The psalmist sees his deliverance.

²²I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you. ²³You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel! ²⁴For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.

Psalm 22:22-24

Finally, the psalmist declares that the salvation that God has brought will be known in all the nations and in every generation.

²⁷All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him...

³⁰Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. ³¹They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!

Psalm 22:27, 30-31

The Gospel writer Matthew has reflected on Psalm 22 and recognizes that everything the psalmist went through, or imagined himself going through, has been experienced, sometimes in a shockingly literal way, by Jesus Christ. When he tells the story of Jesus' suffering, he uses the language of Psalm 22. Compare the following passages from the gospel of Matthew and Psalm 22.

When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

Matthew 27:35

*They divide my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment.*

Psalm 22:18

Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads...

Matthew 27:39

All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

Psalm 22:7

He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'"

Matthew 27:43

"He trusts in the LORD," they say, "let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him."

Psalm 22:8

About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

Matthew 27:46

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?

Psalms 22:1

The fact that Jesus himself used Psalm 22 to express his agony on the cross indicates that Jesus was conscious of his fulfillment of the psalmist's suffering. Matthew makes this fulfillment clear for his readers.

Read Hebrews 9. Explain some of the ways the author of Hebrews sees elements of the Old Testament anticipating and being fulfilled by Christ.

Chapter 6: Learning from the New Testament

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

2 Timothy 2:15

Many people feel more comfortable navigating the pages of the New Testament than they do reading through the Old Testament (excluding, perhaps, well-known Old Testament stories and the Psalms). Even so, there are several things we can do to read the New Testament more profitably.

1. Zoom out before zooming in.

Rather than reading just one verse, or one part of a verse, we should “zoom out” and read larger passages, or even an entire letter, so we can understand the place of a verse in the overall flow of an argument.

In any language, a great deal of the meaning of individual statements depends upon how they are punctuated, where paragraph divisions are made, and what their relationship is to the surrounding context. Removed from their context, verses or portions of verses can be easily misunderstood.

Consider Matthew 7:1. Many people are familiar with the first three words of this verse, which are, “Do not judge.” From these words we might conclude that no person should ever challenge the actions or beliefs of another person. “What’s true for me may not be true for you.” But consider the broader context.

¹“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ²For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

³“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

Matthew 7:1-5

The larger context makes it clear that Jesus was concerned about self-righteousness, hypocrisy, and a lack of love for others. He was not teaching that we should never evaluate the lives of others or address them when they sin. But we might miss this if we only concentrate on the phrase “Do not judge.”

Zooming out also helps us understand how particular words and concepts are used by the New Testament authors. Consider the following verse.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you...

Ephesians 1:18

What does Paul mean here by “the hope to which [God] has called [us]?”

We may be inclined to read into this verse whatever particular hopes or dreams are in our hearts. Perhaps our hope is that God would give us a great marriage, or children with bright futures, or work that is truly significant. Maybe, we reason, God has called each of us to have different hopes, and Paul is praying that believers would know the specific hope that God has called each of us to.

Those concepts may appear in other places in the Scripture, but it is very unlikely that that is what Paul is getting at here. As we read other passages throughout Paul’s letters, we find that what Paul typically means by “hope” in contexts like these is a hope associated with the coming age, the hope of eternal salvation. In Colossians, for example, which was written around the same time as Ephesians, we find the following passage.

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people — ⁵the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel ⁶that has come to you.

Colossians 1:3-6

Zooming out will also help ensure that we don't miss the big ideas that are emphasized multiple times in one writing. Consider the New Testament letter of 1 John. First John contains a number of memorable verses including:

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

1 John 1:5

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

1 John 3:1

God is love.

1 John 4:16

When we read the entirety of John's letter, we find that even in these verses John is making one sustained argument: *Those who really know God demonstrate it with transformed behavior.* This theme appears in every chapter.

If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.

1 John 1:6

Whoever says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person.

1 John 2:4

No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

1 John 3:6

⁷Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

1 John 4:7-8

We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them.

1 John 5:18

Read 2 Corinthians 10:3-5. Some Bible readers apply these verses primarily in the context of conflict with demonic spirits, and they understand the “strongholds” referenced in verse 5 to be demonic strongholds in cultural institutions or the lives of individuals. Now read all of 2 Corinthians 10-12. What conflict is Paul addressing in these chapters? Given this context, what “war” or “fight” is Paul most likely describing in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5? What might be some appropriate applications of this passage?

2. Zoom out further to take into consideration the differing circumstances and the cultural context behind the New Testament documents.

All the documents that make up the New Testament were addressed to particular communities with unique circumstances. The nature of the communities and their specific circumstances impacted the contents of the writings sent to them. If we will read carefully, we can often piece together what was going on in these communities. This helps us as we think about applying the contents of the New Testament to our lives.

As an example, consider the differing circumstances behind Galatians and 1 Corinthians. In Galatia, some people had begun to teach that Gentile converts to Christianity were required to keep the entirety of the Law of Moses in order to experience salvation. Paul reacts very strongly to this

teaching, indicating that Christ did not come to bring people under the religious requirements of the Law of Moses, but rather to empower them to live in true freedom under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit. Paul writes:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Galatians 5:1

In Corinth, on the other hand, it appears that a number of people in the church were embracing completely inappropriate behaviors. Some were visiting prostitutes. Others were drinking to the point of drunkenness during celebrations of the Lord's supper. Church meetings were full of spiritual expressions that were unintelligible to newcomers. So Paul writes to them with these words:

¹⁹ ...You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Making intelligent inferences about the circumstances in which a letter was originally received helps us apply the contents of these letters to our own lives. If, for example, our church attendance is irregular, we don't financially support our local church, we can't be counted on to serve, and we make decisions based upon whatever we feel like doing, it's probably not appropriate for us to quote Galatians 5:1 as justification. We need 1 Corinthians 6.

On the other hand, if our spiritual life is consumed with clocking hours and acquiring gold stars for Bible study, prayer, small group participation, and volunteering, and everything seems to come from a loveless sense of duty, then we need Galatians 5:1. When we understand the context in which the New Testament documents were originally written and received, we will be in a better place to apply their contents to our lives.

As we did when we considered the Old Testament, we should remember that the cultural context of the 1st century Greco-Roman world is different in many ways from 21st century America (or most other developed

nations). This must be taken into consideration when we think about how instructions in the New Testament should be applied.

For example, four times in New Testament letters readers are encouraged to greet one another with a kiss. Most of us instinctively know that it may not be appropriate to use this greeting in our contexts.

Now consider the much more controversial instructions in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.

³⁴Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. ³⁵If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

Several things should be noted here. First, it's almost certain that this prohibition against women speaking in church gatherings was not intended to be absolute. Just a few chapters before this, Paul talks about women praying and prophesying, and he almost surely means in public settings.

Secondly, it is obvious from Paul's letters that many women worked with him in his ministry. So he certainly wasn't of the opinion that women were not Spirit-empowered and should not be active in ministry and church-planting.

Many scholars, then, think that in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul is addressing the judging of prophecies, and that allowing a woman to stand in judgment over a man (perhaps even her own husband) would be inappropriate. Therefore, he instructs women to be silent in these contexts. This is a reasonable clarification of what Paul likely intended, although from this distance we can't be completely certain.

What is fairly certain, however, is that in Paul's context, his instruction requiring women to remain silent on at least some occasions was not culturally jarring. It was in line with what most people in the broader cultural context considered socially proper. In the 1st century the Christian

faith was incredibly liberating for women, and many women flocked to the early church. It seems that the Corinthians were on the edge of taking their “freedom” so far that they would have been offensive to the very culture they were trying to engage.

On the other hand, in the United States today, if a church were to make a policy requiring women to be silent in small group discussions that also included men, such a policy would grossly violate our social norms without providing any clear spiritual benefit.

Therefore, the way in which a church should apply such a passage is going to depend a great deal upon the church’s cultural context.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10 - 4:17. What does this passage reveal about the cultural context of the Corinthian believers? What do you think they valued? Are any of these values widely shared by people in your cultural context? Do you share any of these values? What are some of the ways Paul responds to the values of the Corinthians? What can we conclude about what God wants us to value?

3. Zoom in for personal application.

Consider the following verses from Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7

It is helpful to examine these verses one phrase at a time in order for the richness of their content to make a deep impact on our lives.

“Do not be anxious about anything...”

God commands us not to be anxious. This means that when we begin to experience anxiety, we have a choice. We can run with it, or we can follow God’s plan for dealing with it.

"...but in every situation..."

According to God's instruction, no matter how overwhelming our circumstances may be, there is never a time when God wants his children to respond to life's challenges with anxiety.

"...by prayer and petition..."

So how are we to respond when the world begins to shake? With prayer! God wants us to turn to him. We're not to respond with anxiety but prayer.

"...with thanksgiving..."

When something goes wrong, we often feel like everything has gone wrong. But if we are still breathing, we can talk to God. And if we can talk to God, the story is not over. And, therefore, we have something to be thankful for.

"...present your requests to God."

The God of the universe says to us, "Ask me." This is astounding! The book of James states, "You do not have because you do not ask God." Jesus teaches:

*⁹"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?
¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"*

Matthew 7:9-11

God wants us to bring our requests to him.

"And the peace of God..."

What will God give us in place of anxiety? His peace. The most important thing is not what is happening outside of us. It is what is happening inside of us. The battle is not won "out there." It is won in our hearts and minds.

"...which transcends all understanding..."

We can have peace before we have it all figured out. That is good news. Our peace does not have to be contingent upon our understanding.

"...will guard your hearts and minds..."

We tend to feel anxiety in two places: our head and our heart. We are affected emotionally, and we can't get our thoughts to settle down. But God will take care of both.

"...in Christ Jesus."

This peace is available to anyone who is in Christ Jesus.

The above is one quick example of how we can zoom in, read slowly, and thoughtfully apply a short passage from a New Testament letter to our lives.

Two other very practical ways to "zoom in" on the Scriptures are "praying" the Scriptures and memorizing the Scriptures. We might pray the above passage by saying something along the lines of the following.

Father, I thank you that your command not to be anxious implies that I can choose a different response. I'm coming to you now in the middle of this challenging circumstance to ask you to bring about a favorable resolution. Thank you that there is still hope in this situation and that you are at work in my life. God, let your peace fill my heart and my mind. Help me put away all of my anxious thoughts. Thank you for bringing me near to you through your Son Jesus Christ. I love you, Lord. Amen.

Take a few minutes right now and try to memorize Philippians 4:6-7.

Read slowly through Romans 8:31-37. Take time to meditate on some of the key phrases and expressions. What stands out to you? How is this passage relevant to your life?

Notes

