

Unit 1

The Pentateuch: God Chooses Israel to Be His Redeemed People

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Lesson 1

Approaching the Old Testament



David Slaying Goliath by Peter Paul Rubens.

You may be familiar with the stories of the Old Testament. Perhaps you heard about David and Goliath at church or learned about Abraham and Sarah in school. But did you ever wonder how those stories apply to you today? Some Christians wonder why they should study the Old Testament, given that Jesus and his disciples do not appear until the New Testament. Isn't the New Testament sufficient for our growth as Christians? So much of the Old Testament seems outdated.

We can't gain a proper understanding of who Jesus was and what he did unless we understand the Old Testament. Not only does the Old Testament compose roughly 75 percent of Scripture, but it lays out the plot of the story that Jesus came to resolve. Would you understand or appreciate the last 20 minutes of a movie had you not seen the first hour and a half? Similarly, it is difficult to appreciate fully why Jesus came into the world unless we see how he fulfilled the story begun in the Old Testament.

Although the Old Testament was written thousands of years ago, it remains relevant for us in the 21st century. Just as God does not change, neither does the truth of the Bible. The Old Testament was written with future generations in mind, in order to teach us (1 Corinthians 10:11). In fact, the New Testament says that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

No other ancient writings have this quality, because they were not inspired by God. To

Total Number of Chapters	1,189	
Old Testament	929	78%
New Testament	260	22%
Total Number of Verses	31,103	
Old Testament	23,145	approx 75%
New Testament	7,958	25%

say that the Bible was inspired means that God “breathed out” the words of Scripture through the human authors. The books of the Old Testament were written by many different authors—from Moses to Malachi—yet there is also one author: the Holy Spirit. This mystery of God working through the human authors to compile and write the great story of redemption is what gives the Bible its unique character. It is an eternally relevant book.

Some people have mistakenly thought that the New Testament and Old Testament are at odds with each other. They perceive the Old Testament as legalistic—all about pleasing God by obeying laws and sacrifices. They see the Old Testament as harsh and demanding and the New Testament as gracious and forgiving. They may even think that Jesus disagreed with the strict laws of the Old Testament and shifted the focus from outward obedience to an inward focus on the heart.

Instead, Jesus claimed that he was in harmony with the Old Testament and came to fulfill it, not to do away with it (Matthew 5:17–20). Jesus never disagreed with what was written in the Old Testament; he disagreed only with how some people had interpreted it. He wanted to restore its true meaning. He said the Old Testament was not about striving to please a strict God; it is about a holy God who demands obedience and promises his love to those who will trust and obey. Both the Old and New Testaments reveal a gracious God, but both also require inward, heartfelt obedience from God’s people.

It is true that Old Testament believers followed certain laws and ceremonies that Christians no longer follow, but this is only because we have experienced the fulfillment of these symbols. Instead of interpreting the differences between the Old and New Testaments as conflicts, we will view the differences in terms of growth. We will see that

the whole Bible is one unified story, but it is also a story that matures as it unfolds.

As we embark on this Old Testament study, we look forward to seeing how this epic tale of adventure, love, and betrayal will energize and strengthen your faith.

Reflection Questions

1. *Think of a story from the Old Testament and a lesson you learned from that story. How might you miss out on God’s truth if you did not have that story?*
2. *If someone said that he or she was inspired by the beauty in nature and just had to compose a song or drawing about it, is that the same thing as the authors of Scripture being inspired? Why or why not?*
3. *What would you say if you wanted to encourage yourself or someone else to read the Bible more regularly? What reasons could you give?*

Lesson 2

The One Big Story



Which would you rather read: an adventure novel or a theological treatise? The Lord of the Rings trilogy, or a doctrine textbook? Most of us would choose to read the story; stories excite our imaginations and emotions much more than a list of doctrines could. We should not be surprised, then, that God chose to reveal the Bible as a story, not as a mere list of facts about himself.

We have all heard many stories from the Old Testament—Daniel in the lions’ den, Noah and the flood. But if you were asked to tell the Old Testament as one story, could you do it? We might begin with key terms such as *redemption*, *God*, *God’s people*, or *God’s love*. But do these summarize the whole Old Testament? And how does such a theme become a story, complete with characters, conflict, setting, and plot?

The terms suggested above are all important biblical themes, but none of them explain the story of the whole Old Testament. For instance, the Bible is certainly about God, but it features other characters as well—and not just God’s people, but God’s enemies, too. God’s love for humanity is another major theme of the Bible, but his holiness and justice are equally important. And even the theme of redemption leaves out two important pieces: the Creation of the world and the Fall into sin.

For an even more complete story, we will use what biblical scholars use as the best summary of the Old Testament: God’s kingdom. This theme includes all the stages of Scripture from Creation, to Fall, to redemption. It also incorporates all the characters mentioned in Scripture: God, God’s people, evil people—even animals and the Earth. The word *kingdom* demonstrates that God rules as a king over both people (his sub-

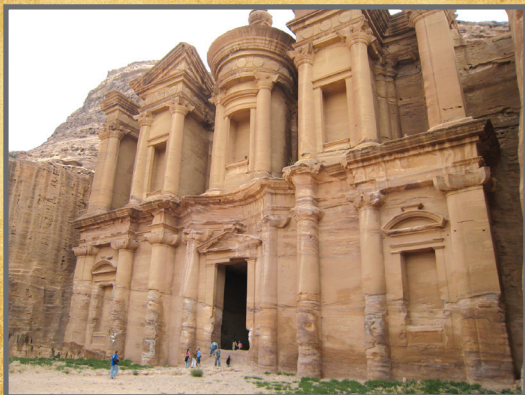
God’s Kingdom

God’s kingdom is his rule over all creation. When Jesus taught us to pray “Your kingdom come,” he meant that we should pray for God’s rule to govern our own lives more and more, to pray that the church will be strong and bring the message of God’s rule into the world, to pray that the works of Satan will be defeated, and to pray for the day when Jesus comes again to bring God’s rule to its perfect end in the new creation.

See Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 48.



jects) and place (his domain). That is why, from the Book of Genesis to the Book of Malachi, you will learn to tie the stories of the Old Testament back to the idea of God's desire for a kingdom made of holy people and holy place.



Many great kingdoms have come and gone, some leaving little evidence they ever existed. But God's Word remains.

The kingdom theme springs from all that Scripture says about God ruling and reigning. The Bible declares that God rules over the Earth and all the people in it (Psalm 103:19). He wants all people to acknowledge his rule and bow before his Son, Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:9–11). Jesus has been given authority over all the Earth, and one day everyone will acknowledge him to be Lord (Romans 14:11). But until that time, God wants us to be involved in helping his enemies turn to him and become his willing, joyful subjects (2 Corinthians 5:20).

As you begin your study of how God's kingdom unfolded in the Old Testament, you may feel as though you are entering a different world: an ancient world of emperors and conquest, bloody rituals and treaties, pharaohs and slaves. You will see that accurately understanding this world requires a good deal of study, so we will delve into the historic and literary background to gain the original, ancient meaning. But we won't stay in the ancient world. You will learn to see that even our modern world is not controlled by

presidents, prime ministers, celebrities, or other powerful forces, but by one supreme ruler: the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one who sits enthroned over the universe.

The story of God's kingdom being established here on Earth is an epic tale of good versus evil. It contains all the elements of suspense, heartbreak, violence, betrayal, and love that make for the best film or novel. Yet this is not just a compelling story; it is a true story. And it has the power to stir our hearts and propel us into action. It is a more radical message than we often hear. We will encounter a God who is not only a loving friend to help us in our troubles but a king who created us and makes demands of us. This story of God's kingdom will give us not only a bigger vision of God but also of our own lives. We will see that we were commissioned with spreading God's kingdom here on Earth. We influence how history unfolds. We can have influence for eternity.

May learning the biblical story of God's redemption lead you to embrace Jesus Christ even more energetically and to come to participate in his mission of transforming this world.

Reflection Questions

1. *Many Christians have found fictional stories of kingdoms—such as *Lord of the Rings* or *the Chronicles of Narnia*—to convey the truths of Christianity very powerfully. Non-Christians and Christians alike are also moved by fairy tales of kings and kingdoms. Identify at least three stories in this category.*
2. *If we viewed our sins as actual rebellion against the King of the universe, how would that change our perspective?*
3. *What are some ways that your behavior and thoughts should change in light of seeing God as the great and loving King of the universe?*