

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO STUDYING THE OLD TESTAMENT

Studying the Old Testament doesn't have to be a confusing or daunting task. In fact, the more we study the Old Testament, the greater our understanding will be of the New Testament's teachings. God's patience, love, and compassion are put on display over and over again in the books of the Old Testament. Because God doesn't change in His character, purposes, or ways, then the things we learn about Him in the Old Testament are also true of Him in the pages of the New Testament.

When it comes to studying the Old Testament, remembering the following 3 areas will greatly help your understanding and provide clarity as you study.

Studying the Old Testament

When studying the Old Testament, it's helpful to consider: 1) What did the *original audience* understand when the instruction was given? 2) What *timeless truths* about God can we learn from this passage or section of Scripture? 3) Because *all Scripture is profitable and useful for training in righteousness*, what principles can you glean and apply to your life today?

A Word About Covenants

Israel is the recipient of God's gracious covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:2; 15:5). God had not only promised to give the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants, He also promised personal blessing to Abraham and his offspring. God also promised all the nations of the world would be blessed through Abraham because of one of his descendants—Jesus. Abraham didn't do anything to deserve God's favor, nor did Abraham's offspring. God chose to do good to Abraham and his family, no strings attached. This *unilateral* covenant, also known as the *Abrahamic* Covenant, is in place simply because God chose to bless Abraham and his descendants *forever*. It's amazing to consider that this covenant is still in effect today!

During the time when the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy take place, the nation of Israel also entered into another kind of covenant with God. This was a *bilateral* covenant, also known as the *Sinaitic* Covenant. God instituted the Sinaitic covenant with the nation of Israel during the time in which the book of Exodus takes place. The covenant with Abraham, which is also in effect toward the nation of Israel during the time of the Exodus and wilderness wanderings, is a one-way covenant. God promised to love and care for the people of Israel. But when God rescued the nation of Israel out of Egypt, God also wanted to teach the nation about Himself and how to live lives that give Him glory in all things, so He gave them the laws at Mt. Sinai. These laws are God's way of teaching the nation about the things that are important to Him—things like holiness, love for God, and love for your neighbor. In essence, they are God's "family rules," so the nation of Israel can live in harmony with God. In this *bi-lateral (two-way) covenant*, Israel also played a role, saying they would keep God's laws, follow Him, and love Him, for He would be their God and they would be His people. God promised to bless them in the land if they would obey Him.

Understanding the Law

The law, however, was *never* intended as a means of salvation. Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:1-6; Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6). Salvation

has always been by faith as the means of pleasing God (Hebrews 11:6). The law was given to set Israel apart from the nations. Israel's unique distinctness from the surrounding nations was to be a light pointing the nations to the One, True God. *God always intended that the law would lead people to Him*, that they would learn more about Him, and desire to walk with Him in faith. Everyone who was saved in the Old Testament times was saved by grace through faith in God, just like everyone today is saved by grace through faith in God. In the Old Testament people looked forward to the promised Savior, while in New Testament we look backward to Jesus' sacrificial and finished work on the Cross for salvation.

“The law was not designed to regulate human behavior for the world at large, but to provide legal, moral, and religious guidelines for a *special people* chosen for a *special task*. The law is not a means of salvation, but contains instructions of how to live. At least four times in the New Testament it is clearly stated that the believer is not under the law (Rom. 6:14-15; Gal. 5:18; 1 Cor. 9:20). The means of salvation for men in all ages has been faith. The Old Testament saint was never saved by law nor can one be saved by law in this dispensation (Rom. 3:20). The Old Testament saint was regenerated and justified by faith as is the one who receives Christ today. *The difference then is not in salvation, but the means by which one's conduct is governed*. In other words, in the Old Testament period fellowship with God was regulated by specific deeds and prohibitions accompanied with a series of checks and penalties. This was designed to protect Israel from the idolatry that surrounded her and provide the way for the appearance of Messiah. When Christ came He brought a new era of grace and truth (Jn. 1:17). *For the believer the law is nonetheless revealing and instructive. It gives insight into the mind of God and helps one to determine what standards of holiness He expects of those who follow Him.*”
– John J. Davis, from his commentary on Exodus, titled *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*.

For You

It's helpful to remember these key facts (above) when studying the Old Testament and the covenants, yet the most important thing to remember is that the means of salvation has *always* been *by faith* in God. Salvation comes when we look to God to provide everything we need for salvation. We can't please God based on our own merits and works, nor can any amount of faithful adherence to God's laws cover over our sin, nor can our sin be atoned for by the blood of bulls and goats (Hebrews 10:4).

Okay, with that in mind, let's get studying!