

For the last three and a half months we have explored various Old Testament stories, in part to lift up the Old Testament – which is the first 3/4 of the Bible – because most Christians don't give much attention to the first 3/4 of the Bible. But more importantly, to learn valuable faith lessons from the characters we meet in those stories.

Not going to name them all, but for example in this series we talked about Noah, Abraham, Gideon, Adam and Eve, Jonah, Job, and last week Ruth. Some, familiar characters. Some, not. All, however, helpful to our spiritual walks.

So what have we learned in this sermon series? Today I want to answer that question, but with the help of a larger palette: What is the message of the Old Testament?

Before we go there, I need to ask a favor of our Core and More Bible study people. Last Tuesday we celebrated the end of our three year journey through the entire Old Testament, and as part of that review we basically answered the question I'm addressing today. So, to you three I know today's sermon is going to sound familiar; please be patient.

What is the message of the Old Testament? One way to think about the Old Testament is as the story of the relationship between God and Israel. One question people ask of couples getting married is, how did you meet. Well, the Old Testament tells us how God and Israel met. First God created the earth, then the earth's population began to grow. Eventually into that population came Abraham with whom God entered into a covenant, a promise that through Abraham God's people would be born. A few generations down the line came Joseph who ended up in Egypt, which moved Abraham's lineage into Egypt. The eventual generational result of that move was a bunch of people in bondage in Egypt.

Of course, then it was time for Moses and the burning bush, the exodus from Egypt, the ten commandments and the rest of the law, plus the fundamental covenant between God and Israel: I will be your God, you will be my people. And the way Israel was to be God's people was to follow the commands. In short, God told Israel to be holy, set apart, different from surrounding nations.

So they're out of Egypt, in possession of the law, then it's into the promised land to set up shop as a nation. How did that go? Sometimes well. Sometimes poorly. Basically, it fell into a pattern. Israel would be faithful to God. But inevitably the people would sin. God would punish. Israel would apologize and promise not to do it again. God would forgive. Israel would be faithful to God again...until they sinned again.... And over and over again that pattern would repeat.

I've just given you a summary of the first half of the Old Testament. You don't have to read it now; you've heard the Cliff Notes!

In the other half of the Old Testament, we find the prophets who basically reminded people of what God expected of them, and told them that there would be consequences if they failed to comply. And before the prophets we find books like Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, books whose central mission is to think about and respond to real life. Sometimes the authors respond with joy and praise; sometimes they respond with anguish and protest.

That's it: the entire Old Testament in what, seven minutes?

The word I have for us today is that Old Testament story is our story! Some people will say but we're New Testament people! But hear the big picture. People get in trouble. God rescues. God offers a relationship with expectations. People run hot and cold in their faithfulness, which produces consequences, confessions, repentance, and forgiveness. And that happens over and over and over again. That's the Christian story! That's basically what happens to you and me.

Break it down. On our own, something's missing. God finds us, throws us a lifeline named Jesus, offers us new

life in the form of a relationship – You'll be my people; Jesus will be your lord. That's God's offer! But with that offer come expectations, which on a regular basis we fail to meet. So we confess, promise to change, and God forgives us, which moves us back into good standing... until we mess up again. And so it repeats in our lives over and over and over until....

Those prophets I told you about at the end of the O.T. had a word about the “until” question. In the end, ultimately, they proclaimed, God's way would triumph in ultimate victory; evil would be wiped out – lions and lambs would lie down together; wars would end; peace would prevail. And that's our story, too.

We who follow Jesus proclaim that no matter how hard this life is, how many mistakes we make, how badly we human beings mess up God's vision, in the end, ultimately, our God reigns and by God's grace and through the name of Jesus we will reign with him.

The Old Testament ends with something the prophets labeled the “Day of the Lord.” The N.T. book of Revelation ends with a new heaven and new earth. Our lives end with everlasting life. It's the same basic story. The Old Testament presents our story, your story.

The song “Amazing grace.” “I was once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.” Israel was lost in Egypt. Centuries later Israel was lost in something we call the exile. In both instances God rescued them. They once were lost, but then they were found.

There was a time in your life when you thought you could live on your own, by your own strength, according to your rules. You were lost. But God found you, offered you new life in the form of a relationship with Jesus. You accepted the offer – at least I assume you accepted the offer – and your life changed. Yes, you messed up – again and again and again – but each time you came back to your senses – we ALL come back to our senses and discover God's willingness to forgive, to restore us to life, to start again... make that new life.

Again and again and again in the Old Testament Israel fails, but then repents and is forgiven. That's us, too. And that's today sermon. Don't be just a New Testament Christian. Be a Bible Christian. Make room for the Old Testament's drama, and conflict, and hope – a hope that you might really need today.