

The B-I-B-L-E Sermon Series
1 – What’s in the Old Testament?
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Let me tell you a story.

How did you respond when I said that? My guess is your ears perked up a bit, maybe you even leaned forward. We all love a good story, don’t we? As kids, nothing engaged our imagination like hearing, “Once upon a time...” We are narrative creatures. We want to know what happens next. We want to know how the story turns out. That’s why we binge-watch an entire season of a show in a weekend or get angry when someone tells us the ending to a movie.

That’s why, as we start this sermon series on the Bible, it’s important for us, right at the beginning, to talk about the purpose of the Bible. And that matters, because the Bible isn’t primarily a rulebook, or a self-help manual, or a collection of inspirational quotes. It’s not the literal word of God, downloaded straight from heaven in the good ol’ King James English. It’s not a checklist to determine who’s in and who’s out, who God loves and who God judges.

At its core, the Bible is a story. It’s the story about a creative, generous, patient God and God’s recalcitrant, difficult, stiff-necked people – that’s you and me, in case you were wondering. It’s a story about how God loved us but we didn’t love God back, so God kept loving us and we still didn’t love God back, and finally God loved us so much that God got right in our face and said, “I love you!” and we hung him on a cross. And then...God loved us some more. If you read the Bible as a story, you’ll see that at its essence, the Bible shows us who God is, so when we read something in it, our first question should be, “What does this story tell me about God?”

Today, we’re going to look at the part of the story that’s told in the first 39 books of the Bible, which have been historically known as the Old Testament. There’s been a movement to do away with that name and move to calling it the First Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures, because the word “old” has some negative connotations that go with it, especially when followed up by the word “new.” But the New Testament is not a bigger and better version of the old one. It wasn’t meant to replace what came before.

Instead, the First Testament tells us the story of how God created us, formed a relationship with us, and tried to lead us. While parts of it can be read as pointing to Jesus Christ, it’s not simply a prologue or an opening act. The Hebrew Scriptures stand on their own as a compelling, heart-breaking, hopeful story about God and God’s people. I wish I could give you a lot of information about every book this morning, but then we’d all be old by the time we left. So, this is going to be more of a scenic overview—and probably feel like trying to stuff a watermelon into a mailbox. Fasten your seatbelts, and you may want to open your pew Bible to the table of contents.

The story starts where every good story starts: “In the beginning...” The first book, Genesis, tells the story about how God created the world and everything in it, culminating in God’s greatest creation, us. This was truly an amazing feat for which God was immediately sorry, because we human beings used our God-given free will to disobey God, as we see in the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah’s Ark. So God chooses one particular couple, Abraham and Sarah, and seeks to build a great nation out of them and their offspring and lead them to the Promised Land. Genesis tells that story, through Abraham to his son Isaac, and then to his grandson Jacob.

Exodus picks up the story after God's people were made slaves in Egypt. God calls on another man, this one named Moses, to lead God's people out of slavery and into the Promised Land, where they could enjoy the blessing of being God's people. Along the way, God gives them the law, which is God's instructions on how the people are to live in order to be God's people. The books of Leviticus and Numbers are mostly the terms and conditions about that law – click this box if you agree – while the fifth book, Deuteronomy, is a restating of that law by Moses in his final sermon to God's people. Those first five books together – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – are known in Hebrew as the Torah, which means “law,” or in Greek as the Pentateuch, which means “five books.”

Next up are 12 history books that span about 800 years, weaving together different storylines and characters into this beautiful tapestry that shows us, as my friend David Shirey says, that God is “patiently, persistently, passionately working God's purposes out, sometimes with the help of God's people, sometimes without them, and sometimes in spite of them.”

First up is Joshua, which tells about God's people settling into the Promised Land, while Judges tells about tribal leaders like Gideon, Samson, and Deborah. Both books are rated R for violence and bloodshed, which makes Ruth an interesting contrast—a gentle story about two women from enemy nations who share a lifelong friendship.

The next six books – 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, 1st and 2nd Chronicles – tell the story of God's people demanding a king to lead them, and God saying, “Really? You have me, but you want one of YOU to lead you? Good luck with that!” Starting with Saul, God's people have a series of kings, some good like David and Solomon, some bad like most of the rest of them. The leadership is so bad that at one point God's people split into two different kingdoms. Can you imagine a group of God's people disagreeing so strongly that they divided? I'm so glad that doesn't happen today! These books remind us that the human condition hasn't changed much in several thousand years...and yet God still loves us.

Eventually, Babylon conquers God's people and carries them into exile. After the Exodus, this is probably the most defining event in Israel's story. And what they discover is that even thousands of miles from home, God still loves them. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the homecoming from exile and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. The last history book, Esther, is a beautiful little interlude, telling the story of one woman acting bravely to save God's people.

Then we move to Wisdom and Poetry section. Job struggles with suffering; Psalms gives us the hymnbook of Israel; Proverbs offers wisdom for living; Ecclesiastes cynically wrestles with the meaning of life; and Song of Songs is an erotic love poem that will probably make you blush. Most children's bibles skip this one.

That covers 22 books of the First Testament, leaving the last 17, which are the Prophets. The first five – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel – are called the Major Prophets because of their length; the last 12 are the Minor Prophets. The prophets all lived during the time of the History Books and served the role of reminding God's people who they were called to be. Some of the prophets lived before the exile, and warned God's people to behave or they would be punished. Some of the prophets lived during the exile and reminded God's people that God had not forgotten them.

What would usually happen was that the prophet would get a message from God and speak it to the people. The people would either listen and straighten up, or more often, ignore the prophet. God would then exact punishment on the people, which caused them to repent and return to their Godly ways. That would last a little while, and then they'd start falling away

again. So God would send another prophet. Second verse, same as the first. One of the most famous lines from the prophets is from Micah, who says, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” But the people didn’t do those things, so finally God decided on a better way to relate to them. We’ll save that for next week when we look at the New, or Second, Testament.

So there you have it! A bullet-train ride through the First Testament. If you’re feeling a little overwhelmed, don’t worry. I’ve been studying this for years and I’m still overwhelmed. After all that, you might be tempted to say, “Okay, but do I really need all of this? Isn’t Jesus enough?” I had a congregation member once tell me we should just do away with the Old Testament because all we need is Jesus. But that would be like taking the letters your grandparents wrote or your old family photo albums, and throwing them in the garbage because, “Well, those people aren’t here anymore.”

We need the story. We need to know where we came from. We need to know the people who got it right and the people who got it spectacularly wrong. We need to know about their faith and their failures, their courage and their stubbornness, their victories and their exiles.

Because the First Testament tells us something we desperately need to remember: God has never given up on God’s people. Not when Adam and Eve messed things up. Not when Israel wandered in the wilderness. Not when the kings failed. Not when the people were divided. Not when Jerusalem fell. Not when they were carried into exile. Again and again, God called. God waited. God forgave. God restored. God loved.

And if that sounds like an ancient story, maybe we haven’t been paying attention. Because we are still those people. We still wander. We still get it wrong. We still turn away. We still divide ourselves into tribes and factions and convince ourselves that our way is the only way. We still need prophets to remind us who we are.

And God is still God. Still calling. Still waiting. Still forgiving. Still restoring. Still loving. That’s why we don’t throw away the First Testament. Because it isn’t just the story of people who lived thousands of years ago. It is the beginning of our story. It is the story of a God who, from the very beginning, has been chasing after us with a love that refuses to quit. And next week, we’ll see just how far that love is willing to go. But for today, remember this: This ancient story is God’s story. This ancient story is our story. And the story isn’t over yet.