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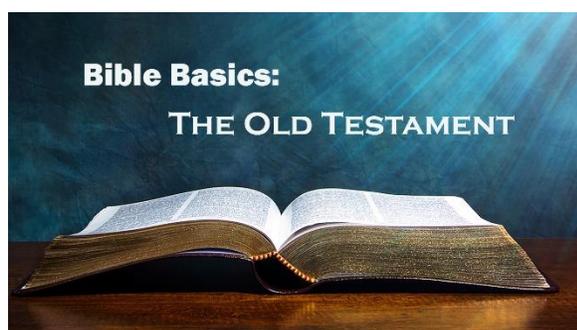
**Title:** Bible Basics: The Old Testament

**Preaching:** Ryan Hazen, Lead Pastor, Mud Creek Campus

**Text:** [Psalm 119:105-112](#)

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After a seven-week sermon series, I thought we'd back off a bit and embark on just a two-week series. I'm not even sure if two sermons qualify as a "series" so it may just be one sermon with two parts. These two sermons – today and next week – will be a departure from what you usually hear from the pulpit. Usually, we take a

story or short passage of scripture and dissect it to see how it might have implications for our life. That is all well and good and we'll get back to that but for these two weeks, rather than looking at a passage with a microscope, I'd like to take a high-level view of the Bible itself. It might be the kind of view that Sir Richard Branson had of the earth from his ride to the edge of space. We'll look at the big picture – this week with the Old Testament and next week with the New Testament. I've called it Bible Basics – for many it will be just that – BASIC - for others it will be brand new information. Let's get started.

First, the Bible is only talked about singularly as a "book" because of its binding. It's bound together as one book but it's a book of books. The books that make up the Bible were written by various people over more than 1,000 years and these books span a variety of literary genres, including poetry, history, songs, stories, letters, and prophetic writings. They were originally written on scrolls of parchment. Keep in mind, Gutenberg didn't even invent the printing press until 1440 so up until that time, scribes copied these manuscripts by hand.

Over time, the sacred texts that were deemed authentic and authoritative by the communities who used them were included in the canon or the definitive collection of scripture. The rest were discarded or, in some cases, hidden. We are still finding them with a large cache called the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered between 1946 and 1956. What's in and what's out of our Bible mostly ended in the late 300s. However, the debate over which books were theologically legitimate continued until at least the 16th century when church reformer Martin Luther published his German translation of the Bible.

Luther had issues with the book of James, which emphasized the role of "works" alongside faith, so he stuck James and Hebrews in the back of the Bible alongside Jude and Revelation, which he also thought were questionable. In Luther's original Bible, those four books don't even appear in the table of contents.

Early on, there were lots of other texts in circulation. Early Christian historian Eusebius talks about the Apocalypse of Peter, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Gospel of Thomas still being debated. Most scholars believe that there were hundreds of texts like those found in the New and Old Testaments that didn't make it into the scripture we know as the Bible.

It's important to say as we examine the Bible that not even all Christian denominations today consider the same books to be canon. Most Protestant Bibles including ours have 66 books - 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. The Roman Catholic Bible has 73 books including seven known as the Apocrypha. And the Ethiopian Orthodox Church includes 81 total books in its Bible including books like 1 Enoch and Jubilees.

Our Bible has these two major divisions – the Old Testament and the New Testament. We'll take a deeper dive into the New Testament next week. For today, let's keep to the Old Testament. Only Christians use the words "OLD" and "NEW" as a way to divide the two. Most scholars call the Old Testament "The Hebrew Bible" – it was both written in Hebrew and for the Hebrew people.

From there, we can break down the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible into distinct sections. The Torah, the Hebrew word, or the Pentateuch, the Greek word, or simply "Law" denotes the first five books of the Old Testament – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Then there are historical books – books like Kings and Chronicles. After that is wisdom literature like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and finally there are the prophets. The prophets are further divided into major and minor prophets, but this has to do more with length than content or status.

Some books are reflective of one particular incident or a particular time or a particular kingly reign. The book of Esther is an example. It is tied to the time of one queen and one emperor and only part of their lives at that. On the other hand, books like 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles cover multi-reigns. This means they have been brought together at the end of that period and cover hundreds of years. When you go from 1 Samuel to the end of 2 Kings, you are covering the period from before King Saul in the eleventh century BC, all the way to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC – almost half a millennium. <sup>1</sup>

If you'll buckle in, let's take a high-level view of the specific books in the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible and we'll end with how we might view the Old Testament as a whole. Genesis is the first book, and it begins with creation – there are actually two different creation stories in Genesis, but we usually latch onto the first one. God makes everything good then comes what is called “the fall” when Adam and Eve disobeyed God. Rebellion against the Creator leads to judgment including a flood. From Genesis 12 on, there is a recounting of the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph – with a huge emphasis on the promises of God to Abraham.

Their descendants multiply, and these Israelites are viewed as a threat. They are eventually enslaved. That sets the stage for Exodus and the birth of Moses. God calls him when he's about 80 and he leads the people of God on quite the adventure. This adventure culminates in Exodus 20 with the giving of the Ten Commandments. Moses dies at the end of the Pentateuch. Spoiler alert! - Moses doesn't get into the Promised Land.

Exodus is followed by Leviticus with a lot of laws, many of them ceremonial. Some of them are highly memorable moral laws like, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). But there are also specific laws that are the heart of the sacrificial ritual with Passover laws and the holiness code. The Book of Numbers lays out the numbering of the people and what the distribution of land will be once they get into the Promised Land.

Deuteronomy is a kind of review. If people trying to read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation did not give up in the laws of Leviticus, Deuteronomy will surely be a stopping point. It's confusing because it's not in straight line chronological order. Deuteronomy has Moses calling everybody back to faithfulness as they get ready to enter the Promised Land. And then Moses himself dies in the last book of Deuteronomy and is buried by God himself in a place that nobody knows about on Mount Nebo.

So that is the Pentateuch. In one sense, it ends with discouragement. God promises blessings upon those who obey, curses upon those who disobey. Often, those curses seem to come to the fore and people fail again and again and again.

In Joshua and Judges, Joshua brings the people into the Promised Land, but Judges shows that, in the following years, there are cycles of depravity that bring the people down again and again. And when the people get desperate enough, God raises up a judge and the people are spared again. A couple of generations later they have sunk into the same sort of idolatry and

immorality until the book ends, again, with the bleakest despair. During that period of the judges, you also get the story of Ruth and other little snippets.

What you have in 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and then reviewed again in 1 and 2 Chronicles is the movement from the period of the judges, the last great one being Samuel, to the onset of kingship. And the first king of what is called the united monarchy — all the tribes together — is King Saul. He begins admirably but eventually becomes barbaric in his cruelty and his rebellion against God.

God appoints David as king, a man after his own heart we are told, which is the beginning of the Davidic dynasty. The tabernacle is moved into Jerusalem. They collect materials and the money needed to build the Jerusalem temple, which is undertaken eventually by Solomon in the next generation. When Solomon dies, his son, Rehoboam, wants to act powerful but succeeds only in dividing the kingdom between the northern tribes, Israel, and the southern tribes based in Jerusalem.

Eventually, under the press of horrible idolatry, God sends in the Assyrian army and the Assyrians capture the leadership. Jerusalem is spared. It is within that framework that the opening lines of the prophets begin. Isaiah and the other prophets are messengers of God to provide information to the kings and the people. Their message can usually be summed up by saying, "if you do this, this will happen, so it might be best not to do that."

The messages of Jeremiah and Ezekiel are that the people are so wicked that destruction and exile are inevitable, and the only hope at the end of exile is that God brings them back and provides a Redeemer. When the people start returning, there is the ministry of the so-called postexilic prophets, people like Haggai who preaches to tell the people who are returning that they need to build the temple right away. A small temple is rebuilt in Jerusalem, and here is when you also find the ministry of Ezra and then a little later the ministry of Nehemiah. Malachi brings the Old Testament to a close.

That is the end of the Old Testament but there is a 400-year period between the Old and New Testaments when the people are really under one regional superpower or another. After the Assyrians come the Babylonians then the Persians. It is sometimes called "the 400 years of silence" for God appears to be silent without a voice from the prophets during this time.

As Christians, what then are we to do with the Old Testament? Presbyterian minister, Glenn McDonald, recently used this analogy in one of his reflections. "Think of the Bible as the house where you live. You walk into

your house through the front door. You spend almost all your waking hours in the family room, kitchen, and study. These "living areas" represent the life of Jesus as reported in the four Gospels along with the letters written by Paul, Peter, John, and the other apostles. Those Bible books are where life happens every day. The Old Testament is in the basement. It's part of the foundation which holds everything up – not to mention the critical functions of plumbing, electricity, and HVAC."

McDonald continues, "If you were showing someone around your house, you wouldn't bring them in through the basement window. Likewise, we introduce people to scripture by coming in through the front door of the life of Jesus. Is the Old Testament important? Absolutely. But it's not where we live. We can go so far as to say that the reason the foundation was laid in the first place was to provide a secure platform for the ground floor, where we get to know the Son of God on a daily basis." <sup>2</sup>

In my life, it is a foundation, but no one in the circles in which I travel follows the Old Testament literally. I know that may be a reflection on my circle of friends, but I think it is true for all Christians. Many times, people will want to tell you that they take all of the Bible literally, but I would challenge them. That's where author A.J. Jacobs found himself as he wrote a book titled "A Year of Living Biblically." As a Jew himself, Jacobs set out to follow the Old Testament precisely for one year.

Jacobs describes it this way, "I decided to write down every rule, every piece of advice, every nugget of wisdom that I could find in the Bible without picking and choosing. So, I wanted to follow the famous ones like love your neighbor and the 10 Commandments, but I also wanted to follow the hundreds of rules that are not so famous. The Bible says you cannot wear clothes made of mixed fibers, so I thought, sounds strange, but I'll try it. You only know if you try it. So, I got rid of all my poly-cotton T-shirts."

Jacobs was pretty sure he could spend a year not killing someone but gossiping, coveting, lying were different stories. He did not cut his hair so by the end had a year-long growth of beard. He wore a white robe and sandals even in winter because of Old Testament instruction. He observed the dietary laws including preparation of food and what to do if an insect contaminated his water. He even stoned an adulterer but admitted they were small stones and he didn't throw them very hard. Technically, he failed at living Biblically to the letter of the law but, he says it was a life-changing year nonetheless.

He summarizes the year like this. "It was really interesting because I was able to make some progress because I couldn't believe how much my

behavior changed my thoughts. One of the huge lessons of the year is that when I acted as a better person, I became a little bit of a better person. I had always thought that you change your mind and you change your behavior, but it's often the other way around. You change your behavior and you change your mind. It's easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting.”<sup>3</sup>

I think that's the way Jesus viewed the Old Testament. It's what he told the Pharisees when they confronted him about healing on the sabbath or any other violation of the letter of the law they caught him on. These laws can help you act in a new way of thinking but when the laws become your God you've gone astray. I believe Jesus was trying to say to them and us that these laws are a good foundation but don't get so caught up in keeping all the laws that you forget to love God and love neighbor. Next week, Jesus comes to fulfill the law so that it can release us and not bind us.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the background on the overview material in this sermon is gleaned from audio transcript of an interview with Dr. D.A. Carson, Professor Emeritus at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL titled “An Overview of the Whole Bible,” posted February 12, 2016 at [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org).

<sup>2</sup> Glenn McDonald daily meditation titled “OT vs. NT.” July 9, 2021. Glenn's daily meditations can be found at <https://glennsreflections.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> Jacobs, A.J., “A Year of Living Biblically,” Simon & Schuster; Illustrated edition, copyright 2008. Quotes from Jacobs found in transcript of NPR's TED Radio Hour hosted by Guy Raz, “How Does a Year of Following Biblical Rules Change You,” August 14, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/431365299>.