

The Whole Book, A Christian Book

By Todd Pruitt

The Bible, the whole thing, is a Christian book. The Old Testament is for Christians just as much as the New Testament. The division of the Bible into two testaments has often been misunderstood. It has allowed for a fractured view of the Bible to be enshrined in our thinking. We easily come to imagine there are two Bibles with the newer, improved testament replacing the older one. Much contemporary preaching has not helped the matter. And unfortunately, once the unity of the Scriptures has been lost it is not easy to regain it especially if that division has been drilled into us from our childhood.

This fracturing has produced a generation of Christians who have lost their grip on the Old Testament. As a result the church suffers from a tragic ignorance of an entire category of revelation concerning the nature and word of God. This matters because the all too common approach of interpreting and applying the great stories of the Old Testaments results, among other things, in the loss of Jesus and His gospel. We become like the religious experts in Jesus' day who could not find Him in the Old Testament Scriptures.

Preachers commonly use the Old Testament, albeit unwittingly, to imprison their hearers behind the bars of moralistic legalism while depriving them of the liberating Gospel which boils with life just under the surface. In sermons, Sunday School literature and popular Christian books the Old Testament is routinely treated as a collection of helpful moral stories that are especially interesting for children. "Be like Abraham. Be like Ruth. Be like Daniel" becomes the supreme point of application for these great passages. Theologian Michael Horton calls this "the Grimm's Fairy Tales method of biblical interpretation." The Old Testament is gazed upon through a "moral of the story" interpretive grid. When a pastor wants to beat up his congregation, when a writer want to us the Bible as a "success-in-leadership" manual, or when the heretics of the prosperity "gospel" want helpful proof-texts they turn to the Old Testament.

How many times has God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his beloved and only son been turned into a generic challenge to "trust God"? If you are thinking, "Does this guy have a problem with challenging people to trust God?" I can only reply, "No, so long as that is what the particular text of Scripture is really doing." The problem with the example that I mention is that the Gospel is lost as the real significance of the story is ignored: God's coming redemption through the sacrifice of *His* beloved and only Son.

Another common error made with the Old Testament is the misappropriation of God's promises. This is especially popular among the preachers of prosperity but it is also common in mainstream evangelicalism. We have a tendency to want to make the Bible all about us; therefore, we reason, each promise found in Scripture must be somehow applied to our own situation. But there are entire categories of promises in

the Old Testament that were temporal blessings for the people of Israel. These promises served as shadows of things to come through God's redemptive plan in Christ. Unfortunately, promises that God made to bring His people into the land and bless them are commonly taken out of context and made to read as if God is promising us more property, a better job, and healthy children. These errors arise from seeing the self as the interpretive key to Scripture rather than Jesus Christ.

The great Old Testament scholar John Bright likened the Bible to a two-act play. He pointed out that (a) the play is incomplete without both acts; (b) that each act has something unique to say; and (c) that neither act can stand alone. For example, there is a tension in the Old Testament as the sacrificial system unfolds. The prophet Isaiah discerned that ultimately only a person could adequately serve as a substitute for persons (Is. 53). So act one anticipates act two. Yet act two is required for act one to be properly understood. After all, it is act one that establishes the Divine pattern of the innocent being substituted for the guilty.

The stakes for rightly interpreting the Scriptures are high. In an increasingly pagan world and biblically illiterate church we cannot afford to replace the unfolding revelation of God's redemptive plan through Jesus Christ with well-intended but ultimately futile, moralistic lessons that tend to produce narcissists or Pharisees rather than Christians. Work hard to read the Scriptures well. School yourself in the Bible. Above all, read the Bible with Christ in view. The whole book is a Christian book. There is a formula that will help us keep this in mind: the Old Testament is Jesus predicted; the Gospels are Jesus revealed; Acts is Jesus preached; the Epistles are Jesus explained; and the Revelation is Jesus anticipated.

Great books to help you understand and love the Old Testament:

God's Big Picture by Vaughan Roberts

The Unfolding Mystery by Edmund Clowney

According to Plan by Graham Goldsworthy

These books can be ordered through our website under the "Recommended Reading" section.