

Today we continue our series. Taking a closer look at the Bible. Last week, we looked at the biblical story from beginning to end, and today, we're going to take a closer look at the Old Testament. What Christians refer to as the Old Testament, it was simply the Bible for Jews. This is their holy book, and these are the scriptures that shaped Jesus' life and they shaped the early church. And they are the foundation for our faith today. For Christians who were living in the time that the New Testament was written, the Bible was the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. The New Testament, as we know it, hadn't yet been written. So these scriptures carry power in our Christian faith. Last week, we read the story of Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. And do you remember how Jesus responded? Well, he quoted the scriptures.

He quoted the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. When Jesus was crucified, when he was hanging on the cross, you remember what Jesus turned to for his own words of prayer? The scriptures. He quotes Psalm 22 as he's praying from the cross. The early church was shaped by the Old Testament. When they look at the Hebrew Bible, they saw words that gave life, and connections that help them understand the truth of Jesus. So, today, I'm going to give you a broad overview of the Old Testament, and the Old Testament includes the 39 books and it covers 1,400 years. Over the next several minutes, we'll review the entire Old Testament. If you want to have a Bible, there's one in the pew in front of you or you can pull it up on your phone, if you want to follow just the table of contents, I'm going to try to touch on every book that you see there.

We'll begin with what's known as the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, and we'll begin with Genesis, of course. And Genesis chapters one through 11 are a little bit different from the rest of the story. The first 11 chapters of the book of Genesis are written about events that take place before any other recorded history. The stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, a great flood, God's promise, and the rainbow, Noah and his descendants. All of these stories teach us the truth about God, truth about people and how people and God interact with one another. There are types of stories that point to something that's bigger than themselves, something that is still true for us today. Then, beginning the chapter 12 through 50 towards the end of Genesis, we move into the story of a particular couple, Abraham and Sarah, and their descendants.

This story begins around 1900 B.C., but this family becomes known as the Israelites and they have a distinct relationship with God. It's a story of God's call for them to be God's people, and the story of the covenant, the promise that God makes with them. But it also tells the story about how God's people struggled and often failed to fulfill this covenant. And the Book of Genesis concludes around 1600 B.C. with the Israelites in slavery in Egypt. Then we move to Exodus. The people of Israel are enslaved until around 1300 B.C., centuries in which they are enslaved. Generations there, which brings us to Exodus. Exodus tells a story of God delivering the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt through an unlikely character, Moses. Moses was a goat herder in the Sinai Peninsula whom God had called to confront Pharaoh.

And through the words of Moses, and the work of God, the people of Israel were released. This is the defining story for the people of Israel, for those that practice the Jewish faith, the Exodus is their story. Then we come to Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua. And these tell the story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. It was while they were in the wilderness, that God gives the people all the laws that they are to follow in the land God will take them to, including, what we know as, "The 10 Commandments." Here, their new kingdom is to be the light of the world. They would be God's

people and God would be their God. God would lead them to the promise land. And the book of Joshua tells us of the conquest of the land of Canaan. So, that's Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua.

Then we move into a section of scripture that are really known as the historical books. They tell the history, more specifically, of the people of Israel. Judges tells of the 200 years after the conquest of Canaan as God raises up warrior judges to help protect the people. Ruth, then, is a beautiful short story about King David's great-grandmother and it introduces the idea of a monarchy that there might be a king one day in Israel. 1st and 2nd Samuel tell the story of the rise to power of King David, the greatest king in all of Israel's history. And it tells of his life story. 1st Chronicles also tells the story of David, and the story of Solomon from a little bit different perspective. Then 1st Kings and 2nd Kings, along with 2nd Chronicles, tells the stories of all the kings that come after David and Solomon, some of them faithful, some of them unfaithful.

These kings who are supposed to lead the way for the people and their relationship with God, instead, at times, lead the people away from God. The cycle of turning away, turning back, and being forgiven, and delivered repeats itself until 722 B.C., when the northern part of the kingdom, which is known as Israel, is conquered by the Assyrian army, the Great Assyrian Empire. The 10 northern tribes of Israel, you remember there are 12 tribes of Israel, 10 of them are forcibly relocated and scattered into the Assyrian Empire. And this time, they disappear into the people of Assyria. 130 years later, in 587 B.C., the same thing happens to the Southern Kingdom, which is known as Judah, except this time, it's the Babylonians, a different empire. Jerusalem, the capital city, is destroyed.

The temple, the center of worship and their religious life, is destroyed and the people are taken into exile in Babylon. The people of Judah remember the Northern Kingdom and they remember that the Northern Kingdom failed to continue to be a people, to maintain their identity, to remember who they are. And so, these people in exile continued to worship God. They gathered together in what would become known as synagogues, where our Jewish brothers and sisters so gather for worship today. All right, so that covers Joshua, Judges, 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, and 1st and 2nd Chronicles. Then we come to Ezra and Nehemiah. In 538 B.C., after about 50 years in exile, the Babylonians are conquered by the Persians, and the Persian king allows the people to return to their homeland. 50,000 Jews return to the city of Jerusalem and find it in ruins. And they begin the rebuilding of the process of the temple and the city walls. This is the story of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The last historical book is Esther. And Esther is a beautiful story about the courage of a woman who's married to the King of Persia. She discovers that there's a plot to have the Jewish people killed by the Persians, and she stands up for her people. And because of her courage, the Jews continue to live to this day. And they remember the story of Esther annually. So this concludes the review of Israel's history, from the very beginning of time, to the return from exile in Babylon. And this brings us to a shift in genre. A different types of books in the Old Testament. These are our poetry and wisdom literature. From Job to Song of Solomon, you have the poetry and wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The words in these books are most often written in poetry and not in prose. And, of course, we lose that in the English translation, words don't rhyme in the same ways that they do, or they're not put together in the same structure as they do in Hebrew, in different languages.

But these books are written, you might notice that they're written in a different way. Some versions of the Bible, will lay them out differently and you'll see the way that they sit on the page, it looks different than those earlier portions of the scripture. The book of Job begins these writings. But this is an epic

poem that addresses the question of suffering. And, in some ways, Job is a counterbalance to the historical books that we've talked about so far. These historical books often suggest that suffering comes from unfaithfulness to God. In contrast, the book of Job makes it clear that Job was a righteous man, and yet he still suffered. Thus countering the idea that suffering is always a punishment for sin, because we know that this is not how it works. Next we enter the songs, this is Israel's hymn book and prayer book, is composed across the course of Israel's history during the good times and the bad.

And you'll find, in these songs, some that are songs of joyful praise, and some that are songs of the lament and grief. Cries for help in times of trouble. Next, comes Proverbs. This is a collection of short sayings that tell us something about how life works and written first by Solomon and then by others who came after him. Ecclesiastes, that is often traditionally associated with Solomon, but it tells a story of a wealthy man at the end of his life who determines that all things are really meaningless except the fear of the Lord, a faith in God. Finally, Song of Songs offers a tribute to romantic love and intimacy, and some interpret this as an allegory of God's love for the church and yet most scholars see it as just as it is, as romantic poetry, that reminds us that God invented sexual desire and it is a good gift.

This concludes the writings, leaving only the prophets. So, what do prophets do? In Biblical times, prophets, they were not fortune tellers that told the future, nor were they really interested in telling the future. Instead, they were social critics that sounded the alarm, that if the Jews continue to walk away from God, God would withhold protection and destruction would be at hand. You remember that part of the story from last week, the prophets for the spiritual and ethical conscience of the nation. Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, and Micah prophesied primarily in the 700s B.C. They are warning the nation of Israel, the Northern Kingdom you remember, that there will be judgment at the hands of the Assyrians if they don't repent and follow the Lord. The people do not repent, and Israel is destroyed. Nahum comes next. He's prophesied against the Assyrians for having destroyed the Israelites.

He prophesies that the capital city of Nineveh will one day fall, and within a few decades, it does fall to the Babylonians. Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and Joel foretell the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and of Judah, again, if the people don't repent. They also offer a word of hope that one day people will return to their homeland. The people did not repent. Well, they did and then they didn't and then they did and then they didn't again, and eventually, the Babylonians carry them away as slaves in exile. Habakkuk is written as the Babylonians have started to take control of Judah, and reflects Habakkuk questions about God as this foreign empire is taking over the place where the people of God live. Lamentations is a song written as a man walks through the streets of Jerusalem after it has been destroyed. He is grieved with what he sees and cries out to God for help in the midst of his pain.

Ezekiel was one of the first prophets to be carried into exile. He writes from exile about why Judah was destroyed and promising that one day there would be a restoration. Daniel, you may be familiar with this story, tells the story of courageous exiles. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The king has asked them to bow down to the gods of the empire and give up following the Lord, and they refuse. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace. Daniel was cast in the lion's den for their refusal and exile to give up their faith. And these stories are intended to encourage the people of God who were still living away from home, away of forcibly in exile. Obadiah prophesies that one day Judah would be restored. And that Judah's Southern Kingdom, southern neighbor Edom, who laugh as the people of Israel, the people of Judah were taken into exile, that Edom would be destroyed.

Now Jonah is a bit hard to pinpoint about when Jonah occurs, but what the book does tell about is the story of a prophet who's called to offer grace to Israel's enemies. And Jonah did not want to go offer that grace. So you remember he was thrown overboard, swallowed by a giant fish. And the whole story in this book is about God's love for our enemies, and not just for ourselves. Haggai and Zachariah are writing after the exiles have returned to Judah, the people have been focused on building their own houses and yet they have not rebuilt a place for worship. They have not rebuilt the temple of the Lord. These prophets encourage the people to rebuild the temple. And finally, Zechariah foretells the coming of a new king, which we interpret as Jesus.

Malachi comes 90 years later. He sees that the people are halfhearted in their worship of God, and not taking their faith seriously. He warns them, once more, "Repent, or what happened before will happen again." And that's all 39 books in the Old Testament. There's really so much more to these 39 books than a history lesson or just this very brief overview. These books contain a word from God for us today, because in them we hear our family's story, our own story. The story of Israel is that they turned away from God time and time again, and every time they turned back to God, they are forgiven. Every time, and this is the story of how we sometimes struggle. When things are going well, we can tend to forget about God. We can focus on money, possessions, our jobs, those things that, ultimately, have very little meaning. We can sometimes find ourselves ignoring the needs of others, of our neighbors, and then we realize that, somehow, we've found ourselves and distant from God.

We are disconnected from the creator of all things, we don't know where else to turn, we know that things need to change, and so we cry out to God for forgiveness. "Take us back, oh God, we want to follow you," and every time, when we turn back to God and seek God's forgiveness, God gives it to us. God offers us the chance to start again. God offers us the opportunity to live a life in which we confess the one God, the Lord. The other things that we chase after are not God at all. God offers us the opportunity to start over and live a life in which we love our God with all of our hearts, soul, mind, and our strength. The good news is that God offers forgiveness to every person, every time. God's love is for you. No matter what you've done or how many times we turn away, God created all things out of love. You, me, our neighbors, our family members, the people with whom we may not really get along very well. Those that don't look like us or act like us. God's love really is for all people.

So here's my invocation for you today. Look for ways that you can share God's love and forgiveness with others. Look at other people as one whom God has created and one whom God deeply loves. And if you find yourself, like the people of Israel, in need of a time to repent and turn back to God, remember that no matter how many times we turn away, God offers forgiveness and love, and is more ready to offer it to us than we are to ask for it, beyond our imagination. And this is the story of the Old Testament.

Will you pray with me?

Oh God, we are sorry for the times when we turn away from you, please forgive us of our sin, and all that we know that is wrong. Thank you that you died on the cross and rose for me. I trust you with my life. Help me to receive your forgiveness, and help me to follow after you. We offer ourselves to you in Jesus' name. Amen.