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## ***Finding Jesus in the Old Testament***

Luke 24:44-49

Sunday, August 6, 2006  
Northway Christian Church – Dallas, Texas

**Rev. Mark R. Bender**

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Wednesday night at the youth group's Guys and Gals Night Out, I could tell the calendar had changed. Over the summer, the discussions at these Wednesday gatherings had focused on family vacations, camps, and sleeping in. But on this Wednesday night, one of the main discussions was summer reading. Yes, the flipping of the calendar to August meant that school was right around the corner.

There were mentions of a number of classics that had been assigned: Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Dostoyevsky's classic, *Crime and Punishment*, Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. These were some the assigned texts for summer "enjoyment." And those assignments that were intended to be spread across the summer, were now being tackled with just weeks to go. In fact, one student had already calculated that he only had to read 22 pages each day between now and the start of school to finish his assigned text. Yes, thoughts had turned from the things of summer, to the things of school.

As we discussed what could only be described as the "drudgery" of summer reading, I made a mistake. I shared that when I was in high school, we didn't have summer reading. Those assignments for June, July, and August didn't come into style until after my high school education was over. While I had read most of the books these students were poring over, I could readily admit that I had not read one of them during June, July, or August. I should have kept that to myself. Immediately the question was asked: "If you didn't have to read during the summer, why should we?" Now as a 12-year youth ministry veteran, father of two, and, yes, husband of a school teacher, I should have been able to rattle off reason after reason why summer reading was critical to their educational growth and development. I should have opened their eyes to the joy of reading and assured them that readings like this would expand their horizons. But, I didn't. Instead, I reverted to the favorite line of parents everywhere: *because it's good for you!*

Many of us view the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, with the same sort of excitement these youth showed towards their summer reading – not much! And the question is much the same: *does it really matter?* After all, there are, what Phillip Yancey describes as, two main barriers to reading the Old

Testament: It doesn't always make sense, and what sense it does make offends modern ears.<sup>i</sup>

In his book, *The Bible Jesus Read*, Yancey suggests that these two barriers are causing knowledge of the Old Testament to fade fast among Christians. The results are even worse in popular culture where this knowledge has almost vanished completely. In a comedy routine, Jay Leno tested his audience's knowledge of the Bible by asking them to name one of the Ten Commandments. One brave soul raised his hand and said: "God helps those who help themselves?" Everybody laughed, but no one else could do better. Polls show that eighty percent of Americans claim to believe in the Ten Commandments, but very few can name as many as four of them. Half of all adult Americans cannot identify the Bible's first book as Genesis. And fourteen percent identify Joan of Arc as Noah's wife.<sup>ii</sup>

The reality is we often reduce the Old Testament to merely a boring history book with some laws that don't really have much application today. We've made a joke out of it. In fact, a recent incident involving one of our youth provides a perfect illustration of this. Several weeks ago, a youth group was visiting Dallas from out of town and spent several nights in our Youth Hall. One of our clever Northway youth members, who shall remain nameless, wrote a message for these visitors. In bold at the top of the white board was the word "Welcome." So far, so good! But, underneath this harmless welcome was, well... in short, it gave them some rules to abide by while staying in our facilities. Our visitors were encouraged to look up several passages from Deuteronomy as their guide for staying at Northway. Without going into too much detail, these scriptures basically encouraged the visiting group to keep things clean, and to properly use the provided restroom facilities, else their hands would be cut off. In this case, the Old Testament served as a treasure of comedic material.

But those of us living today are not the first ones to struggle with the Old Testament. A flurry of scholarly debate took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century about the relevance of the Old Testament. Walter Kaiser, a Professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, suggests that Christians in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century tended to have three common views of the Old Testament. The first was to view these scriptures as not only *pre-Christian* but *sub-Christian*. Those who held this view argued that the Old Testament failed to reach the ethical and theological heights of the New Testament. The second view was held by persons who would not say anything derogatory about the earlier testament, but in practice they totally neglected it. Thus, they ended up with almost the same effect, if not the same conclusion, as the first group. The third view covered almost everyone else. This was the group that declared the Old Testament as dry, uninteresting, cumbersome, wordy, and confusing. Its sheer weight, variety, and apparent disjointedness led to neglect, apathy, and passivity.

These 19<sup>th</sup> Century readers failed to recognize a unity found in the scripture. Unable to find a unifying center to the message of the Bible, they started to look for other ways to understand the Old Testament. This was not unlike what the scholars of the Middle Ages had done. These scholars saw much of the Old Testament as being like a quilt - sort of a patchwork of unrelated

themes, events, and subjects, which were declared unhelpful, sub-Christian, and morally objectionable. To rescue the text, they started looking beyond the surface meaning of the text for a so-called “hidden spiritual sense.” This is what scholars today would call an allegorical method of interpretation.<sup>iii</sup>

The people of the Middle Ages used four types of allegories to help make the Biblical and Classical traditions recognizable to the Medieval culture. The first type was the literal interpretation of the events of the story for historical purposes with no underlying meaning. The second was called typological, which connected the events of the Old Testament with that of the New Testament. This method drew connections between the events of Christ’s life with the stories of the Old Testament.

The third type of allegory was called moral, which sought to demonstrate how one should act in the present. It quite literally provided the “moral of the story.” And the fourth type of allegory was anagogical, which dealt with prophecies and the future events of Christian history, heaven, hell, and the last judgment. These four types of allegory dealt with past events (literal), the connection of past events with the present (typology), present events (moral), and the future (anagogical). Medieval allegories became a Christian method for synthesizing the discrepancies between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The most common form of allegory used was the second type, the typological. This view allowed readers to see the Old Testament in relation to how it would predict the events of the New Testament. For example, the picture on the front of your order of worship this morning is a type of medieval allegory. The upper panel depicts Noah and the flood linked with the baptism of Jesus in the bottom panel. The new beginning, which resulted from the flood, symbolized the new beginning provided by baptism like Christ. Likewise, some medieval scholars interpreted the story of Jonah and the whale as an allegory that prefigured Christ’s burial, with the stomach of the whale as Christ’s tomb. As the story goes, Jonah was eventually freed from the whale after three days, just as Christ rose from the tomb after three days. This is why when one finds an allusion to Jonah in Medieval art or literature it is usually an allegory for the burial and resurrection of Christ.

Things haven’t changed much since the Middle Ages, or even since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. We still are trying to figure out how relevant the Old Testament is to us today, those born after resurrection of Jesus Christ. But that doesn’t stop people from trying to make connections. Almost everyday it seems like some evangelist is finding an allegorical reference between the Old Testament and the events of today. They proudly proclaim that what just happened is surely what this or that Old Testament author was writing about. But one doesn’t have to be an outspoken evangelist to struggle with the relevancy of the Old Testament.

How did we get off course? Obviously, this didn’t just happen yesterday. It’s something Christians have been dealing with for hundreds of years. How did the Old Testament become a lesser testament, a nice treasury of history and poetry? How did we come to regard it as a diverse collection of manuscripts that seem to be disjointed and unfamiliar? I think the answer comes from Professor

Christopher Wright. Wright suggests that these problems arise because we start reading the Bible from verse 18 of Matthew Chapter 1. In the consciousness of the average Christian, the birth of Jesus marks the beginning of the gospel message. We tend to overlook the 17 “who-beget-who” verses of Matthew and get on to the portions that make nice Christmas carols. After all, it is hard to sing about Hezekiah begat Manasseh, who begat Amos.

But have you ever considered why Matthew wanted to begin his Gospel like this? Have you ever wondered why these 17 verses were placed at the very beginning of the canonical books we call the New Testament? Professor Wright gives the answer as though he were the gospel writer:

*Because, says, Matthew, you won't understand that story – the one I am about to tell you – unless you see it in the light of a much longer story which goes back for many centuries but leads up to the Jesus you want to know about.<sup>iv</sup>*

The Old Testament tells the story which Jesus completes. The Old Testament sets the stage for the Gospel message of the New Testament. This means that we need to look at Jesus in the light of the history of the Old Testament, but also that he sheds light backwards on it. The Old Testament leads to Jesus and he gives meaning to it.<sup>v</sup>

In our scripture from Luke this morning, Jesus is encouraging us to do the very same thing. This passage, which comes just before the final three verses of Luke, shows Jesus with the disciples after Cleopas and the others had informed them of what had happened on the Road to Emmaus. Jesus had appeared to the disciples and assured them that he was not a ghost, but flesh and bone. And as he ate in their presence, he once again emphasized that he is the fulfillment of scripture: *Everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.* Then in verses 45 - 47, Luke gathers under the authority of scripture not only the death and resurrection of Jesus, but also the mission to all nations:

*Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name, beginning from Jerusalem.”*

While Luke does not cite specific passages for each of these verses, one could cite the suffering servant passages from Isaiah 52 as confirmation that the Messiah had to suffer, Hosea 6:2 for the resurrection on the third day, and Isaiah 49:6 for preaching of repentance to all nations.<sup>vi</sup> Yet, laying aside specific texts, the point is that all of these events should be understood as fulfilling Scripture. Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of all the prophets had foretold.

It is clear that one cannot understand the New Testament without an understanding of the Old Testament. While the Gospels might work as stand-alone stories, a reader unacquainted with the Old Testament would miss many

layers of richness in them. But, in the same way, Christians uniformly believe that the Old Testament is not enough, either. The very word, testament, comes from the Hebrew word *berith* which means “covenant.” As Christians, we know that Jesus the Messiah came to introduce a “New Covenant” or New Testament. We can look back on the Old Testament period as a time of preparation. We can see that these texts inform us about Jesus and help us to understand the significance of His life in human history.

Given this, there are three reasons why one should read the Old Testament to find Jesus Christ. First, when we read the Old Testament, we read the Bible Jesus read and used. These are the prayers Jesus prayed, the poems he memorized, the songs he sang, the bedtime stories he heard as child, the prophecies he pondered.<sup>vii</sup> These were the depths of wisdom and revelation and prophecy that shaped his whole view of life, the universe, and everything. This is where he found the shape of his own identity and the goal of his own mission.<sup>viii</sup> These were the texts that Jesus taught from and later fulfilled.

Second, we learn from the Old Testament how God works, which is not at all as we might expect. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are an example of this. These chapters describe a series of human failures that call the entire creation project into question. Yet, God declares a plan in Genesis 12<sup>ix</sup>. This plan includes some surprising characters – Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David, and leads to the greatest character of all, Jesus Christ.

Third, the Old Testament demonstrates that God is personal. God enters into people’s lives, shows up in unexpected places, chooses unlikely people, calls people to account. Most of all, God loves. The stories and characters of the Old Testament give each of us a history to enter into. As the various characters of these scriptures sought in various ways to “get along with God,” we, too, identify in them various ways for each of us to know God better.<sup>x</sup>

Finding Jesus in the Old Testament is not like a Where’s Waldo book. Jesus is not hiding in the midst of the text waiting for us to find him amid the other distractions. No, instead the Old Testament is a powerful tool for us to understand who Jesus is. The more we comprehend the Old Testament, the more we comprehend Jesus. As Protestant Reformer Martin Luther put it, “The Old Testament is a testamental letter of Christ, which he caused to be opened after his death and read and proclaimed everywhere throughout the Gospel.”<sup>xi</sup>

It’s time that we open our minds to the Scriptures. It’s time for us to recognize the fulfillment of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms in Jesus Christ. It’s time for us to add new depths to our understanding of Jesus through the Old Testament. And in doing so, we will understand how God’s activity through history has culminated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the words of one minister I know, I think it will be “good for you.”

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<sup>i</sup> Yancey, Phillip, *The Bible Jesus Read*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1999. p. 18.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. *The Old Testament documents: are they reliable and relevant?* Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001. p.216-217.

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<sup>iv</sup> Wright, Christopher, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992. p. 1.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>vi</sup> Culpepper, R. Allen, "The Gospel of Luke" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol. IX. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995. p.486

<sup>vii</sup> Yancey, p. 25.

<sup>viii</sup> Wright, ix.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid, p. 25.