

*Chapter 1*



**WHO NEEDS THE OLD TESTAMENT?**

As a young couple looks on, the skywriter soars and loops through the air, writing:

*Marry me Jill*

As the biplane begins to spell out *Jill*, the camera pans to the face of the woman, and we watch with delight as she suddenly realizes that the message scrawled across the sky is for her. Her casual interest yields to a cry of recognition and an exuberant embrace.

I have forgotten the product that this scene was intended to advertise, but I have never forgotten the scene. What fires Jill's response, and what fills us with delight, is not just the proposal itself. It is the packaging of the proposal. The manner in which Jill's suitor makes his love known reveals how certain and deep that love is. Private promises of devotion are not enough for him. He wants the world to know. He has no interest in cheap, spur-of-the-moment declarations. Only

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careful planning and great expense can adequately express his commitment. Jill sees this and gives her love enthusiastically to him.

How do we give our love more enthusiastically to God? In much the same way. We note the manner in which he declares his love, and we learn to wonder at the devotion of a God who would go to such great lengths in his pursuit of us.

The Old Testament is a rich and beautiful proposal of marriage, designed to win not only our faith but also our affection. Sadly, we are generally so ignorant of this packaging that our love remains unkindled. It is as if Jill were to spend the entire scene too engrossed in a brief note from her lover to look up. By the time she is done, the wind has dispersed the message, and her joy in his love is much less than it might have been.

### *God's Unfolding Proposal of Love*

God has always loved his people. But his revelation of that love unfolds in varied fashion throughout the pages of Scripture. God begins to reveal himself and his loving plan in Genesis 3, immediately after the Fall has plunged the human race into alienation and death. Gradually over time, he reveals his loving plan with greater and greater fullness, until finally, in the fullness of time, he makes us his own spotless bride.<sup>1</sup>

God declares his intentions almost as soon as the Bible begins. Our first parents have just disobeyed God's command, with tragic and widespread consequences. Their re-

<sup>1</sup> Galatians 4:4; Ephesians 5:25–27.



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relationship with God shifts dramatically from one of love and fellowship to one of fear and guilt. Accusation and shame abruptly mark their relationship with each other. And nature, which they were designed to rule and enjoy, now becomes their mortal adversary, only grudgingly yielding food and in the end reducing them to the dust from which they came.

Astonishingly, God chooses in this distressing context to declare his love in language that contains the heart of what we have come to know as the gospel. Speaking to the Serpent (Satan), he says:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.<sup>2</sup>

These strange words may at first seem harsh. But when we examine them more closely, we see that they are really words of great love. God is going to do something marvelous. He is going to make the woman and the Serpent hate each other. We must remember that when God first speaks these words, the woman and the Serpent are on the same team. She and her husband have just chosen to believe the Serpent's lies, and in so doing have aligned themselves and the whole human race with Satan. But God promises to intervene and rearrange things, to strip from Satan his newfound allies and make them his own again.

More marvelous still, God intends to perform this great miracle through Eve's own descendant. Her "seed" will suf-

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3:15 RSV.

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fer at Satan's hand, but he will triumph. We do not know from this promise exactly who the descendant will be, nor are we certain if it will be an individual or a group of people. But we do know that there will be victory, and that it will come through a human being.

How comforting and humbling this great promise must have been to Eve. By listening to the Serpent, she had brought incalculable disaster upon the human race. And yet God mercifully appointed her to carry in her own womb the certain hope of restoration. He gave her a task of inestimable value.<sup>3</sup> We look at Eve and also take comfort. If the Lord can make her the mother of the Redeemer, then he can and will use us, no matter how far we have fallen.

"How do I love thee?" runs the old verse. "Let me count the ways." God loves us enough to restore us to himself, even though we have forfeited our right to life.<sup>4</sup> And he loves us enough to use us, or one like us, in the process. Such is the nature of his commitment. What unfolds from Genesis 3:15 onward is an extraordinary demonstration of that commitment. Again and again God intervenes, drawing his people back to himself, thereby reinstating the promised enmity, until finally God himself enters history as a man, born of a woman, suffers, dies, and rises again to secure once and for all the hearts of his beloved people.

To be ignorant of this great history is to miss out. It's like being engaged without ever getting flowers or cards or un-

<sup>3</sup> This high task may well be in Paul's mind in 1 Timothy 2:15, "Yet woman will be saved through bearing children" (RSV).

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 2:17; see Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death."



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expected phone calls from your fiancé. You may know he loves you, but you just don't feel it. God designed the Old Testament so that "through . . . the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."<sup>5</sup> Not to know those Scriptures is to deprive ourselves of confidence in God's faithful love.

### *Why Jesus?*

"Jesus is the answer," crow billboards, bumper stickers, and even restroom walls. Occasionally one finds scrawled below it, "But what is the question?" It's a fair rejoinder. Jesus Christ has to have a context if he is to mean anything. And this was as true in the first century as it is today.

Jesus clearly did have a context in the first century—the revelation of the Scriptures that then existed, what we call the Old Testament. The disciples knew these Scriptures well, and when they finally understood how Jesus fulfilled them, their lives changed dramatically. They worshiped Jesus enthusiastically, they proclaimed him with fervor, they died willingly for him—and the world has never been the same.

What does Jesus mean to you? Why did he come? Why did he suffer and die—and then rise from the dead and ascend into heaven? What difference does the drama of Jesus' life and work make in your life today? These questions demand answers if Christianity is to come to life for us. And we cannot begin to answer them without knowing something about the setting in which Jesus lived, taught, and died.

The Old Testament anticipates Jesus, not simply by predicting events in his life, but also by showing us what we

<sup>5</sup> Romans 15:4.

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need him to do for us and why that need is so desperate. A wise suitor will do more than declare his love for the one he seeks to marry. He will convince her that she needs him. Our God has done this for us in the Old Testament. To be ignorant of those Scriptures is to be like the complacent husband, bored with his wife because he has never realized what life would be like without her.

Aged Simeon, well versed in the Old Testament, knew very well what life was like without the Messiah. For that reason, he had long been “waiting for the consolation of Israel.” When he saw the infant Jesus in the temple, he took him in his arms, praised the Lord, and said he was ready to die, “for my eyes have seen your salvation.”<sup>6</sup> Simeon’s knowledge of the ancient Scriptures was deep, and therefore his joy in the Redeemer was strong. Should we not learn from him?

### *Questions for Discussion and Reflection*

1. According to this chapter, what does a Christian believer miss by not knowing the Old Testament well?
  - a. Can you think of other reasons why a Christian should know the Old Testament well?
2. What do Romans 15:4 and 2 Timothy 3:15 tell us about God’s purpose for the Old Testament?
  - a. In what ways is Christ at the center of this purpose?
3. How do we know that Genesis 3:15 is much more than a primitive explanation of the hatred that exists

<sup>6</sup> Luke 2:25–32.



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- between women and snakes? Second Corinthians 11:3, 14–15 and Romans 16:20 will help.
4. Imagine yourself as Eve, hearing Genesis 3:15 for the first time, without the benefit of any further revelation.
    - a. How would you feel?
    - b. What questions would the promise raise in your mind?
    - c. How might you identify the “seed” of the woman?
  5. Imagine yourself as Eve, having just heard that Cain murdered Abel. How might you now identify the “seed” of the woman?
  6. How is Paul’s experience of God’s grace like Eve’s (see 1 Corinthians 15:8–10; 1 Timothy 1:12–14)?
    - a. List and discuss similar experiences from both Scripture and life.
    - b. Take some time to thank God for his mercy.
  7. Martin Luther said that Genesis 3:15 “embraces and contains within itself everything noble and glorious that is to be found anywhere else in Scripture.”
    - a. What did he mean?
    - b. Do you agree?