

## Understanding the Old Testament

*Song of Songs 2: 3-13, Ezekiel 37: 1-14*

Well friends, today we are looking at Understanding the Old Testament building on what we learned last week. A quick review for those of you who were here, now you get to teach those who weren't! Last week we looked at what the Bible had to say about itself, what it claimed to be, right. What were the 3 claims of the bible?

1. The Bible claims to be the ----- of God
2. The Bible claims to be the ----- of God
3. The Bible claims to be about ----- through

Jesus Christ

And we were challenged to go and spend time with the bible to put these claims to the test and find out if they are true, and of course that is going to take time and study and so this week we move on to helping you understand the first half of the bible – the Old Testament. Now when you think of the Old Testament what comes to your mind? Just say it out loud.

I think people often find reading the Old Testament difficult and they find it's hard to understand and difficult make sense of or see why it's important. But the key to understanding the OT and reading it comes from knowing that not all books in the OT are the same kind of writing.

- Imagine you are a doctor and you give your patient this for a diagnosis - Novel excerpt
- Imagine you are a mechanic who is trying to fix a car and you get this for instructions – Song excerpt
- Imagine you are a trying to help a friend through a relationship break-up – game rules excerpt
- Imagine you are a musician trying to write a hit song and have this for lyrics – prescription excerpt

- Imagine you are trying to play your favorite video game and this is what you have for instructions - relationship advice column excerpt.

Do you see the problem here folks? We've got the wrong kinds of literature for the things we're trying to do. Even though they might deal with the subject matter the form is all wrong, right? So we can see that we write things differently for different jobs so that it works properly, and the different ways we write things are what we call genres or categories.

Our understanding of the Old Testament begins with realizing that it is made up of different genres. When we read the Old Testament we need to be able to identify what kind of genre we are reading from, and what exactly that kind of writing is meant to do and this will help us begin to understand it. So we find five major types of writing, genres or categories, in the Old Testament. Narrative, Law, Wisdom, Poetry, Prophecy. These correspond to the examples that I used earlier and this should give you a hint already at what these different kinds of writing are supposed to do.

Narrative – Novel  
 Law – Game Rules  
 Wisdom – Advice Column  
 Poetry – Song Lyrics  
 Prophecy – Prescription

So let's look at Narrative

Narrative is like a novel, it tells a story. It does this by knitting together a whole bunch of smaller stories and characters and it weaves them into larger story. And when you start to read a story, or a novel you get introduced to the main character and you learn about who they are and what they are like as they interact with the other characters and situations that arise. And that is the purpose of narrative writing in the OT, it's to introduce you and help you get to know the main character of the larger story – God.

So what books in the O.T. are narrative?

*Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Sam, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. 15 out of 39 that's 38%*

Now here are some reading tips for narrative material

1. Start at the beginning and read through to the end.
  - You won't get to know God properly if you only read 1 chapter, or only read the beginning, or only read the ending. Read the whole story.
2. Don't look for a moral – these aren't Aesop's fables
  - You may be shocked to hear this but these stories are not given to us to find moral guidance, or to teach us ethical behavior. Many people do this but that is not the purpose of narrative, besides if you read the whole story you'll find out that those people you thought were heroes often have huge failings and flaws.

3. Always ask “what does this reveal about God and who He is?” first

- This is always the first thing we should be thinking after reading narrative material, instead of looking for a moral or a life lesson to apply we should be asking “What does this story show us about God?” That's what you are meant to learn from it.

4. Then ask “what does this reveal about human beings and what they are like?”

- Often we will find that the narrative shows that humans are not very heroic or moral people, but that God still chooses to work with them and have mercy on them. But I'm giving too much away that you should be discovering for yourself. Read the Narrative.

Ok, next is Law

The most famous passage of scripture that we might know in the Law genre is the Ten Commandments. But there are whole books in the O.T. which outline the rules and guidelines for how God wanted his chosen people the Israelites to live. The Law gives very specific and precise instructions as to how people should live so they might show their gratitude to God for saving them and revealing himself to them and it's concerned with every area of life, religious, social and moral.

- Religious – *“The Lord’s Passover begins at twilight on the fourteenth day of the first month” (Leviticus 23:5)*
- Social and moral concerns, - *“do not harvest your vineyards a second time or pick up grapes that have fallen but leave them for the poor.” (Leviticus 19:10)*
- It even spells out a diet – *“Of all the animals that live in the land these are the ones you may eat.” (Leviticus 11:2)*

So what are the books which are considered Law in the O.T.? *Leviticus, Deuteronomy,*

Surprised, I bet you thought there were more right, so the next time someone says oh the old testament is all just rules and laws you can point out that only 2 of the 39 books in the OT are Law, only five percent.

So here are some tips for you when you are reading Law

1. Remember that the Law was given as a way for people to show gratitude, not to earn brownie points with God.
2. Law spells out God’s will for people in a specific context of his plan to save the world; this was given before Jesus Christ came.
3. To understand what still applies to us we can use the following the basic guideline:
  - Jesus’ life and ministry fulfilled the religious and social aspects of the law in such a way that they no longer apply, eg. Animal sacrifice, special festivals, temple worship, dietary laws,

etc... But the moral implications of the Law are still in effect and need to be worked out in our current context. Eg. How do we provide for the poor in our society today – do we leave grapes in the fields, no we have a welfare system. But there are other ways we could do this as well and we would still be obeying God’s law.

Ok, two down, three to go – stay with me. Next up is Wisdom.

Wisdom is about how to live skillfully, how you can be good at life and all that is a part of it, relationships, family, parenting, business, politics, etc... Wisdom gives you advice, but more importantly it gives you insight. It helps you understand how life works because it starts with the assumption that if you respect and acknowledge and seek the one who created this reality, our life and the world we live in, He can help you understand what it takes to live skillfully in it. That’s why it says in Proverbs 1:7 “the Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” Wisdom also teaches us that there is room for surprises and unpredictability in God’s creation, that life is not

fatalistic. Because even though it is true that having wisdom allows you to live well and skillfully, there will be times when you suffer in spite of having wisdom. There will be times when you have to deal with consequences of foolish choices that you didn’t make. Wisdom is about knowing how to live skillfully in the tough times as well. This is why the book of Job says “shall we accept only good from God and not trouble?” Wisdom gives you the insight you need to go through life.

So, what books in the O.T are wisdom literature? *Proverbs,*

*Job, Ecclesiastes*

There is really only one tip on how to read Wisdom

1. Don’t confuse Wisdom with Law.

- Wisdom, especially proverbs are not rules or laws, they are observations on how things normally work which give us insight. So when you read Proverbs 21:14 “A gift given in secret soothes anger, and a bribe concealed in the

cloak pacifies great wrath” this is not a command from God to go and bride someone who is angry at you, but an observation which gives us insight into our fallen human nature and how some people deal with conflict. So reading wisdom literature will give you more understanding to work with as you make your decisions about how to live your life.

### Alright, moving on to Poetry

Poetry is characterized by its use of metaphor, symbolism, and emotional language, as well as how it is structured. Poetry in the bible doesn't rhyme like our modern poetry does, although in the original Hebrew sometimes poetry will use words that all share similar sounds, but in our translations we don't really notice it.

The purpose of Poetry is to give us permission to be emotional with God, and with others. It reminds us that we have a real relationship with God and that our faith in Him is not an

abstract concept, a philosophy, or a code of ethics which we try to live by. Instead it is a living breathing relationship with God, and like any relationship it goes through ups and downs, through times of joy and excitement and times of disappointment and anger. Poetry shows us how other people have experienced their emotional relationship with God and encourages us to respond emotionally to God as well.

(poetry was written for worship, so that tells you something about what should be present in our worship – emotions) Although you will find bits and pieces of poetry scattered throughout all the other types of writing we have two books which are entirely composed of poetry, Psalms and the Song of Songs. (Although the Song of Songs is a bit different because its wisdom about romantic and sexual love in poetic form)

### Tips for reading and recognizing poetry

1. Look for metaphors, symbolism, emotional response and poetic structures like parallelism.
  - The poet will begin with a thought in the verse line, like in Psalm 15: 1 “Lord, who may dwell in your

sanctuary?” and then will take that thought and develop it further with another verse, keeping it similar but a bit different so its “parallel” So here’s the next one – “who may live on your holy hill?”

## 2. Engage the emotion you find in the poetry.

- To fully experience the depth of the poetry don’t rationalize away the emotion, or skim over it too easily. When the Psalmist says “As the deer pants for water” it is vivid picture of distress and thirst, allow yourself to experience the emotion present and grow to a deeper understand of what the life of faith can be.

Alright we’re almost through the whole OT in one sermon, you’re doing well. So let’s look at the last genre, **Prophecy**.

**Prophecy is about calling God’s people back into a loyal relationship with God.** God had a special relationship with the people of Israel but they were always rebelling against him,

ignoring him, and worshipping other gods. So God would send prophets to speak to Israel to call them back to faithfulness, to warn them that the covenant they had with God had consequences for disloyalty. Many times to God would send the prophets to let Israel know that other nations were going to be punished for their treatment of Israel, and their sinfulness and idol worship, this was both encouragement to Israel and an example of what would happen to them if they followed the ways of the nations around them.

So what books are prophecy – *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zecharai and Malachi*  
*17 out of 39, 43%*

Now its fitting that we end with prophecy because it what is going to transition us into the N.T. next week. You can see how many prophets God sent to call his people back into loyal relationship with Himself, yet for as much as the people may have tried their hearts always strayed away and God knew this. That’s why these prophets also spoke of a future that would

come someday where this would change, they spoke of a Servant of God, a savior who would come to do what Israel couldn't – be a faithful covenant partner with God. When the chosen one came, life would be better, there would be peace prosperity and health, everyone would worship God and the world would be a new place. This was the promise.

So when you are reading Prophecy in the OT remember

1. It was given specifically to Israel in the context of their special relationship with God.
2. Look for God's promises to one day make things better.
3. Look for how God promises to do that.

So our tour through the O.T. ends with a cliff hanger, begging for a sequel which will answer the question - Will God keep his promise? Well tune in next week and you'll find out.

But I hope you've gained a new appreciation for the O.T. this morning. As you can see its not just an out of date bunch of books with hard to pronounce names and lots of rules. It's a comprehensive literary collection which deals with the theme

of “Who is this God and what is He up to in this world and why?” and there are stories about it, poems about how to feel about it, wise observations about to have insight into it, instructions on how to respond to it and encouragement not to ignore it. Each type of literature comes at the theme from a different angle and helps us to get a holistic experience so we can fully understand and have our faith integrated into our thinking, our actions, and into our emotions so that nothing gets left out.

Let's test this out now and see how we experience our scripture readings for today.

So when you leave here today make sure you don't get left out either, you now have the basic tools and tips to go and benefit from reading all of the O.T. I pray that the Holy Spirit will make it so that you are eager to read, and confident to read so that it becomes something you just can't put down, so that you can find out and see if the claims of the bible are true in your life. Amen.