THE DAILY BREAD

The Acts of the Apostles



The Old Testament

A FORMATION BOOK BY

Kendall Peterson

The Everyday Apostle

THE DAILY BREAD

The Word Series

The Old Testament

The Story Behind the Story

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INTRODUCTION

The Half of the Bible You Skipped

Most Catholic men know the New Testament passably and the Old Testament not at all. They know the broad shape of the Gospels. They can tell you roughly who Jesus was and what he did. They have a working sense of the Church that came after. But ask them about the Old Testament, the first three quarters of the Bible, the part God spent more pages on than any other, and you get a vague blur: something about Adam and Eve, a flood, Moses and some plagues, maybe David and Goliath from a childhood picture book, and then a long fog of unpronounceable names and unfamiliar kings until, somehow, Jesus shows up.

This is a serious problem, and not for the reason you might think. It is not mainly that you are missing information, though you are. It is that you are missing the story that makes sense of everything else. The New Testament does not begin the story of salvation. It finishes it. Jesus did not drop out of the sky into a blank world. He arrived at the climax of a story that God had been telling for two thousand years, and every word of what he said and did was soaked in that story, addressed to people who knew it by heart. Read the New Testament without the Old and you are watching the last twenty minutes of a film and wondering why everyone is crying. The emotion, the meaning, the payoff, all of it depends on the two hours you skipped.

Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. — Luke 24:27

That verse describes the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus, walking with two heartbroken disciples who did not yet recognize him. And what does he do to explain his own death and resurrection? He takes them through the Old Testament. Moses and all the Prophets. He shows them that the whole of it, from the beginning, had been about him. The Old Testament is the story that Jesus himself used to explain Jesus. If it was necessary for them, on the first Easter, it is necessary for you.

This book is not a commentary and not a survey of every chapter. It is a map of the story, the single unfolding narrative that runs from creation to Christ, so that the fog resolves into a shape and you can finally see what God was doing across those two thousand years and why it all leads to a manger and a cross. We will follow the thread of covenant, the series of binding promises through which God bound himself to humanity, because that thread is the spine of the whole story. We will meet the major figures not as isolated

Sunday-school characters but as links in a single chain. And we will see, at every step, how the story leans forward, aching toward a fulfillment it cannot reach on its own, until the fulfillment arrives.

The aim is that you close this book able to hold the whole Old Testament in your mind as one story, and never again read the New Testament as though it began the tale. It did not. It completed it. Here is the story it completed.

One more word before we begin, about why this particular gap is worth closing now. A man who does not know the Old Testament is not only missing background. He is missing the answer to questions he actually carries. Why does the world feel broken when it also feels, unmistakably, like it was made for something better? The story of the good creation and the Fall answers that, and answers it better than any philosophy. Why does God seem to work so slowly, over generations, rather than fixing everything at once? The long patient arc of the covenants answers that. Why does suffering not have the last word, even when it seems to? The whole shape of the story, rescue arriving through and beyond catastrophe, answers that. The Old Testament is not ancient trivia. It is the deepest available account of the world you actually live in, the brokenness you actually feel, and the rescue you were actually made for. Knowing it is not a matter of religious completeness. It is a matter of understanding your own life.

CHAPTER ONE

The Shape of the Whole

One Story, Not a Pile of Books

Before we walk through the story, you need to see its shape, because the single greatest obstacle to reading the Old Testament is that it does not look like one story. It looks like a pile of very different books jammed together: creation myths, genealogies, law codes, war chronicles, poetry, proverbs, and the strange thunder of the prophets. A man opens it, finds no obvious throughline, and gives up. So begin with the throughline.

The Story in One Sentence

Here is the entire Old Testament in a single sentence: God made a good world, humanity broke it through sin, and God set in motion a long rescue, choosing a people through whom he would one day send a Savior to heal the breach and restore everything. That is the plot. Everything in the Old Testament is somewhere on that arc, from the good creation, through the catastrophe of sin, into the long slow rescue that builds, across

centuries and generations, toward the one who would finally set it right. Hold that sentence in your mind and the pile of books becomes chapters of a single story.

How the Books Are Arranged

It helps to know that the Old Testament books are not arranged in the order they were written, but grouped by kind, which is why reading straight through can feel like whiplash. There are the books of the Law, the first five, which carry the story from creation through the founding of the people of Israel. There are the historical books, which continue the narrative through the conquest, the kings, the exile, and the return. There are the wisdom and poetry books, the Psalms and Proverbs and Job and the rest, which are not narrative at all but the prayers and reflections of the people living inside the story. And there are the prophets, God's messengers who spoke into the crises of the story, calling the people back and pointing them forward. Once you know the story runs through the Law and the historical books, with the wisdom and prophetic books as the interior life and the divine commentary alongside it, the arrangement stops being confusing. You know which books carry the plot and which books deepen it.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. — Genesis 1:1

The Thread to Follow

The single thread that ties the whole story together, the one to keep your eye on from here forward, is covenant. A covenant, in the biblical world, is not a contract but something far deeper: a binding of persons, a sworn commitment that makes two parties into family. Through a series of covenants, each larger than the last, God progressively binds himself to humanity, drawing closer and committing more, until the final covenant in Christ. If you follow the covenants, you will not get lost, because the covenants are the skeleton of the entire Old Testament. There are five great ones before Christ, with Adam, with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, and with David, and each one advances the rescue a decisive step. We will follow them in turn, and by the time we reach David's, the whole story will be leaning so hard toward its fulfillment that the arrival of Christ will feel not like a surprise but like the answer the story was straining toward all along.

Why Covenant Is the Key Word

It is worth pausing on why covenant, and not some other idea, is the thread that holds the story together. In the ancient world, a covenant was the most solemn bond that existed between persons. It was how strangers became family, how a king bound himself to a people, how two parties swore themselves to each other with an oath that death alone could dissolve. It was deeper than a contract, because a contract exchanges goods and a

covenant exchanges persons. When two parties made a covenant, they were saying, in effect, I am yours and you are mine, with everything that follows. This is the astonishing thing the Old Testament claims: that the God who made the universe chose to bind himself to human beings in exactly this way, to make himself their God and them his people, sworn and permanent, family. The whole story is the story of that binding, deepening across the covenants until, in Christ, God binds himself to humanity so completely that he becomes one of us. Follow the covenants and you are following the deepening of the most intimate bond in existence, the self-binding of God to the people he refused to abandon.

CHAPTER TWO

The Good World and the Break

Creation, the Fall, and the First Promise

The story opens not with sin but with goodness, and this matters enormously, because how you understand the beginning determines how you understand everything. The Bible does not begin with a world that was always broken. It begins with a world that was made good, by a God who is good, for creatures he loved, and it insists on this before it says a word about anything going wrong.

Everything Was Good

The first chapter of Genesis is a hymn to the goodness of creation. Again and again, as God makes light and sky and sea and land and living things, the refrain returns: and God saw that it was good. And when he makes man and woman, in his own image, the refrain intensifies: it was very good. This is the foundation of the whole Christian understanding of reality. The world is not an illusion, not a prison, not a mistake. It is a good thing made by a good God, and the human being is the summit of it, made in God′s own image, made to know and love him, made for communion with God and with one another in a garden where everything was as it should be. Whatever comes next, the story insists that this was the original and the intended state: goodness, wholeness, communion, life.

The Break

Then comes the break, and the Bible tells it with devastating economy. The man and the woman, given everything, are given one limit, one tree from which they may not eat, one boundary that marks the difference between creature and Creator. And they cross it. Tempted by the serpent with the oldest lie, the promise that they could become like God

on their own terms, deciding good and evil for themselves rather than receiving it from the one who is good, they reach for the forbidden thing and take it. This is what the tradition calls the Fall, and its consequences are not arbitrary punishments but the natural unraveling of a communion that has been broken. The relationship with God is fractured; they hide from him. The relationship between the man and woman is wounded; they turn on each other. The relationship with creation is disordered; the ground itself resists them, and work becomes toil. And death enters, the ultimate rupture, the return to dust. The good world is not destroyed, but it is broken, and every human being since is born into the wreckage, inheriting a nature wounded and a communion severed.

It is worth understanding exactly what the temptation was, because it is the same temptation a man faces every day, and seeing it clearly in the garden helps him see it in his own life. The serpent's lie was not crude. He did not tell them to hate God. He told them that God was holding out on them, that the limit God had set was not for their good but to keep them small, and that by seizing the forbidden thing they could become like God, deciding for themselves what was good and evil rather than receiving it from the one who is good. That is the essence of every sin, then and now: the refusal to receive life and its meaning from God on his terms, and the grasping instead to be the authority over my own life, the arbiter of my own good and evil. The Fall is not fundamentally about a piece of fruit. It is about a creature deciding to be his own god. And every man who has ever insisted on being the final authority over his own life, deciding for himself what is good regardless of what God has said, has repeated the sin of the garden in his own heart. The story of the Fall is not a quaint origin myth. It is a mirror.

The Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. — Genesis 3:23

The First Promise

But here is the thing almost everyone misses in the story of the Fall, and it is the hinge on which the entire Old Testament turns. In the very moment of the catastrophe, before the man and woman are even sent out of the garden, God makes a promise. Speaking to the serpent, he says that he will put enmity between the serpent and the woman, and between the serpent's offspring and hers, and that her offspring will crush the serpent's head, even as the serpent strikes his heel. The tradition has always called this the first gospel, the first announcement of good news, because hidden in the curse is a promise of rescue: one day, an offspring of the woman will crush the head of the enemy. From the very first pages, before the story of sin is even finished being told, God has promised a Savior. The whole rest of the Old Testament is, in a sense, the story of God keeping that

promise, working across two thousand years to bring into the world the offspring of the woman who will finally crush the serpent's head. Everything that follows is the unfolding of this first promise made in the ruins of the garden.

CHAPTER THREE

The Man Who Believed

Abraham and the Great Promise

After the Fall, the story moves quickly through a series of episodes that show the spread of the wreckage: the first murder, when Cain kills his brother Abel; the growing violence that leads to the flood and God's covenant with Noah to never again destroy the earth by water; and the pride of Babel, where humanity, trying again to become like God on its own terms, is scattered. The pattern is relentless. Left to itself, humanity spirals downward. And then, into this spiral, God does something new. He chooses one man.

A Word About Noah

The flood and God's covenant with Noah deserve a moment, because they establish a pattern the whole story will follow. Humanity's corruption grows so total that God resolves to wash the world clean and begin again through one righteous man and his family, carried through the deluge in the ark. But notice what God does on the far side of the flood: he makes a covenant, the first one the Bible explicitly names as such, promising never again to destroy the earth by water, and he sets the rainbow in the sky as its sign. Here is the pattern. Even in judgment, God is bent toward rescue and promise. He does not wipe the slate and walk away; he preserves a remnant, and he binds himself with a fresh promise. The flood also foreshadows something the New Testament will make explicit: salvation through water, a passing through the waters of death into new life, which the Church has always seen fulfilled in baptism. Noah is not a detour in the story. He is an early statement of its deepest logic: that God saves a remnant through the waters and binds himself by covenant to begin again.

The Call

His name was Abram, later Abraham, a man from a city in the ancient Near East, and God's call to him is one of the pivotal moments in the entire story. God tells him to leave his country, his family, and his father's house, and to go to a land God will show him. And God attaches to this call a staggering promise: I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, and in you all the families of the earth shall be

blessed. Read that last line carefully, because it is the key to everything. In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. The rescue of the whole human race, the reversal of the catastrophe in the garden, will come through this one man and the people who descend from him. God has narrowed his focus to a single family, not because he has forgotten the world, but because this is how he will save the world: by building, from one man, a people through whom the blessing will eventually come to all.

In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. — Genesis 12:3

The Faith That Counted

What makes Abraham the towering figure he is, the father of faith for Jews and Christians and Muslims alike, is that he believed. God promised him a great nation, but Abraham was old and childless and his wife was barren, and the promise seemed impossible. Yet Abraham believed God, trusting the promise against all evidence, and the Scripture says this belief was counted to him as righteousness. This is one of the most important sentences in the Bible, because it establishes, at the very foundation of God's people, that the right relationship with God comes through faith, through trusting him. Abraham did not earn the promise. He received it, by believing the God who made it. And when God finally gave him the impossible son, Isaac, in his old age, and then asked him to sacrifice even that son, and Abraham, in the most harrowing scene in Genesis, rose to obey, trusting that God could somehow still keep his promise, God stopped his hand and provided a ram instead. The tradition has always seen in that scene, a father and his beloved son climbing a hill, the son carrying the wood for his own sacrifice, a foreshadowing so exact it is difficult to read without a chill. Abraham's faith becomes the pattern, and his story plants the promise that will grow, through his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob, into a people.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Rescue That Defined Them

Exodus and the Making of a People

Jacob, Abraham's grandson, was renamed Israel, and his twelve sons became the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. Through a remarkable chain of events, involving Jacob's son Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers and rising to power in Egypt, the whole family ended up in Egypt, where over generations they multiplied into a great population and were eventually enslaved. And it is here, in the slavery of Israel in Egypt, that the defining event of the entire Old Testament takes place: the Exodus.

The Bridge of Joseph

The way the people got to Egypt is itself worth knowing, because it is one of the great stories in Genesis and it foreshadows the Gospel with startling precision. Joseph, one of Jacob's twelve sons, was hated by his brothers, betrayed by them, and sold into slavery in Egypt. There, through suffering and false accusation and long imprisonment, he was eventually raised to become the second most powerful man in Egypt, and from that position he saved the known world from famine, including the very brothers who had betrayed him. When they finally stood before him, terrified, expecting vengeance, Joseph wept and forgave them and spoke one of the most theologically profound lines in the Old Testament: you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good, to save many lives. Hold that sentence. A beloved son, betrayed and handed over, brought low into a kind of death, and raised to a place of power from which he saves the very ones who betrayed him, declaring that the evil done to him was woven by God into salvation. If that pattern sounds familiar, it should. Joseph is one of the clearest foreshadowings in the entire Old Testament of the one who was coming, the Son who would be betrayed and handed over, brought down into death, and raised to save the very ones who condemned him. The bridge that carried Israel into Egypt was also a prophecy of the cross.

The God Who Hears

The Exodus begins with God hearing. The enslaved people cry out under their bondage, and the Scripture says God heard their groaning and remembered his covenant with Abraham. This is the character of the God of the Bible: he hears the cry of the oppressed, and he acts. He calls Moses, an unlikely deliverer, a murderer in exile tending sheep, and sends him to confront the most powerful ruler in the world with an impossible demand: let my people go. Through a series of plagues that dismantle the gods of Egypt one by one, God breaks Pharaoh's grip, and in the climactic night, the night of Passover, the people are spared the final plague by the blood of a lamb marked on their doorposts, while all Egypt mourns its firstborn. Then they go out, and when Pharaoh's army pursues them to the edge of the sea, God parts the waters, and the people pass through on dry ground into freedom, while the pursuing army is drowned behind them.

The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. — Deuteronomy 26:8

Why This Is the Center

You cannot overstate how central the Exodus is. For the rest of the Old Testament, and into the New, this is the event the people return to whenever they need to remember who God is. He is the God who brought us out of Egypt. The Exodus defines God as the

liberator, the one who hears the cry of the enslaved and breaks their chains. It defines the people as a people rescued, who exist not because they were strong or numerous or deserving, but because God reached down and saved them. And it establishes the pattern that the New Testament will fulfill: salvation comes through a lamb whose blood spares the people from death, and through a passage from slavery to freedom. When John the Baptist points to Jesus and calls him the Lamb of God, when Jesus dies at Passover, when the Church speaks of being saved by the blood of the Lamb and passing through the waters of baptism from slavery to freedom, all of it is drawing on the Exodus. The rescue from Egypt is the template for the rescue from sin. To understand what Christ did, you have to know the story of the night the blood on the doorposts turned death away.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Law and the Covenant at Sinai

What It Meant to Be God's People

Freed from Egypt, the people come to a mountain in the wilderness, Mount Sinai, and there the story reaches one of its great covenant moments. God, who has rescued them, now binds himself to them formally, and them to him, in a covenant that will define what it means to be his people. This is the covenant at Sinai, and its centerpiece is the Law.

Not a Burden, but a Bond

Modern people, hearing the word Law, tend to think of the Old Testament law as a crushing burden of rules, a legalistic system that Jesus later came to abolish. This is a serious misreading, and correcting it changes how you see the whole Old Testament. The Law was given after the rescue, not before it. God did not say, keep these commands and then I will save you. He saved them first, brought them out of Egypt by sheer grace, and then gave them the Law as the shape of life with him, the way a rescued people were to live in covenant with their rescuer. The Ten Commandments and the wider Law were a gift, the terms of a relationship, the description of how a people belonging to a holy God were to live so that they could remain in communion with him and be a light to the nations. The Law was never meant to earn God's love. It was the response to a love already given, the grateful shape of a life lived with the God who had already saved them.

You shall be my treasured possession among all peoples. — Exodus 19:5

A Kingdom of Priests

At Sinai, God tells the people what he intends them to be: a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This is the purpose of Israel, and it reaches back to the promise to Abraham. A priest stands between God and others, mediating blessing. Israel was to be a priestly people among the nations, the people through whom the knowledge of the true God and his blessing would reach the whole world. They were chosen not for privilege but for mission, set apart not to hoard God's blessing but to be the channel of it to everyone else, exactly as God had promised Abraham that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed. The whole existence of Israel, its Law, its worship, its very separateness, was in service of this purpose: to carry the promise, to preserve the true worship of God in a world of idols, and to be the people from whom, at last, the Savior would come.

The Problem the Law Revealed

But the Law also did something the people did not expect: it revealed how far they were from being able to keep it. Almost immediately, even while Moses was still on the mountain receiving it, the people made a golden calf and worshiped it. The pattern of the wilderness years, and of the centuries that followed, was a relentless cycle of the people failing to keep the covenant, falling into idolatry and injustice, suffering the consequences, crying out, and being rescued again by God's mercy. The Law was holy and good, but it exposed a deeper problem: the human heart was broken, and no external law could fix an internal wound. The people could not, by their own strength, be the holy nation they were called to be. This is one of the great lessons the Old Testament teaches by hard experience across a thousand years: the Law shows you what righteousness looks like, but it cannot make you righteous. Something more would be needed. Something that could reach the heart itself. The prophets would eventually name it: a new covenant, in which God would write his law not on tablets of stone but on the human heart. But that fulfillment was still centuries away. First came the long, painful demonstration that the people could not save themselves.

CHAPTER SIX

The King and the Promise of a Throne

David and the Covenant of the Kingdom

After the wilderness, the people entered the promised land, conquered and settled it, and lived for a time under judges, charismatic leaders God raised up in times of crisis. But they wanted a king, like the nations around them, and eventually God gave them one.

After the failure of the first king, Saul, God chose a second, and with him the story reaches its final great covenant before Christ. His name was David.

The Shepherd King

David is the towering human figure of the Old Testament, and we have met him already in the book on the Psalms. A shepherd boy, the youngest and least likely of his brothers, anointed in secret, he rose through the killing of the giant Goliath and years of hardship to become the greatest king Israel would ever have. He united the tribes, established Jerusalem as the holy city, and brought the Ark of the Covenant, the sign of God's presence, into the heart of the nation. He was a man of deep faith and deep failures both, an adulterer and a murderer who was also called a man after God's own heart, and his life is one of the richest portraits of a human being anywhere in Scripture. But for the shape of the whole story, what matters most is the promise God made to him.

The Covenant of the Kingdom

God made David a covenant, and it is the last great covenant before Christ, so listen to its terms. David wanted to build God a house, a temple. God's answer was to reverse the offer: instead, God would build David a house, meaning a dynasty, a royal line. And God promised that David's throne would be established forever, that one of his descendants would reign, and that this kingdom would have no end. This is the covenant that shapes all the expectation that follows. From this point on, the people know that the promised deliverer, the offspring of the woman, the blessing to the nations, will come from the line of David, will be a king, an anointed one, and his kingdom will last forever. The Hebrew word for anointed one is Messiah; the Greek is Christ. Everything now has a shape: the one who is coming will be the Son of David, the Messiah, the eternal king.

Your throne shall be established forever. — 2 Samuel 7:16

A Promise That Outlived the Kingdom

Here is what makes the covenant with David so powerful across the rest of the story. The actual kingdom did not last. David's son Solomon built the temple and reigned in glory, but after him the kingdom split in two, and both halves declined through a long succession of mostly faithless kings into idolatry and injustice. Eventually the northern kingdom was destroyed by Assyria and the southern kingdom, Judah, was conquered by Babylon, the temple burned, and the people carried into exile. The throne of David, in earthly terms, fell. And yet the promise remained: the throne would be established forever. So the people, even in exile, even with no king on any throne, held onto the promise and began to look forward, with growing intensity, to the coming of a new Son of

David, a Messiah who would restore the kingdom that God had sworn would never end. The failure of the earthly kingdom did not cancel the promise. It sharpened the longing for its true fulfillment, which no mere earthly king could provide, and which would only arrive when a descendant of David was born whose kingdom really would have no end.

The Temple and the Presence

One institution from this period deserves particular attention, because it becomes central to everything that follows: the temple. David's son Solomon built it in Jerusalem, a magnificent house for the presence of God, and it became the beating heart of Israel's worship and identity. Here God's presence dwelt among his people in a special way, in the innermost chamber, the Holy of Holies. Here the sacrifices were offered, the whole elaborate system by which a sinful people could approach a holy God, the blood of animals standing in for the lives of the people, a daily, visible acknowledgment that sin costs something and that approaching God requires atonement. The temple taught Israel, across centuries, two truths it would need in order to understand Christ: that God desires to dwell with his people, and that sin creates a barrier that only sacrifice can cross. When the New Testament presents Christ as both the true temple, God dwelling among us in the flesh, and the true and final sacrifice, whose blood atones once for all so that no further sacrifice is needed, it is drawing on everything the temple had been teaching the people for a thousand years. The tearing of the temple veil at the moment of Christ's death, the barrier between God and man torn open from top to bottom, is the temple's whole meaning brought to its conclusion. To feel the weight of that torn veil, you have to know what the temple was.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Voices in the Ruins

The Prophets and the Ache for More

As the kingdom declined and fell, God raised up the prophets, and to understand the end of the Old Testament story you have to understand what the prophets actually were, because most people badly misunderstand them.

Not Fortune-Tellers, but Covenant Voices

A prophet, in the biblical sense, was not primarily a predictor of the future. A prophet was a man sent by God to speak God's word into a specific moment, usually a moment of crisis, calling the people back to the covenant they were abandoning. The prophets

thundered against the two great betrayals of the covenant: idolatry, the worship of false gods, and injustice, the trampling of the poor and the vulnerable. Read the prophets and you find, again and again, God's fury at both, at a people who kept up their religious rituals while worshiping idols in their hearts and grinding the faces of the poor. The prophets were the conscience of the covenant, God's voice reminding a straying people who they were and what they had promised. They were, mostly, ignored, persecuted, and rejected, which is its own foreshadowing of what would happen to the greatest prophet of all.

The Books That Ask the Hard Questions

Alongside the prophets, and worth naming here because they are so often overlooked, stand the wisdom books, and they are the part of the Old Testament that speaks most directly to a thinking man's hardest questions. The Book of Job confronts the deepest problem a believer faces: why the innocent suffer. It refuses every easy answer, including the pious ones offered by Job's friends, and ends not with an explanation but with an encounter, God himself answering out of the whirlwind, and Job falling silent before a mystery larger than his questions. The Book of Ecclesiastes stares directly into the emptiness of a life lived for pleasure, work, wealth, and achievement, and pronounces it all vanity, a chasing after wind, a startlingly modern verdict on the very things our culture tells a man to build his life on, and it points, underneath the bleakness, toward the truth that only God can fill the hunger these things leave. The Proverbs offer the accumulated practical wisdom of how to live well, wisely, justly. These books are the interior wrestling of the people of God, and they speak to a man's real life, his suffering, his disillusionment, his search for how to live, with a frankness that surprises everyone who assumes the Old Testament is all law and battles. They are worth a man's time precisely because they ask the questions he is actually asking.

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. — Amos 5:24

The Growing Promise

But the prophets did more than accuse. As the situation grew darker, as the kingdom fell and the people went into exile and everything God had promised seemed to lie in ruins, the prophets began to speak of a future beyond the ruin, and their vision of that future grew steadily more specific and more glorious. They spoke of a coming servant who would suffer for the sins of the people, wounded for our transgressions, bearing the iniquity of us all, and by whose wounds we would be healed. They spoke of a new covenant, unlike the one made at Sinai, in which God would write his law upon the

human heart and forgive sins completely. They spoke of a child to be born who would be called Mighty God, of a king coming to Jerusalem humble and riding on a donkey, of a ruler to come from the small town of Bethlehem, of God himself coming to shepherd his people, of a day when the knowledge of the Lord would cover the earth and all nations would stream to Jerusalem. Piece by piece, across the prophets, a portrait was being assembled of the one who was coming, and the longing for him grew almost unbearable.

The Ache at the End

And then the Old Testament simply stops. After the return from exile and the rebuilding of a modest temple, the prophetic voices fall silent, and there follow four hundred years the Old Testament does not record, centuries in which the people, back in their land but under the boot of one foreign empire after another, waited. This is where the Old Testament leaves you: with a people who possess the most extraordinary set of promises ever made, a Savior from the line of David, a suffering servant, a new covenant, a king whose reign will never end, and none of it fulfilled. The story ends not in triumph but in longing, in an ache, in a people scanning the horizon for the one who was promised and had not yet come. The Old Testament is a story with a magnificent setup and no resolution, a bow drawn back to its full tension and not yet released. It ends leaning forward, straining toward a fulfillment it cannot produce on its own, waiting.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Story That Was Always About Him

How It All Points to Christ

Now we can see why Jesus, on the road to Emmaus, explained himself by walking through the Old Testament. The whole thing had been about him from the beginning. He is the point toward which the entire story was straining, and once you see him as the fulfillment, the Old Testament stops being a foreign collection of ancient books and becomes the first three quarters of a single story whose ending you already know.

Every Thread Ties Off in Him

Follow the threads to their end. The offspring of the woman promised in the garden, who would crush the serpent's head, is Christ, who by his death and resurrection defeated sin and death, the serpent's power. The blessing to all nations promised to Abraham comes through Christ, Abraham's descendant, in whom the blessing finally reaches the whole world. The beloved son carrying the wood up the hill, whom the father was willing to

offer, is fulfilled in the Son who carried his cross up Calvary, the sacrifice God did provide. The Passover lamb whose blood turns death away is Christ, the Lamb of God, who dies at Passover and whose blood saves his people from death. The Law that could show righteousness but not create it is fulfilled in Christ, who writes God's law on the human heart through his Spirit, the new covenant the prophets foretold. The everlasting throne promised to David belongs to Christ, the Son of David, whose kingdom truly has no end. The suffering servant, wounded for our transgressions, is Christ on the cross. Every promise, every pattern, every longing of the entire Old Testament finds its resolution in him. He is the one the story was about the whole time.

These are my words that I spoke to you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. — Luke 24:44

Why This Changes Your Reading of Everything

Once you see this, two things happen. First, the Old Testament comes alive, because you are no longer reading a disconnected pile of ancient books but the unfolding of a single divine plan that you can watch tightening, chapter by chapter, toward its fulfillment. The genealogies matter, because they are tracing the line toward the Messiah. The Law matters, because it is showing you the righteousness only Christ could give. The failures of the kings matter, because they are deepening the longing for the true king. Everything is going somewhere, and you know where.

Second, and more importantly, the New Testament explodes with meaning it did not have before. When Jesus is called the Lamb of God, you hear Passover. When he is called the Son of David, you hear the everlasting throne. When he speaks of a new covenant in his blood at the Last Supper, you hear the prophets. When he dies on a hill carrying wood, you hear Abraham and Isaac. When he rises and the tomb is empty, you hear the whole two-thousand-year ache of a people waiting for God to finally, decisively act. You cannot hear any of this if you skipped the first three quarters of the book. But once you know the story behind the story, the Gospels detonate with a significance that a man who knows only the New Testament will never fully feel.

The Church's Way of Reading

What we have been doing in this chapter has an ancient name in the Church: typology. A type is a real person, event, or institution in the Old Testament that genuinely happened and also, by God's design, foreshadows and points forward to its fulfillment in Christ. Adam is a type of Christ, the new Adam who undoes the first Adam's fall. The Passover lamb is a type of Christ, the true Lamb. Melchizedek, the mysterious priest-king who brings out bread and wine, is a type of Christ, priest and king, who gives us bread and

wine that become his body and blood. The manna in the wilderness, the bread from heaven that fed the people, is a type of the Eucharist, the true bread from heaven. This is not a game of finding clever parallels. It is the way the New Testament itself reads the Old, the way Jesus read it on the Emmaus road, the way the Church has always read it. God authored a single story across both Testaments, and he built the earlier part so that it would genuinely prefigure the later, the way a great author plants, early in a novel, details that only reveal their full meaning at the end. Learning to read typologically is learning to read the Bible the way its divine Author wrote it, as one unified work in which the whole first part quietly points forward to Christ.

CHAPTER NINE

Reading It for Yourself

Where to Begin and How

Knowing the shape of the story is the essential thing, and if this book has given you that, it has done its main work. But the point was never to substitute for the Old Testament. It was to open it, so that now you can read it yourself and not get lost. Here is how to begin.

Do Not Start at the Beginning and Push Through

The instinct is to start at Genesis 1 and read straight through to the end, and this is exactly how most men fail. You will do fine through Genesis and most of Exodus, and then hit the detailed legal and ritual material in the middle books and grind to a halt, and quit, and conclude you cannot read the Old Testament. The problem is not you. The problem is the method. Reading straight through treats every book as equally suited to continuous reading, and they are not. Some are narrative and read like a story; others are law codes or collections meant to be consulted rather than read through. Do not start at the beginning and push through. Read strategically instead.

Read the Story First

Read the narrative spine first, the books that actually carry the plot, so that the whole story lives in you before you tackle the rest. Read Genesis for creation, the Fall, and the patriarchs. Read Exodus for the great rescue, through the giving of the Law, and then you can move lightly over the detailed legal sections rather than laboring through every rule. Read the narrative of the conquest and the judges, then the books of Samuel for Saul and David, which contain some of the finest storytelling in all of Scripture. Read enough of the books of Kings to follow the decline and fall. This narrative spine gives you the whole

story as story, and it reads, in large stretches, as compellingly as any epic ever written. Get the story into you first. Everything else will make sense in its light.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. — Psalm 119:105

Then Deepen With the Rest

Once the story lives in you, the other books open up, because you can place them. Read the prophets knowing the crises they spoke into, and they transform from baffling thunder into passionate voices you can follow. Read the wisdom books, Job wrestling with suffering, Ecclesiastes staring down the emptiness of a life without God, the Proverbs, as the reflections of people living inside the story you now know. Pray the Psalms, as the companion book in this library teaches, as the prayers of that same people, now that you understand the history they arose from. And read all of it, always, with Christ in view, watching for the ways each book leans toward him, because that is how Jesus himself taught his disciples to read it. The Old Testament read this way is inexhaustible, and a man can spend the rest of his life going deeper into it and never reach the bottom.

Use Good Help

Finally, do not read it alone in the sense of reading it without the Church's guidance. Use a good Catholic study Bible with introductions and notes that place each book and explain the hard parts. Let the Church, who assembled these books and has prayed and pondered them for two thousand years, guide your reading, so that you interpret the difficult passages within the tradition rather than inventing your own conclusions. The Old Testament contains genuinely hard things, violence and strangeness and passages that trouble the modern conscience, and a good guide helps you read them rightly, in the light of the whole story and its fulfillment in Christ. You do not have to figure it all out yourself. You have the Church, and two thousand years of her wisdom, to read alongside you.

A Word on the Hard Passages

Be prepared, as you read, to encounter things that trouble you: divinely commanded warfare, harsh laws, violence, and passages that seem to sit uneasily with the God revealed in Christ. Do not let these stop you, and do not pretend they are not there. The Church has wrestled with them for two thousand years and offers real help. A few principles carry a man through. First, revelation is progressive: God met a violent and ancient people where they were and led them, slowly, across centuries, toward the fullness that would only come in Christ, so the earlier stages show real but incomplete

light. Second, the whole Old Testament must be read in the light of its fulfillment, which is Christ, and where a passage seems to conflict with the God revealed on the cross, it is the cross that shows us the fullness and the earlier passage that we read in that light. Third, much that troubles the modern reader is a matter of genre and ancient convention that a good guide will explain. None of this means explaining away the hard passages, and none of it should shake you. It means reading them as the Church reads them, as real parts of a real story that is genuinely leading somewhere, and whose destination, Christ, is the key that unlocks even the hard parts. Bring your questions. Do not bury them, and do not let them stop you. Read on, with the Church, toward the one who makes sense of it all.

CONCLUSION

The Two Hours You No Longer Have to Skip

Return to the image we began with: the man watching the last twenty minutes of a film, wondering why everyone is weeping, missing the meaning because he skipped the two hours that gave the ending its weight. That was you, perhaps, for most of your life as a Catholic, knowing the Gospels reasonably well and the long story behind them not at all, feeling the emotion of Easter without fully understanding what had been resolved.

You do not have to skip those two hours anymore. You now hold the story: a good world made by a good God, broken by human sin, and rescued across two thousand years through a series of ever-deepening covenants, with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, each advancing the promise, until the whole story leaned forward, aching, toward a Savior from the line of David, a suffering servant, a new covenant written on the heart, a king whose reign would never end. And you know how it resolves: in a child born in Bethlehem of David's line, in a Lamb slain at Passover, in a beloved Son carrying wood up a hill, in an empty tomb that answered the whole two-thousand-year ache at once. The Old Testament is the story that Christ fulfilled, and now you can read it as the story it is, and read the New Testament with all the meaning the Old pours into it.

This is not merely academic. When you know this story, your own life finds its place in it. You are a member of the people this story created, grafted by baptism into the covenant that runs from Abraham through David to Christ and now to you. The promises made in these ancient pages are your promises. The God who heard the cry of slaves in Egypt and remembered his covenant is the God who hears you. The rescue that ran through the

whole Old Testament and climaxed in Christ is the rescue that reached you. You are not reading someone else's story. You are reading the first three quarters of your own.

So read it. Begin with the narrative, get the whole shape into you, and then go deeper for the rest of your life, always watching for the Christ toward whom every page leans. The story that took God two thousand years to tell, and that Jesus himself used to explain himself on the road to Emmaus, is waiting for you now, no longer a fog of names and kings but a single, magnificent, unfinished-until-Christ story of a God who would not abandon the world he made. It is, as always, waiting to be read.

✦ ✦ ✦

The Old Testament: The Story Behind the Story is part of The Daily Bread Library.