

# her·me·neu·tics

## HOW TO STUDY YOUR BIBLE

— an eight week course with pastor ben —

### Lesson 4 – Rightly Relating the Old and New Testament

Hermeneutics deals with how we study the Bible, and as we think about studying our Bible one important issue that we must wrestle with is how the relationship between the New Testament and the Old Testament. How do we read the Old Testament differently now that Christ has come, and as we study the authors of the New Testament, how did they think about the Old Testament? The answer to these questions will make a difference in countless passages we study.

In this lesson, we will look at two major ways of viewing the relationship between the Old and New Testament: covenant theology and dispensational theology. We will compare and contrast the two views and then explain why a dispensational view should be preferred. In the second half of the lesson, we will give some thought specifically as to how the Old Testament points toward and prepares the way for Christ.

#### Covenant vs. Dispensational Theology

As we study these two positions, we should begin with the observation that both groups hold to the authority of the Bible and orthodox Christian beliefs, and both desire to be faithful to God and His Word. But it is important know what you believe concerning these issues and why, because what you believe in this area will determine several other important things, such as...

- **How you understand prophecies in the Old and New Testament.**

When you read through Isaiah through Malachi in the Old Testament or Revelation, the Olivet Discourse, and the Thessalonian letters in the New Testament, your understanding of your reading will at times be very different based on what you believe about these key issues. How and when what you are reading will be fulfilled will be determined by whether you start with a dispensational or a covenant hermeneutic.

- **How you understand the doctrine of the church.**

Is the church something new, or is the church basically the same thing as Israel? Has the church replaced Israel as the special people for whom God has a plan? Or is there still a future for Israel?

- **How you understand the doctrine of end times.**

The question of whether or not God is done with the Jewish people will greatly affect not only your view of the church but also your view of the end of time? Does God have unfinished business with Israel? Or are we simply headed for the end of all things? Your answer to these questions, and the passages behind them, will look differently based on whether you hold to a dispensational or covenant hermeneutic.

In this lesson, we will work through three big differences between these systems. We will give the covenant theology understanding, then the dispensational theology understanding, and then give reasons why a dispensational understanding should be preferred.

1. **An emphasis on unity or distinction within God's plan.**

Everyone agrees there is unity in God's plan and everyone agrees that God deals differently with different people in different times. Salvation is always by faith, whether you're Abraham or Paul. Yet no one tries to offer sacrifices on an altar. Everyone agrees there is a unified plan of God that looks a little different in different eras. The question is which gets the most emphasis in your system: the unity or the distinction?

**Covenant theology:** Emphasizes the unity within God's plan. According to Covenant theology, God has made 2 primary covenants with humanity. The covenant of works in the garden was made with Adam and Eve but was broken, so God made a covenant of grace, which has been effective since the fall until today. Every covenant afterwards is basically a different form of the same covenant, meaning the covenant we enjoy today is simply another form of the same covenant that God made with Israel. For this reason, Covenant Theology sees a lot of overlap between Israel and the church.

**Dispensational theology:** Dispensationalists focus on the different ways God has interacted with people throughout time. These different ways of God's working with people are called "dispensations." This is a word Paul uses 4 times, three of them referring to the "administration" that God had given him in sharing the gospel to the Gentiles, and one referring to the coming "dispensation of the fullness of times" (Ephesians 1:10). A dispensation is often defined as a new stewardship given by God, or we could think of it as a new way of relating to God, which calls forth new responsibilities and a new way of interacting with God. Many of the covenants God made throughout history initiate a new dispensation, such as the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and the New.

**Summary:** Both covenant theology and dispensational theology start with a biblical word (covenant, dispensation) and build on it. Covenant theologians suggest a covenant never explicitly mentioned in the Old Testament, the covenant of grace, and see all following covenants as a different expression of this same covenant. Dispensationalists take the word “dispensation,” a word used by Paul to refer to his own ministry and the coming time when God will unite all things in Christ and use that as a pattern for God’s changing interactions with humanity in throughout Scripture. At this point, we can’t say much in favor of one system or the other, but as we continue to look at the other points of difference we will important differences between these two views and why it is a dispensational view should be preferred.

## 2. **A spiritual or normal (or literal) hermeneutic of prophecy**

This is perhaps the most foundational difference between these two systems. It is from this fundamental difference in how they read the Bible that dispensational and covenant theologians come to such different views on other issues.

**Covenant Theology:** all the promises of the Old Testament will be fulfilled, but they will be or are being fulfilled in a spiritual way. Many of the physical promises originally made to Israel are now being fulfilled spiritually in the church.

**Dispensational theology:** all the promises of the Old Testament will be fulfilled as the original hearers would have understood them to be fulfilled. While dispensationalists recognize that prophecy often includes symbols and metaphors, this does not mean that it does mean that straightforward predictions of the future should be taken in ways that wouldn’t have made sense to the original audience.

### **Reasons for a normal hermeneutic of prophecy**

- **The understanding of the original audience.**

Understanding what the original author meant the original audience to understand is an important principle in studying God’s Word. Hosea 1:11 and Ezekiel 37 both prophesy that the divided nations of Israel and Judah will one day be reunited under David or a king of Davidic descent. Does this refer to a literal, future event wherein God will regather the nation of Israel and will place them under the Messianic king? How should we interpret this today? Some would argue that what the prophecy was *really* talking about was the unity of all nations under Christ that is being fulfilled in the church and will ultimately be fulfilled in the eternal state. The problem with this understanding is that it means something very different from what Ezekiel and Hosea’s readers would have understood it to mean!

- **Spiritual interpretations of literal promises tend to be subjective.**

Ezekiel 40-48 is nine chapters full of details regarding a massively rebuilt temple. The dimensions of the building and the surrounding land, the different parts of the temple itself, the role of a figure called the prince in the worship of the temple, and many other highly detailed instructions are included in these long nine chapters. In situations like this, those who take a spiritual approach to Old Testament prophecy tend to either make very general statements happening by ignoring many of the details or they finding in them very interesting interpretations that reflect more on the imagination of the interpreter than on the meaning of the original author. When people see a deeper, spiritual meaning in straightforward promises, it's hard to find an objective way of deciding what that meaning is.

- **Prophecies concerning Christ's first coming were fulfilled literally.**

What did it mean that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem? What did it mean that there would be the voice of one crying the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord"? Or that the Servant of the Lord would be wounded for our transgressions, or that our iniquities would be laid upon him? What did it mean that a virgin would conceive and bear a son, or that Zion's king would come riding on a donkey? Since Christ's first coming fulfilled prophecy with such astounding exactness, we should expect that his second coming would likewise fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament in a similar way.

For these reasons, a normal hermeneutic of prophecy should be adopted. The prophets used symbols and metaphors, but we should still be concerned to understand them as the original authors understood them.

### **3. An equating or differentiating of Israel and the church.**

Is there a future for the ethnic people of Israel? Or has the church completely replaced Israel as God's people? The difference in hermeneutic (normal versus spiritual) impacts how one sees Old Testament prophecies, and greatly impacts one's view of many New Testament passages that address the church.

**Covenant theology:** God's work with Israel specifically is concluded. Individual Israelites may be saved, and perhaps even the nation as a whole may turn to God in the future. But if that happens it will happen by them joining the church, because God works exclusively with the church as His special people.

**Dispensational theology:** God continues to have a special future planned for ethnic Israel. The promises of national revival made to Judah and Israel, of a reunited kingdom under a

Davidic ruler, and of a regathering to the land will be fulfilled in the millennial kingdom at the end of a period of tribulation.

### **Reasons for a continued distinction between Israel and the church**

- **The church is never called Israel.**

Descriptions used to describe Israel in the Old Testament is sometimes borrowed to describe the church, as in passages like 1 Peter 2:9-10 or Romans 9:25-26. This makes sense, because there will certainly be much that overlaps with the way God interacts with His people in the Old Testament and the way He interacts with His people in the New Testament. But the writers of the New Testament never equate Israel and the church. Some would argue that “the Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16 is an instance where Israel actually means church, but more likely it is a reference to the believing remnant of Israel.

- **Specific promises made to Israel.**

As we saw under the previous section on prophesy, God had made several distinct promises to Israel. These included:

- A regathering in the land.
- The northern and southern kingdom reunited under a Davidic king.
- A position of supreme importance on the world stage.
- A gloriously reconstructed temple at which all nations would come to worship.

These things have not happened, certainly not to the degree anticipated in the Old Testament. This means either these prophecies will be fulfilled in a very different way from what Israel was expecting, or that they will still be fulfilled in the future millennial kingdom. Again, as we saw earlier, the literal fulfillment of the promises concerning Christ’s first coming suggests a literal fulfillment for these prophecies as well.

- **Paul’s hope for the future of Israel.**

Paul’s discussion in Romans 9-11 focuses on a very important question: how could Israel have missed it when it comes to the gospel? How did God’s chosen people reject their Messiah? Paul has a twofold answer. First, not all of them did. There is a remnant, as Paul himself is evidence of. Second, God still has a future for Israel. Why? Because, as Paul states “The gifts and calling of God *are* without repentance,” in other words, God’s not giving up on Israel.

- **The disciples’ expectation.**

Acts 1:3 tells us that for forty days Christ presented himself to his disciples and taught them about the kingdom. At the end of those forty days, the disciples asked a very revealing question, “Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6) After forty days of being taught by Christ about the kingdom, the disciples were

expecting Jesus to set up *a kingdom focused on Israel!* Christ's response told them not to worry about when, but to leave that to God and to be witnesses. For the disciples to get it wrong, for Jesus to let that slide, and then for Luke to include the confused dialogue for posterity when there is no kingdom coming to Israel makes a lot less sense than simply reading this as a legitimate expectation on the part of the disciples that there was a future left for Israel.

Although there is much more that unites covenant and dispensational theologians than divides them, the differences in hermeneutics should not simply be shrugged off.

## Where Is Christ in the Old Testament?

On the road to Emmaus, Christ meets two downcast disciples who are mourning His death. Christ rebukes them for having missed the message of the Old Testament: that the Christ [Messiah] must suffer before entering into glory. Then Luke 24:27 tells us that "beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." So what did He say? In what ways did Jesus see the Old Testament as pointing forward to Him? Many specific prophecies point to Jesus, but in what ways did Jesus point out on that trip that "all Scripture" pointed to Him.

Some have tried to press every little detail to somehow be a hidden reference to Christ. While there is a lot of creativity in these methods, one is left wondering if that is really the point, and if that's really the type of conversation Christ had with the disciples on the way to Emmaus. What I will be suggesting here is a bigger picture approach. We will see at least four ways that the Old Testament points forward to and prepares the way for Christ: prophecies about Christ, promises God makes, pictures of Christ, and problems that only Christ can solve.

### 1. Prophecies

This is the easiest and most obvious way that the Old Testament points to Christ. Many specific, detailed prophecies pointed forward to Christ and His work on our behalf. Many of these are found in the prophetic literature, but these prophecies are scattered everywhere if we look closely.

- God promised that there would be a greater prophet than Moses who would arise (Deuteronomy 18:15-19)
- God promised David a descendant who would rule forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16).
- God predicted a great priest-king after the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110).

### 2. Pictures

When we hear that something Jesus said or did "fulfilled" the Old Testament, most of us assume that if we looked up the reference we would find a straightforward prediction of what the Messiah would say or do. Yet while that is often the case, sometimes when we look up a Sometimes when the New Testament say that something Jesus said or did

“fulfilled” the Old Testament, we find upon careful examination a puzzling problem: the passage that is being alluded to isn’t a direct prophecy. This raises the question: in what sense does Christ “fulfill” these passages?

**Example:** In Matthew 2:15 the prophet Hosea is cited when he said as being fulfilled by the flight to Egypt. “Out of Egypt I have called my son” (Hosea 11:1). When we look carefully at the verse in Hosea, we realize that Hosea is not saying “God will call the Messiah out of Egypt” but rather, “God once called Israel out of Egypt.” Hosea is talking about Israel when he said “My son,” yet Matthew applies those words to Christ. So is Matthew twisting the words of Hosea to mean something they don’t? How can he take the words of Hosea, which were originally talking about Israel, and apply them to Christ?

Matthew is not here using the word “fulfill” to mean a prediction that has been satisfied. He is using the word to say that Jesus is the Son of God, much like Israel was the son of God. Israel becomes of picture of the Messiah, but the difference is that where Israel failed in their obedience Christ will be successful. As we look at the comparisons between Jesus and Israel, we find quite a few:

- Both stories begin with a murderous tyrant senselessly and jealously killing innocent children.
- Both involve a departure from Egypt.
- Both “passed through the waters” (Israel through the Red Sea, Christ in his baptism)
- Both involve a testing of forty (days/years).
- Both are called the son of God.

Matthew’s point, here, is that Israel is a picture of Christ. They are a pattern that Christ follows in many ways. Just as God cared for His son Israel in Egypt, preserving them and bringing them out of Egypt so they can accomplish His purposes, so He preserved and cared for Jesus, eventually calling Him out of Egypt to do the Father’s will.

**Example:** Another example of the Old Testament forming pictures of Christ is the Passover. Every Jewish family had to sacrifice a perfect lamb without blemish. When the destroying angel saw the blood on the door, he would pass over that home. Not surprisingly, Paul connects the sacrifice of Passover to Jesus, whose blood causes the wrath of the Father to pass over us.

**Caution:** We need to be careful to avoid allegorizing at this point. The overlap between legitimate pictures of Christ’s person and work in the Old Testament and pressing details to the unhealthy extremes of allegorization may be a fine line at times. If we find the New Testament drawing a connection between a person, institution, or event in the Old Testament and Christ, we can safely know that is meant to point to Jesus. If someone gives an example and your first response is, “Oh yeah, I can certainly see how that would be the case” then you’re probably on safe grounds. But watch out for instances where an example

is given that makes you scratch your head and think, "I would never have thought that was referring to Christ."

### **3. Promises**

God makes lots of promises, to individuals and to nations. He made Promises to Abraham, to Moses, to David, to the nation of Israel, into many many more. In fact by the time we get to the end of our Old Testament God has made so many promises in such big promises that we wonder if you could actually come through on all of them. Not only does he come through on all of them but he fulfills all of his promises through the work in person of Jesus Christ. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1:20 that "for all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen." The promises of the Old Testament are designed to point forward to the one through whom God will fulfill all of his promises, Jesus Christ.

### **4. Problems**

It has been said that the Old Testament is a story in search of an ending. The book of Malachi is a disappointing end to the Old Testament that leaves us hanging in a number of ways. But this is intentional! The Old Testament was supposed to prepare us for what is more to come and one of the ways it does that is by setting up numerous problems that need solving. The first and greatest problem is the problem of human sin. Every time we find evil temporarily triumph over good, every time we watch a hero fall, every time we see disaster and devastation we are reminded that there is a problem that needs a solution. But as we continue to read, we find more and more problems.

For example, reading the law emphasizes the problem with the priesthood. The priests keep giving sacrifices over and over, because the sacrifices don't really take away the sin. Not only that, but the ones offering the sacrifices have to offer sacrifices for themselves as well, because they too are sinners. When we read the book of Kings, we are left wanting a King who is going to fully and completely succeed in leading the people in the ways of the Lord. Too often we find wicked Kings, or good Kings who become proud and make a mess of things. When we come to the prophets, we find a group of people who give God's word over and over again but are ignored. And so we get to the end of our Old Testament and we're left wanting a priest who can offer the perfect sacrifice, a King who will truly lead in the ways of the Lord, and the Prophet who will clearly and convincingly revealed the father to us. All of these sections are leading up to Jesus Christ and his ministry. They are problems begging for a solution, and that solution is Jesus.

The Old Testament points forward to Jesus. But it doesn't do so by hiding a bunch of random details that were supposed to somehow then force to somehow have a connection to him. Rather as we step back and look at the whole we realize that the story of the Old Testament is a story in search of an ending. It's a story that is pointing forward to an looking to the ministry of Jesus Christ. And as we read our old testaments carefully and thoughtfully we will realize more and more of them anyways in which they require and demand the ministry of Jesus Christ.