

Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

A. Beginnings

1. Religion and Revelation

The teachings of Jesus and the apostles are rightly the focus of Christians who want to follow in their path. But those teachings, found in the New Testament, build upon a legacy and a story—told in the Old Testament—that reaches back to the beginning of the world and beyond. Jesus knew this story very well. But many of us don't, and, as a result, find it that much harder to grasp the riches of what Jesus and the apostles taught. That's too bad; after all, the stories and teachings of the Old Testament are part of every Christian's story, and are essential for helping us understand what God has wanted from the beginning. That's the reason I wrote this book: "Longing for a Better Country," and developed this course. I hope it will help you better grasp how the redemption we have in Christ builds upon and completes God's earlier redemptive activity.

So far, what I've done with my book is try to get people to commit to using it for a year. That's a big commitment, but one worth doing for the results it brings. But what works even better is if a small group of people, who are using this book to study the Old Testament get together once every week or two for a conversation about the readings. Those who have done that have gotten the most out of their study.

You are probably taking this course because you not only want to grow and mature spiritually but you want to help others do the same. I hope to help you do that with the background and supplemental material in these lectures. A good grasp of it will help you be an effective leader.

Let me explain the outline I'll be following. Part 1 of this course—the first third of it—gives an overview of the redemptive-historical story of the Old Testament. I'm trying to condense the story told in 365 daily readings into a few lectures.

Part 2—the last two thirds of the course—deals with some important biblical topics addressed in the Old Testament narratives. Take prayer for example. As you read through the various stories you can't help but notice the significant role of prayer. The daily readings offer some reflections on this in passing. But in the lecture on prayer I've addressed prayer in a topical rather than an expository way. And I've done similar things with 20 other topics: The Sovereignty of God, Spiritual Warfare, Our Covenanting God, and so on.

Just before we get to Parts 1 and 2 however, I should be clear about the presuppositions or underlying assumptions I bring to this study. These concern my perspective on the nature of religion and revelation.

What is religion anyhow? The dictionary defines it as a particular system of faith and worship. But this might be a little misleading because some people claim they have no religion. You may hear something like this: "My neighbor, why, he's got no religion at all." Or, "She's a very religious person." Or as one recent convert asked another: "When did you get religion?"

What do you think? Is religion really something that you can have or not have? I suppose it is if you define religion as belief in God or in the supernatural. But if religion really has to do with where you put your faith and what you regard as most important in your life, then everyone has religion. I don't know who first said it, but I'll repeat it: Humankind is incurably religious.

In the days of ancient Israel, all of the other nations of that world, everyone except Israel, thought there were many gods. They had gods for fertility and gods for war and household gods. They found gods in the sky and gods on the earth and gods in the water and gods in animals; they found gods everywhere.

Today too, you may travel to the farthest corners of the world; it doesn't matter where. And when you do you will find religion in operation even if it looks a little different than it did in ancient times.

Usually there is outright worship involved. But religion may also take the form of relegating God to a small slice of life, or denying him completely. Your religion, whether you call it that or not, is what you build your life around, what is most important to you as shown not just in official acts of worship, but in your behavior and lifestyle. So then, those who intentionally worship God or some idol are religious. But so are those who devote all their time and energies to material gain or to the experience of one pleasure or another or even to the attainment of what some scientists pursue: "God-like omniscience."

Many people like to say that such things are just a matter of personal preference, and that one person's preference (or religion), so long as it doesn't hurt anyone, is just as good as anyone else's. But that assumes there is not One who demands, and is worthy of, all worship and service. But my starting point is that there is such a one—God—the very one who created everything and without whose constant involvement everything would degenerate into the nothingness from which it came.

If that is so, then true religion involves doing what God wants and commands. And false religions—of which there are many varieties—are those in which peoples' lives are devoted to any other purpose than the service of the One True God.

And that brings us to the questions of how we can tell the difference between true and false religion, and what the requirements of true religion are. The Judeo-Christian religion, as well as most of the offshoot religions that have been derived from it (such as Islam), says that outside revelation is the key to understanding true religion and knowing what it requires.

In other words, the source of revelation is not the human mind, nor does revelation depend on the initiative of those who seek it. Instead, revelation comes from, and by the initiative of, the Creator of the universe who is not himself locked into the world he has made. Revelation is a sovereign act of God who chooses to expose us to himself and his ways through a variety of methods. True religion, therefore, is not a matter of inventing God or creating truth, but of discovering God and coming to know him as he has revealed himself.

"The core idea in revelation," says Dr. Gordon Spykman, "is the notion of *unveiling*. Think of unwrapping a gift, or unveiling a monument, or drawing aside the curtains at a theater. Revelation means making known something previously unknown and still unknowable apart from the revealing act... With deeds and words God informs our hearts of his claim upon our lives and his plan for the world - opening doors of understanding which would otherwise remain forever closed." A knowable God and a knowing mankind - this is the foundation of true religion.

But, how can we know someone so great and majestic? Only when and if he communicates with us in words we can understand. God has to put his Word into human words.

Dr. Spykman writes that “Even his names, personal revelations, are drawn from earthly vocabularies... He takes his revelation down to our level of understanding, our capacity, and our need. There are hidden depths we cannot plumb, dazzling heights we cannot ascend. Yet the light that shines is true, though filtered. And in that light we see light.” Spykman, 14; also paraphrased in ff para’s.

If we look at God's Book—the Bible—which is certainly the major document of his self-revelation, we see that the revelation of God takes several forms.

- In the beginning God spoke his *creative Word*. Out of nothing He called heaven and earth and everything in it into existence. His creative Word is not merely a devout wish, but an almighty and effective command. Psalm 33:9 tells us, “God spoke and it stood fast.” The so-called natural world is a continuing witness to what God did in the beginning.
- After that, and progressively, God spoke his *prophetic-apostolic Word*. He spoke to Adam and Eve, and after the fall, met men and women in their need by gradually unveiling his plan of salvation through such prophets as Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah, and through such apostles as Peter, John, and Paul. What God wanted passed on was written down in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.
- Then, about 2000 years ago God revealed himself most clearly through his *Incarnate Word*; God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, who said that anyone who has seen him has seen the Father (John 14:6). In other words, Almighty God revealed himself in all that Jesus said and did in his life.

In short then, we have the book of the world, and the book of scripture. The book of God's general revelation, the world, is a mirror which reflects its Maker. Sin damaged it but did not shatter it. Before sin, the world revealed only the goodness of God. And now that sin is in the world, it reveals both God's goodness and his judgment. But the world remains a self-revelation of God. Would that everyone had the eyes to see this and ears to hear it.

And the book of Scripture, read and preached, declares God's will as revealed through the prophets, apostles, and Jesus Christ. These different forms of the Word are not at all contradictory, but complementary, for they are all means by which God has revealed, and continues to reveal himself.

Psalm 19 speaks of God's self-revelation in both the book of this world and the book of scripture. These first verses are clearly about the book of this world:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.

Next, Psalm 19 goes on to speak of God's written word which reveals more of God and of his plan for the world and for mankind, including his plan of salvation. Starting at v. 7...

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

The Psalmist isn't talking here merely about the Ten Commandments or even the expanded version of God's written law, but about the principles by which God consistently acts. We can call those principles by any one of several synonyms: laws, statutes, precepts, commands, or ordinances. These are closely tied to God's character and on display, therefore, whenever and however God reveals himself. In the way he runs the world and in the way he relates to people, it is clear that the Lord's ways are both of one piece, with no inconsistencies, and without parallel in revealing love for his creation.

Scripture is not a substitute for general revelation but a restorer of it; the Scriptures are like eyeglasses to help refocus our distorted sight. They are more a guidebook for life than a textbook in science, art, and culture. They are a lamp to our feet and a light upon our path as we explore and live in God's world.

Without specifically mentioning the two books of God's revelation, Psalm 19, nevertheless, praises them both. It recognizes that God reveals himself in nature and in the law and prophets, and thus helps men and women to know him and walk in his perfect ways.

What we see though the beauties of Creation and the instructions of God's Word, if we have the eyes and ears for them, is enough to show us our sinfulness and misery when we stray from God and the necessity of our return to him. What God reveals to us is enough to convert us and draw us back to whom he made us to be: to ourselves, to Him, and our duty.

God's central message is "You shall have no other gods; I'm the only one; the others are useless and powerless; I control everything. There is only one God, and I am He."

Do you see that if you get that straight, everything else falls into place? We don't have a religion that is based on what we can dream and pursue. Our religion is not some interior journey of self-actualization. No, our religion is based on the revelations of the Creator of the Universe. We could never find him; we don't even speak his language. But he has found us; he speaks our language. He reveals himself in ways that we can hear and understand. And it is in our journey of response to him, that we really find ourselves. For when we see him, we also see our purpose and reason for existence, and what's more we receive from him both forgiveness for sin and strength for service.

In the course of your life you may pass through spiritual deserts, in which you despair of finding any strength or direction from God's Word. But keep reading, submissively and prayerfully because God's Word is dependable and powerful. It is Holy Spirit-Inspired. Behind it stands all the authority of God. In it he will never deceive you;

- if you follow it, you will not be mistaken about the salvation God offers you;
- if you live by it, it will be sure to achieve his purpose of helping your religion to be true and pure, ie. Helping you to *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.* And to love your neighbor as yourself

This is the only acceptable response to God, who alone controls and oversees everything—to God, who not only has no equals, but has no real rivals: *Love him*. Don't spread your love around to all sorts of false gods; reserve it for the Lord God alone. There is only one God and true religion is to love and serve him.

Is God's word really powerful enough to do help us do this? Isaiah 55:10-11 says it is:
As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

As God speaks, things happen - just what God wants to happen. His word does not return to him empty. When God says something, it is not useless or ineffectual. It always accomplishes what God desires that it should accomplish. We don't know quite how this works, for at the same time, God does not secure people's love by over-riding their own wills. He speaks effectively, and yet allows people to exercise their own responsibility in how they respond to his word. But in any event, and regardless of individual choices, what results is always the advance and prospering of the work of God's kingdom. And this will continue to be the case forever. God's speaking is in the eternal present, so that it remains effective.

What's more, every time people retell what God has done and is doing, His project comes closer to full realization. For the repeating of God's word of truth, actualizes it, both in the hearts and lives of believing people, and in the universe as a whole. And at the same time, wherever God's truth is actualized, Satan's lies are defeated.

This is not always immediately apparent, for in our sin-damaged world the liars and tricksters seem to win too often. Yet in the end, later if not sooner, the truth will show itself. Lies may win for a time; a liar may even make it through life in what looks like the success lane; but lies and liars will not win in the end. For God's word is truth, powerful truth. God's reality breaks through now here and there. It broke through most significantly in the incarnation of Jesus. And we are moving toward the day when it will break through to fulfill all that Jesus and the whole Bible has promised – the time when all lies will be exposed and all tears wiped away. It cannot fail to do so.

So it is never a mistake to be on God's side, and to rely on God's Word. Other Scriptures besides Isaiah 55 support its power.

- Eph. 6:17 calls it "the sword of the Spirit."
- Jer. 5:14 calls it "a devouring flame."
- Jer. 23:29 calls it "a crushing hammer."
- John 17:17 calls it "a purifier of people."
- Ezekiel 37:7 depicts it as the life-giving force that makes dry bones live.
- Rom. 1:16 calls it "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."
- and more.

So we must keep speaking and studying and memorizing the Word and watching for the times and the ways it does break through in the present and do its work.

With this clarification of our pre-suppositions, we'll move on in the next lecture to primeval history—the biblical story: from Creation to the Post-flood world.