

Message Sunday January 5th, 2014 The Bible Jesus Read

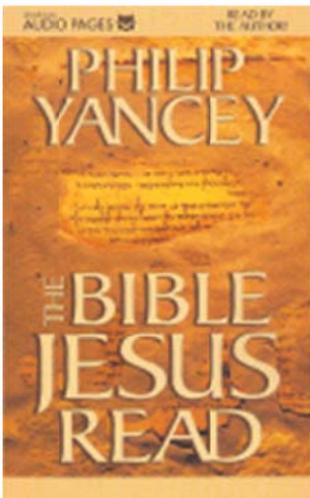
Pray

Is the Old Testament worth reading? Was it so old it got replaced by the New Testament?#

Comedian George Burns once said, "Tennis is a game for young people. Until age 25, you can play singles. From there until age 35, you should play doubles. I won't tell you my age, but when I played, there were 28 people on the court -- just on my side of the net."



We begin today a Message Series on "The Bible Jesus Read", why reading the Old Testament is important to our faith as Christians. The series is based on the scriptures and a book by Philip Yancey of the same name (available from St. John's Church Library, main entrance shelves).



There are two main reasons for reading the OT: it speaks of reality both then and now, reality of human struggle and of our relationship with God, just as Jesus wrestled and as we struggle.

Secondly, the OT hints at a grace to come, seen so amazingly in Jesus. Who are we to think our era is superior to our forebears in regard to the same issues of violence, sexuality, politics, etc?

So the Hebraic-God covenant in sacrificial blood of the OT and of Jesus' blood inaugurating the New way offered to all humanity, will be fully realized one day. Until then, we do struggle but not alone, nor in fear, but in faith and fellowship.

This message series on the Old Testament comes with a warning. The Old Testament is filled with passionate stories of love and hate, blood-chilling stories of rape, dismemberment, matter-of-fact accounts of trafficking in slaves, honest tales of high honour, and cruel treachery of war. Nothing is neat and orderly. Spoiled brats like Solomon and Samson get supernatural gifts; a truly good man of faith like Job gets catastrophe.

The warning is that the hard questions we have about God and the issues raised, may turn themselves back on you and I causing us to reexamine our thinking and, in fact, and may draw us nearer to the God of the bible Jesus read.

2 main reasons for including the Old Testament as instructive to our faith: the reality portrayed (creation, conscience, covenant) and the grace promised (in our hope in God).

Some dismiss the Old Testament, out of hand - 66 books of ancient writings of the Hebrew people - as negative, vengeful, violent, out of date. The OT contains 600 passages of explicit violence many of them linked to God's self. How do we reconcile that with the nonviolence preached by God's son Jesus? a God who resembles Jesus as much as a dump truck resembles a bouquet of roses.

I find the OT to be realistic. When you see a play like Macbeth, movies like The Godfather, Schindler's List, or tv shows like CSI or Criminal Minds, we encounter a world of evil, violence and revenge. Many feel drawn into these stories because they recognize the world of today, school shootings, bombings outside churches in the Middle East, uncivil war in Africa. The Old Testament portrays the world as it was which looks strangely like today, no holds barred.

As Kathleen Norris wrote in her book *Amazing Grace*, she hopes that the same people who reject the violence in the bible are rejecting the violence-as-entertainment of movies, video games and television on the same grounds, and that they say a prayer every time they see humanity's inhumanity on the nightly news. In the context of real life, the bible seems refreshingly whole, an honest reflection on humanity in relation to the sacred and the profane.

Singer and social justice advocate **Bono** said, I accept the Old Testament as more of an action movie: blood, car chases, evacuations, a lot of special effects, seas dividing, mass murder, adultery. The children of God are running amok, wayward. Maybe that's why they're so relatable.

Secondly, I detect in the Old Testament a gradual but certain movement toward grace. The Hebrews lived in wild, barbaric times. Their laws, which

seem harsh to us, represent a great softening compared to their neighbour's laws. They established basic rules of engagement for warfare and enshrined in their laws respect for the poor and care for the environment. The Hebrew laws set limits on revenge and built Cities of Refuge. They proscribed how a society might live in a relationship with God, a relationship of covenant or testament in a mono-theistic society, giving humanity a Great Whole, a unified universe, as a product of a Creator when so many surrounding cultures and empires lived in fear of idols and a multiplicity of gods for every hill and dale requiring obedience, causing an oppressive culture.

The Jews gave us what Thomas Cahill calls in his book *The Gifts of the Jews*, the Conscience of the West, the belief that God expresses himself not primarily through outward show but rather through the "still, small voice" of conscience. A God of love and compassion, God cares about his creation, especially human beings created in his own image and God asks us to do the same. Every person on earth has inherent dignity; thinking that paved the way for liberation movements. Without the Jews, Cahill argues, we would never have known the abolitionist movement to end slavery, the prison-reform movement, the labour movement, antiwar movement, anti-apartheid movement, the civil rights movement, the movements of indigenous peoples for their human rights, the medi-care movement, free-speech and pro-democracy movements in Arab countries or in China.

We must remember that God had to work with people's moral condition as its given stage. In the writings of the period lay the seed, but only the seed of God's grace. Jesus ultimately would say in his resurrected self, "these are the scriptures that testify about me."

The drafters of the Revised Common Lectionary which selects bible readings over a three-year cycle for many denominations, including Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, United, etc. include Old Testament readings from most of the 39 books of the Old Testament to be read on Sunday. The reason? The New Testament is not understandable without the old. A better word than "Old" Testament might be "former" or "first" testament, a relationship God has with his people, the Jews, signed in the blood of animals. The "New" Testament might better be called "Revised" because it's still about a relationship with God, but, because of

the sacrifice of God's Son Jesus, is now available to all people, not just the Jews.

St Paul wrote to the Romans, "Consider the kindness and sternness of God." I would rather consider only the kindness of God, but by doing so I construct my own image of God instead of relying on God's self-revelation. I dare not speak for God without listening to God speak for himself.

That's exactly what happens in the first reading, the OT reading from Job. Job's essential lesson? Job's name has become synonymous for the suffering of life's derailments, like last summer's derailment of oil cars completely destroying the downtown and many lives and businesses of Lac Megonic, Quebec. Actually 'derailment' is too weak a word to describe what happened to Job. He lost everything: children, health, riches, the support of his friends and wife, and apparently the love of the God he had trusted and loved for so long.

What did he do when life ground to a halt? The Bible says he "got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.'" (Job 1:20-21).

Job's perspective wiped the "why me?" question from his mind. He recognized that he had nothing when he arrived on this planet as an infant and he would have nothing when he left. His nakedness was a dress rehearsal for his death and a remembrance of his birth. In the end it will have gone full circle and he would be back where he started: with nothing and no one but God.

When we read the Old Testament, we read the Bible Jesus read and used. These are the prayers Jesus prayed, the poems he memorized, the songs he sang, the bedtime stories he heard as a child, the prophecies he pondered. The more we comprehend the OT the more we comprehend Jesus.

Here's a challenge and once again a warning.

My Challenge to the Congregation: In the Leaflet each Sunday, we publish Next Week's Bible Readings. So before you come to Church next week, read the bible readings we've posted, particularly the OT scripture reading (The

words scripture reading and bible reading mean the same thing). The OT reading you'll see there is Psalm 29. Even if you give me 5-7 minutes out of your week to read Next Week's Bible Readings, from the pew bible, on line or in your bible at home, you'll be ahead of the game for next Sunday, Jan. 12. If you already read Next Week's Bible Readings, google the verses we are looking at and go deeper with any insights or background from a commentary, that will widen your understanding.

And here's the warning: reexamining works like Job, Deuteronomy, the Psalms, Ecclesiastes and the Prophets (major prophets and those sent back to the minors) may turn back on you and I, some troubling questions, display an unvarnished reality, and yet a movement toward grace. Another caveat: these messages through Epiphany can't hope to fully exposit the depth of each book or section of scripture. My hope is to whet your appetite for the astonishing work of God's word, the Bible Jesus read and deepen our discipleship of Jesus. Don't read, mark, learn and inwardly digest if you don't want to be blessed.

Sermon in a sentence: In our struggle to understand the Bible, we find not less but more astonishment in the Old Testament, which is the only Bible Jesus read, whose purpose points toward grace, best seen in Jesus.

As we start a new calendar year, with whatever challenges we are facing, it may not be a bad thing to have God on your side, guiding us through, offering us blessing as we spend/invest a little time each day. We may ask ourselves, "What is God saying to me? What am I going to do about it in the next two weeks?"

3-6 How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.

Story of a builder, man who came to church, took his turn teaching Sunday School, went on mission trips with his family, read the bible everyday, kept a journal of his prayers, a man who showed confidence in his faith. Then

illness hit. No longer able to teach Sun School. A slow slide to a wheelchair then his bed, but he kept reading the word and making prayer notes. His last journal entry was a year before he died. After he died, age 84, his son in law read his journal. All the entries, 19 pages, were from the Old Testament: Ps. 28 Father help! I feel low, sad, fearful. 2 Kings 11-14 So few seem faithful to God, but He has compassion and mercy! Psalm 53:5 There they were overwhelmed with dread when there was nothing to dread. Job 42:2 I know You can do all things. No plan of yours can be thwarted! Psalm 116:15 Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. Psalm 10:14 But you, O God, do see trouble and grief. Psalm 121:2 My help comes from the Lord.

His crisis of faith in the last few years he talked openly about. Answers that used to satisfy him no longer did. He lost his spiritual confidence, not in God but in himself. As he grew anxious, impatient, fearful, he wept bitter tears over his own inability to maintain composure. He felt he disappointed himself. He feared he was disappointing God.

Even at his most doubt-filled moments, he took comfort in the fact that some of God's favourites had battled the very same demons. He learned that the arms of the Lord are long in love, not just in prosperous, happy times but especially in times of travail. In those dark days, he was glad to have the Old Testament to fall back on.

Sermon in a sentence: In our struggle to understand the Bible, we find not less but more astonishment in the Old Testament, which is the only Bible Jesus read, whose purpose points toward grace, best seen in Jesus. Take the Epiphany Challenge and read the next week's bible readings BEFORE you come to church to enhance the experience!

For Job and Hunter Norwood and for us, we can sing with Julia Ward Howard the composer of Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. Glory, glory hallelujah.

Amen.#

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