

John 5:1-23, 39-40 – Christ, the focus of all Scripture

Your challenge for 2019

Many of you will have been reading through the New Testament in 2018 following my reflections on the passage for the day. Those readings and reflections will come to an end tomorrow. What will you do for 2019?

My challenge to you is to read through the Old Testament in a year in 2019. I have created a schedule of readings which does not include every chapter in the Old Testament – that would take you more than a year. The readings I have chosen seek to cover the sweep of the Old Testament story from Genesis to Malachi with a psalm on each Sunday.

My aim is that together we might become more familiar with the Scriptures of the Old Testament and find them a blessing to ourselves and to others.

But what value is there in reading the Old Testament? I want to answer this question by looking at what Jesus, our Lord and Master, has to say about it.

John 5

In the passage which was read to us this morning Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. He was paralysed, able only to lie where he was placed, beside a pool called Bethesda. At Jesus' word of command he was healed, given the power to walk, and Jesus sent him off carrying his mat rolled up under his arm.

This miracle angered the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. When they looked at this man they did not see a wonderful healing but only a Sabbath breaker – a man carrying his mat on the Sabbath day. When they heard that Jesus had enabled the man to walk and commanded him to go home carrying his mat, they did not see a man filled with the power of God – the one who spoke and it was so – they saw only a man who broke the Sabbath laws and encouraged others to do the same.

This leads to a theological argument between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, an argument that it would be good to look at more closely, but time does not permit us to do so this morning. I want to focus only on the punch-line of the argument, the killer blow delivered by Jesus in John 5:39-40. Jesus tells these learned Jewish leaders and scholars:

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (NIVUK)

These Jewish scholars are diligent in their study of what we call "the Old Testament" because they believe that these Scriptures hold the key to eternal life. Jesus does not criticise them for this. These Scriptures had been given by God as a revelation of his own mind and purposes:

- Here we read of God the Creator who made all things by the power of his word and made our world and made us to reflect his glory. We see that even when we had messed up and spoilt God's creation he did not abandon it, but in love determined to redeem and restore his creation.
- Here we read of God's great promises when he called Abraham from his home to know God and serve him. God promised to bless him and to make him the source of blessings for all nations on earth.
- Here we read of God's great acts of salvation, rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt, providing for them in the wilderness and bringing them at last to the Promised Land.
- Here we read of God's promise of a greater king than David, a wiser king than Solomon, a king whose rule of justice and righteousness will have no end.
- Here we read the promise of the prophets that the day is coming when God himself will come to save and comfort his people.

- Here we join in the praises and the longings of the people of God down the ages.

Yes, says Jesus, it's good to read these ancient books; there is life in these pages.

But – and here is where Jesus does criticise these scholars – you need to read these Scriptures from the right perspective if you are to understand their message correctly.

Do you remember those photos of familiar objects taken from a strange perspective or blown up so that you only see a part of them? You were challenged to identify what it is. You look at it and scratch your head and say, "What on earth is that?" Then the camera zooms out and changes angle and you see it immediately, "It's a cheese-grater!" It's all a matter of perspective.

Jesus says to these Jewish scholars of the Scriptures,

These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

To read these Old Testament Scriptures correctly you need to understand that all Scripture has its focus and fulfilment in Jesus the Christ.

All the learning of these Jewish scholars in Jerusalem amounted to a lifetime's labour in missing the point. They searched the Scriptures looking for eternal life but they failed to see it. When the author of life stood before them they refused to recognise in Jesus the one of whom all these Scriptures spoke; they refused to recognise him as the source of life and hope; they refused to come to him.

Now I want to help all of you to read these Scriptures, so familiar to those Jewish leaders, but to study them with a clear perspective – these Scriptures testify about Christ and lead us to him. As we read them we need continually to be led to Christ and to see that he and he alone is the source of our life and our hope. We need to worship him, follow him and tell the world of him – yes, from these Scriptures as much as we do from the Scriptures of the New Testament which so clearly speak of him.

We need to grasp the grand story of Scripture – the great drama of God's saving purposes – which finds its focus and fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ, his atoning death and glorious resurrection. We need these Old Testament Scriptures to enlarge our views of Christ.

I am excited by this prospect. I have already begun this study and reflection on the Old Testament; I am working three months in advance and have just finished the readings for March. I have to admit that there are some difficult passages – and I don't seek to avoid them – but I am finding my reading of them and reflecting on them a joy. It forces me to think more carefully and clearly about the Scriptures and I find that a continual source of blessing. I want you to share that blessing with me in the coming year. With Christ constantly in the centre of our view, these Scriptures will increase our faith, prompt our worship and fill us with hope as we look for the day when God will complete his great work of redemption in the day of Christ's appearing, the day when all things will be made new.

This sermon is short, but I want its message to last throughout the year ahead.

So this is the key question I want to leave you with this morning. Will you come with me and walk through the Old Testament Scriptures in the coming year, not with blind eyes like the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem but with your eyes firmly fixed on Christ, your life, your salvation, your righteousness, your joy, your hope of glory? Come with me throughout the year ahead; come let us adore him.

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