

WHY READ THE OLD TESTAMENT ?

By Joy Todd

Among my most treasured possessions is a tiny much thumbed copy of the New Testament. It belonged to my father and was given to him while on war service in Mesopotamia (now Iraq) in 1916. In the front is this message from Lord Roberts - *'I ask you to put your trust in God . He will watch over you and strengthen you. You will find in this little Book guidance when you are in health, comfort when you are in sickness and strength when you are in adversity.'*

I have no doubt that he and countless other men and women like him, both then and now, have followed similar advice, living faithful and fulfilled Christian lives. They have read in the pages of the New Testament about the teaching, life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and the birth of his church. Through that they have come to put their trust in him and to accept the truth of John. 3.16 - 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.'

So why bother with reading the Old Testament ? For me there are at least three good reasons. First it sets the context for the events of the New Testament, helping us to understand them better. Then it teaches us that God has been working for good in his creation from the very beginning and seeking to be understood and recognised. Lastly it presents us with an amazingly vivid (and uncomfortably familiar) picture of the heights to which humanity can rise and the depths to which it can sink. On top of all that, as a bonus to the reader, it gives us wonderful stories, snippets from which have seeped into our everyday conversations.

But, of course, you may ask if the Old Testament really is relevant today ? Can the history and traditions of the Jewish nation, mythical writings from the ancient world of the Middle East or even the record of events which took place in a very different age and culture really help us to know more about God and strengthen our faith in him. I believe it can, because men and women are basically the same. Ways of life may change, environments may be very different but people still have the same needs for food and shelter, for friends and family and for the sense of purpose to carry them through. We meet 'all sorts and conditions of men' and women in the Old Testament and can only learn from them as they make their journeys and as we see how God deals with them.

For they were Jews, as was Jesus. He was born into a Jewish family and grew up steeped in the Jewish faith. At the time of his arrival their homeland was part of the Roman Empire, an occupied country, and it was an age of expectation. In the Old Testament we read the details of their nation's often turbulent history over the previous 2 millenium - from the call of Abraham, through their Exodus from slavery in Egypt and journey to the promised land, the establishment of their monarchy in Jerusalem with its fall and subsequent 70 years of exile in Babylon and

the work of the prophets with their prediction of the coming of a Messiah, an anointed one who would be a new king and lead his people to freedom and just rule. This was the context into which God sent his Son as a helpless baby.

But how few recognised him as that promised Messiah, one so totally different from what was expected. They believed their new king would be like other earthly rulers. He would be just but powerful, live in a palace and be held in awe. He would command an army to win their freedom and to enforce the law and so he would bring them peace and prosperity. How little they had learned of God's ways during their long history for it seems they had never fully understood his purpose to make of them a nation living together under his laws of love and mutual respect in true peace and prosperity. As we study the Old Testament we see many signs of his loving care and compassion toward them when they sinned, as well as his guiding hand in the ten commandments given to Moses, the leadership of his chosen servants such as Samuel and David and in the work and words of the great prophets - Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the rest.

So it is all the people who inhabit the pages of the Old Testament that really bring it to life for me. Not only the well known ones or the particularly good or especially bad, but the unnamed or those whose names mean little to us. In all of these we find so much with which we can identify. We can understand the fears of Moses when called to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and sympathise with his attempt to make excuses. But then how well he carried out his difficult work with God's help. We think of Elijah running away and hiding in a cave until God called him to task with that 'still small voice'. Great King David followed his calling and ruled well, but we are ashamed when he goes on to sin by stealing Naboth's vineyard, although we know only too well the weakness of humanity.

Very early in Genesis we see the depths to which which humanity can sink as Caen kills his brother Abel saying, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' and later Jacob steals his brother's birthright. But in contrast comes the lovely story of Ruth, who left her homeland Moab to accompany her bereaved mother-in-law Naomi back to her home in Judah where God directed her future. We admire her loyalty as we do the bravery of such as Daniel who was put into the lions' den, or the four young men who faced the fiery furnace rather than deny their God. We wonder at the faithfulness of those prophets like Amos and Hosea, who overcame their reluctance to work in many dangerous ways to carry God's message to his people, or Jeremiah who suffered terribly, if not without complaining about it, but showed amazing faith in the future by purchasing a piece of land in Jerusalem immediately before it fell and the exile began. And although we don't know the authors of all the Psalms, their poetry beautifully expresses their gratitude to God and glorifies his name, whilst also putting into words those questions, longings, cries of protest and anxieties which were part of being human then and continue to be very much so today. That is why many of us find this book particularly helpful.

But Psalms is only one from this invaluable library of books, written during the

2000 years before Christ was born. which we call the Old Testament, I believe reading it can help us bring to life the state of the world and its people at the beginning of the New Testament and prepare us for learning there how God went on to work his loving purposes among them and us through the sending of his Son.

These words from the prophet Micah seem to sum it up -

*'He has showed you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice,
and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.(Micah 6.8)*