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Old Testament Basics - Lesson 02.

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Lesson Two.

In Lesson One, we said that the Bible is more than an important book, it's an essential book. But for it to have any value at all it has to be read. It doesn't help us by laying on our coffee table closed up. But what I find with a lot of people who try to read the Old Testament is that it's confusing. It's hard to navigate your way around it.

In fact, if you go to the books of Esther, Job, and Psalms, three books in a row, you've really gone from the beginning of Jewish history to the end. And then the book of Psalms occurs pretty much in the middle. So people read that and say, "Where am I? What's going on?" And then we come to the Prophets and we say, "Who were these guys? What are they doing? What are they all about?"

Well the reason for that is that the Bible isn't arranged like a normal history book. It doesn't begin at the beginning and end at the end. The Old Testament is arranged according to the types of literature. And the first 17 books of the Old Testament, Genesis through Esther, are chronological books. They're narrative books; they tell the story of the Old Testament. Then we have 5 books of wisdom and literature: the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, that poetry and wisdom material. And then the last 17 books of the Old Testament are Prophets. And if you don't know where the Prophets fit or when those Psalms were written, it's difficult to find the historical context and help them make sense. So the first thing an Old Testament reader has to do is get the story fixed. What is the storyline? What's going on? And then once we have that storyline, we can plug the Prophets in where they belong. We can figure out when Ecclesiastes was written and who wrote it and why was it written? And it just helps us read if we know what's going on around the context of everything that was written.

So in this lesson what I'd like to do is work just through those chronological books. In the next lesson, we'll fit everything together and plug in those other books. So by the end of the third lesson, the next lesson, you should be able to go through the whole Old Testament, pick any book you want, and plug it in where it goes. And then when you read it you have the historical context. You know what the author was trying to do with that book, and suddenly it makes a whole lot more sense.

Now we mentioned that the first part of the Old Testament was the chronological books, okay, but there really are two kinds of those books that tell the story of the Old Testament. Some of the books actually move the story forward. There are 11 of those. And that's what we want to focus on today. Those 11 books from Genesis through Nehemiah begin at the beginning and end at the end of the Old Testament era.

Now there are other books that tell the story. There are other narrative books. I call those the "color books." Think of it this way, the 11 books we're going to look at today are like a movie film spliced together. You go to the end of one book, and we just splice it to the next chronological book. And so as we look at these 11 books, we see the story unfolding just like watching a film.

But every once in a while there is a book, and there are 5 of these books, where it's like the Old Testament writer said, "Well now wait a minute, let's stop the film here. There's something we need to look at. Let's take a closer look at these laws. Let's see what those laws are." Or, you know, in the book of Judges for instance, it seems everybody is so evil and it's all so corrupt, but the writer said, "But wait a minute, there's another story. Look at this."

And so we plug in the book of Ruth. Now the book of Ruth and the book of Deuteronomy don't move the story forward, they stop the story and they give us a snapshot of life during that period of time. So before we plug in the color books, we'll do that in the next session, this time for this lesson what we want to do is move straight down through those 11 books, okay? So by the time we finish today, you'll be able to think your way through from the beginning in Genesis to the end of the Old Testament period of time in the book of Nehemiah.

We divide the Old Testament history into four eras, four periods. The first is the period of the beginnings and that covers three of these chronological books, Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers. At the end of Numbers, we move into the settlement period, which covers two books, the books of Joshua and Judges.

At the end of Judges, we move into the kingdom era, which covers four books, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings. At the end of 2 Kings, the nation of Israel is destroyed. It's wiped out by the Babylonians, and the people are carried off into slavery in Babylon. And that's called the period of the exile. It's the 70-year period of time where the people are in exile. And then the Jews are allowed to return home, which completes that fourth period of the exile and the reconstruction.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell us the story of how the Jews went back home and rebuilt their city, their temple, and their life. So that's the quick view. Now let's add a bit of detail. Let's go back through it again.

We begin with Genesis, Genesis is called the book of beginnings because it tells us where it all came from. It begins with creation. It also tells us the beginning of the Jewish nation in Genesis chapter 12 with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. The book of Genesis ends with the people of Israel, Abraham's descendants, living in Egypt as favored guests of the Pharaoh.

Then there's a 400-year period of silence. That period of silence ends with the book of Exodus, which is the second book in the chronological development of Old Testament history. When Exodus opens, the people are slaves. They want to get out of Egypt; they don't like it there anymore. So God raised up a deliverer named Moses. And the book of Exodus is the book of salvation, the book of deliverance.

That's where we find the story of the Red Sea and Mount Sinai and the Ten Commandments and the people of Israel going across the Sinai Desert to enter their land. They get right up to the edge of their land, up to the brink of the land, and they refuse to go in. So the next book tells us that the story isn't a book of the people of Israel in their land, it's a story of Israel wandering in the wilderness because they refused to enter the land.

So the book of Numbers is the book of wanderings. It tells a story of that generation dying off in the wilderness. Well, when that generation who had refused to go into the land died off, their children were allowed to enter the land. And that moves us to the next period, the second era in Old Testament history, the period of the settlement.

The book of Joshua talks about how the people did enter the land. It contains the story of the parting of the Jordan River. It's a story of Jericho falling down, the walls of Jericho. That's where we find those stories. As the people would enter the land, they settled down, divided it up among the 12 tribes.

But those people didn't follow God's laws. Instead they rebelled and went their own way. And the book of Judges is the next book that moves the story forward, and that's another tragic story of failure, of disobedience to God. And so this book of Judges is a period of time when Israel rebelled against God. They came under oppression from their enemies. And we read stories about Gideon and Samson, who were judges, and that's where we find those kinds of stories.

At the end of the book of Judges, the people demanded a king. And so the next four books that move the story forward are the books that talk about the kingdom era. The book of 1 Samuel talks about preparation for the kingdom. The book of 2 Samuel tells us the story of David, which is the establishing of the kingdom. The book of 1 Kings talks about how the nation Israel split itself into two nations: Israel and Judah. And the book of 2 Kings talks about how both Israel and Judah were defeated by foreign powers and essentially carried off into slavery or obliterated. And we'll look at that in more detail when we look at the kingdom era.

The destruction of Judah, the destruction of Jerusalem (the capitol city of Judah), and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem lead us to the fourth period, the last period of the Old Testament story: the period of exile and reconstruction.

We call it the period of exile because after the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem they carried the inhabitants of Jerusalem off into captivity into exile outside the city of Babylon where they lived for 70 years. With God's providence and God's care for His people, He allowed the Persians to rise to power and defeat the Babylonians, and the Persians allowed the Jews to go back home.

So the last two books of the Old Testament story, the book of Ezra and the book of Nehemiah, are telling us the story of how these released people, these delivered people, were able to go

back home and rebuild their temple and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and that's where the Old Testament period ends.

It's a story of great success and a story of tragic failure. It's a story of God's involvement with His people. It's really a story of God's patience, of God's grace, of God not forcing His people to live the way He wants them to live. But it's also the story of the tragic consequences when God's gracious directions are ignored and people self-destruct.

But the beautiful part of the story is that at the end of the Old Testament God has not abandoned His promises to His people. He still loves them; He still patiently cares for them just like He does with us.