

The heartbeat of the Law & Prophets

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we thank you again for who you are. We thank you that you have revealed yourself to us. And so, Father, as you speak now through your scriptures, by your Holy Spirit, we ask, Lord, for that same Holy Spirit to be illuminating our minds and our hearts so that we would have a richer understanding of your word, but not only that, that we would want to be a part of your story and to live for you.

All this we pray now in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Now, have you ever read a book or watched a movie that was so absorbing?

You found yourselves wishing that you were part of that story? Perhaps you were reading the Chronicles of Narnia and found yourself daydreaming that you live in Narnia itself at the height of its golden age with talking animals and unicorns and fawns living together in harmony?

noble battles being fought and ending in victory? And of course, having that great lion Aslan watch over your country. Or perhaps you've been watching the endless number of Spider-Man movies over the last decade, getting caught up in the adventures of Peter Parker, absorbing the wisdom of Uncle Ben and Auntie May, reveling in the emotional ups and downs of Mary Jane Watson.

When I was a kid, I loved living in the worlds of robotech, wondering what it would be like to pilot a Veritech fighter, or the boarding schools of Annette Blyton's imagination with their earnest teachers and midnight fees.

[1 : 39] In every culture, whether you're young or old, we all feel the pull of stories. And stories don't just pull us into their world.

Story is the way we often make sense of our lives. Have you ever used the expression, that's the story of my life? When someone asks you why you chose that job, or how you met your best friend, did you tell them a story?

Maybe a story about the influence of a mentor, or a story about a chance meeting at a party? When someone asks you why you are a Christian, what might you often do?

You would tell them the story of your conversion. And as you tell the story of how you became who you are, and who you are becoming, you're actually giving a sense of meaning to your life.

Stories help you frame, understand, and interpret your life. At its heart, the Bible is one big story.

[2 : 53] Now that's a basic fact, but I think we Christians sometimes forget that. And this story is like no other story, because one, it's a story that gives God's viewpoint, and two, it's a story that's true for everybody.

And so ignoring the Bible can be disastrous. If the Bible is not what helps frame our lives, helps us understand our lives, and gives meaning to our lives, that means we are not allowing God himself to pull us into his story.

And if we don't participate in God's story, insisting on independently creating our own story, well, everything is bound to get messy.

The crowds who were gathered around Jesus as he gives his Sermon on the Mount certainly understood that. Many, if not most of them, knew God's story as told in the Old Testament.

It was actually their story. Like many good stories, it involves tragedy and anticipation. I think you got a sense of that from the Bible Project video.

[4 : 06] They knew that the world was originally created good, crafted by the Creator God, but that it had all gone wrong. The world is now broken.

There's broken bodies, broken lives, broken systems everywhere. And the Jews believed that God had promised to fix this. And that the descendants of Abraham, Abraham, that is the nation of Israel, was part of God's answer.

That's why God made a covenant with them, gave the law to them, and even got them to build a temple so that he could live with them. Furthermore, the prophets said that Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles and bring blessing again to all creation.

And so Israel is meant to be God's solution to a broken world. That's the Old Testament story in a nutshell. That's the story many in the crowds saw themselves participating in.

But of course, one of the big problems was that Israel were always such a mess themselves. The Old Testament is basically one long history about how they constantly broke covenant and the law.

[5 : 26] Indeed, in Jesus' time, Israel was still a mess since they are now ruled by Romans. In other words, they're ruled by worshippers of other gods.

And so the Jews knew that the story was not finished. They are now simply participating in the latest episode. And many of them were thinking, surely our role is to pay closer attention to the law?

Surely our role is not to repeat the mistakes of our ancestors? But Jesus now appears on the scene. And now he's saying things like, the kingdom of heaven is here.

He's saying that the solution has arrived. What's more, he's pronounced his disciples to be the light of the world. And so if you're a Jew, you are likely puzzled.

How does Jesus fit in with the Old Testament story that I know? How does Jesus fit in with the law? Is he messing up the story?

[6 : 34] Is he introducing a new story entirely? Is he independently trying to write his own story? Well, if so, we should be suspicious.

We've all watched movies or read books, haven't we, where the director or author tried to cram in some strange plot points or suddenly take the story in a weird new direction.

You know, that kind of story never ends well. And so Jesus, is that what you're doing? The disciples themselves likely had another question to throw into the mix.

They just heard Jesus say, Matthew 5, verse 16, Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

But the question now might be, well, what sort of good deeds exactly? Do we just keep doing the law to shine our light to others?

[7 : 38] Well, that didn't work so well for our forefathers in the Old Testament, did it? What's our role in the story you are telling, Jesus? And we too, as Christians today, probably have questions of our own as well.

As Christians, the gospel is the story that frames our lives. But we know that, as Christians, the Old Testament should also be part of our story.

But we struggle to know how the two fit together. Is the Old Testament law, for instance, still part of our story today? Well, Jesus is going to answer those questions.

Now, he's probably not going to answer every possible theological question about the law you might have today. But he will help us understand how he fits into the Bible's one great, big, true story, and subsequently, how all who follow him fit in.

And so let's dive in, make sure the passage is open in front of you, and Jesus will basically make an announcement and a summons. So first, the announcement.

[9 : 00] Jesus is the completion of the story, not a part of some plan B. Jesus is the completion of the story, not a part of some plan B.

In verse 17, Jesus addresses the issue at hand. Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.

The law and the prophets are a shorthand way of referring to the entire Old Testament. You know, often when we think of the law, we are thinking commands, rules, regulations.

But for the Jews, it simply referred to the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah. The Torah refers to their story of how Israel came into being and how they were safe to serve.

It's not just a manual of bylaws, although, of course, laws form part of the story. And the prophets are more or less everything else in the Old Testament.

[10 : 08] We often think it's just books like Isaiah or Jeremiah. But to the Jews, books like 1 and 2 Samuel or 1 and 2 Kings are prophetic books too because they present history from God's point of view.

Now, for those of you who are taking my Equipped Bible Overview class, you might be thinking, oh, wait a minute, doesn't the Old Testament actually comprise of three parts? The law, the prophets, and the writings, which are books like the Psalms and Job.

Well, yes, you are right. But just like we might say the virus instead of the coronavirus because that's so many syllables and it's a mouthful, but in context, everyone knows what we're talking about.

We're talking about COVID-19. And so Jesus does the same here. He just says the law and the prophets. And everyone knows that he's referring to the first 39 books in our Bible.

And so Jesus is talking about the entire Old Testament. And what does he want to make clear? I'm not throwing it all away.

[11 : 22] Now, I enjoy the world of Star Wars. And those of you who are Star Wars fans might know that after the first three movies, especially in the 1990s and 2000s, there were a great number of novels released, continuing the story of Luke Skywalker and Han Solo and their children up to 40 years after the event of the original Star Wars in the original movies.

It was called the Star Wars Expanded Universe. And I used to borrow them from my classmate and sneak in some reading during class time. I must have read close to 20 of them.

Now, did you know in that universe, Han and Leah Solo have three children, including twins, and that Luke has a son called Ben?

Did you know that they have to face a new enemy, an alien race known as the Yuzangvong? But, in 2012, after Disney bought over the Star Wars franchise, what did they do?

They said that all those books, the Star Wars Expanded Universe, didn't count. All 20 to 30 of them, it wasn't part of the official story anymore.

[12 : 45] In fact, they used the word non-canon. That's what they called that. They rebranded the books Star Wars Legends. And so that's why if you watch the latest Star Wars trilogy, there are no solo twins and no Ben Skywalker.

Disney says they never existed. There's just Rey and Kylo Ren. And to me, it certainly felt like a real blow. You know, all those characters I grew up with, all those exciting events in the Star Wars timeline, when they were fighting against the Yid Zhang Vong, it's all now thrown away.

Ouch. Well, that's what the Jews were apprehensive about. Is Jesus about to throw away the Old Testament?

Is he going to declare it non-canon and begin his own trilogy, where the disciples, not Israel, are the light, where he writes his own rules of the game, where he announces the covenant, and says that it never existed?

Is he going to say that it all doesn't count? Jesus answers forcefully, no, do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.

[14 : 08] I am not here to demolish, dismantle, or deconstruct. rather, I am here to fulfill.

Now, what does that mean? We'll get to that in a second. But notice, by contrasting abolishment with fulfillment, Jesus is making another important point.

He's not here to throw away the law and the prophets, but neither is he saying everything stays the same. He doesn't say that he's here to maintain the law.

He doesn't even say he's here to keep the law. He's here to fulfill. And so clearly, there is some sort of change involved.

If I said that I have fulfilled my dreams of owning a Ferrari, well, clearly, there's a change. I've changed from being a non-owner of a luxury car to being an owner of one.

[15 : 14] And so Jesus says he's the main factor why things will change. He's the agent of transformation.

But what does he mean by fulfill? As you can imagine, much ink has been spilled over this very question. One common answer is that Jesus is saying he has come to keep the law perfectly.

Now, that is certainly true. Jesus was the only one who perfectly obeyed. He cannot be the perfect sacrifice otherwise.

But this cannot be what Jesus has in mind in this specific verse. All throughout the rest of Matthew 5, Jesus is relating his teachings, what he said, not his actions, what he did to the Old Testament.

And so he isn't talking about living out the law here. Another answer that is often given is by dividing the law into three categories, civil, ceremonial, and moral.

[16 : 29] And so Jesus has in mind here the moral law, it's often said. he's not come to abolish that particular category, unlike the other two, since animal sacrifices and civil laws pertaining to national Israel are clearly obsolete.

But there are difficulties with this view too. Firstly, the New Testament itself doesn't use those categories when discussing the law.

Indeed, in verse 18, Jesus talks about the law in pretty comprehensive and unified terms. He talks about how not the smallest letter nor the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear until everything is accomplished.

Another problem is that the categories often overlap. Is the Sabbath a moral or ceremonial law? it's hard to place them into neat categories.

And so let me try to describe what seems to be the best sense of fulfillment here. Imagine that you place an order online for let's say a smartphone.

[17 : 49] You've paid the money. Now you're waiting for the delivery. And so you track the order online. Has it been packed yet? Has it been sent with the courier company?

Is it in Kuching yet? In fact, I'm actually tracking an order with Lazada right now. Until finally, the delivery man shows up at your house and hands over your brand new Huawei Nova.

What has happened? Your order has been fulfilled. It has been completed. If you're tracking the order, there is nothing left to track.

The transaction has reached its end point. And that seems to fit with the way Matthew has talked about fulfillment so far.

Before the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew has actually spoken a lot about fulfillment, seven times in total. Look, for example, at Matthew chapter 1 verse 22 to 23.

[18 : 57] where the birth of Jesus is being described. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Or look on to Matthew chapter 2 verses 14 to 15, where Joseph and his family are fleeing from Herod. So he, that's Joseph, got up, took the child, that's Jesus, and his mother during the night and left for Egypt where he stayed until the death of Herod and then he came back.

And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet, out of Egypt I called my son. There are a number of others.

And all these fulfillment quotations point in one direction. They are showing how Jesus completes the Old Testament story.

He is the fulfillment of these promises. He finishes what God was beginning to do. He is bringing to fruition its complete meaning.

[20 : 16] He is the goal. He is the end point. He is the destination. You see, the Old Testament was always pointing to Jesus.

And it does so in many ways. Most obviously by explicit prediction. And often when we hear preachers say that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament, this is what we're thinking about.

He fulfills these explicit predictions. If a prophet says that the Messiah is going to be born in Bethlehem, then we look and then we go, oh, voila, Jesus is born in Bethlehem.

But that's not the only way, or even the main way. After all, in the Matthew 2 verses that we just read about Joseph escaping to Egypt, the verse quoted from Hosea was no prediction at all.

In its original context, the verse in Hosea is simply referring to God calling the nation of Israel out of Egypt during the time of Moses.

[21 : 26] It doesn't say anything about a Messiah. And so how does the Old Testament point to Jesus here? How is it fulfilled? Well, the Old Testament does so by establishing patterns.

Centuries before Jesus, God preserved Israel while they were in Egypt, and then he led them out of Egypt for a purpose. So he's now established a pattern.

And now, Jesus identifies with Israel by following that very same pattern as he is kept safe in Egypt before being called out and led out to accomplish God's purpose.

He is fulfilling a pattern laid down in the Old Testament. And the Old Testament lays down many more patterns. If you take our Equip Bible Overview class, you can identify a few more.

Think, for instance, of the temple. The temple is where the glory of God is in the Old Testament. But now, Jesus declares in John's Gospel that his body is the temple.

[22 : 42] Because he himself is God's glory made visible. And all these patterns, the Exodus, the temple, many others, come to culmination in Jesus.

These patterns are woven into the Old Testament story, so that when Jesus comes, we can see clearly who those patterns are pointing to.

they are fulfilled in Jesus. And the Old Testament also points to Jesus in terms of realizing potential.

Think of a battery. On its own, it has unrealized potential to provide energy. But stick that battery into, say, your alarm clock, clock, and now its potential is fulfilled.

Electrical energy is released, your clock works, and now you can wake up on time. And the Old Testament is full of unrealized potential.

[23 : 48] The law had the potential to make God known to the nations. The temple had the potential to make God's glory known to the nations.

But that potential was unrealized in the Old Testament. It was unfulfilled since the law was not kept, and the temple often defiled.

But now Jesus comes to realize the potential of all those Old Testament institutions. He obeys the law. He reveals God's glory.

He fulfills their unfulfilled potential. He brings them to fruition. And so Jesus has come to fulfill the law and the prophets, not abolish them.

It all points to him. He is the point of it all. He was never plan B. He was always at the heart of the Old Testament story.

[24 : 54] And now everything has to flow through him. We read the Old Testament now through the Jesus lens. Around 20 years ago now, there was a movie called The Sixth Sense, about a psychiatrist who is trying to help a depressed boy who supposedly can communicate with the dead.

But there's a big twist at the end. Sorry, I'm about to spoil the movie for you. It turns out that the psychiatrist is unknowingly dead the whole time.

And so when you watch the movie from the beginning again, it's almost like a completely different movie. The events and the dialogue are exactly the same.

movie, but now that you know that the psychiatrist is actually dead, you begin to notice things that you didn't notice before, like how the psychiatrist never actually touches anything, or how he never talks to the boy's mother in the entire movie.

Now, the entire story matters. Without it, you can't have the ending. but the ending is what makes you watch and interpret the movie differently.

[26 : 13] It's the same with Jesus and the Old Testament. The Old Testament hasn't lost its status as the word of God.

It's still God's story, and it's still hugely significant. What has changed for us, however, is its role. Now that Jesus, the person to whom it pointed, has come, the way to understand and apply the Old Testament has changed.

You are still reading the same events, but now that we know its end point, Jesus, we see it differently. And in the next few weeks, Jesus will give us some work examples of how to do so.

But for today, what should we take away from verses 17 and 18? What is the big implication for us? Well, here's my big take away.

Know the story as well as you can. Know the story as well as you can. Now, if you're not a Christian today, then the very first thing you need to know is that Jesus is the point of the entire Bible story.

[27 : 28] It's not about rules and regulations. And if the Bible is actually the true story of the entire world for everybody, that means Jesus is the only person who can make sense of your story.

And so why not explore this story? We have an online connect card, which we'll talk about later on in the announcements, which you can fill in if you want to explore who Jesus is and what his teaching and mission is all about.

But if we're Christians today, that means we know and believe Jesus is the point of God's story. More than that, we know that Jesus is the point of our story.

He's actually the hero and the main character, not us. Our lives are lived for his glory. We exist to know and love him more and more.

And how can we know him? and love him more and more? By getting to know not just our New Testament, but our Old Testament more and more.

[28 : 39] If it is true that Jesus has come to fulfill the law and the prophets, that means the entire Old Testament is still relevant. Because it's no longer about some ancient nomads and some strange culture in the Middle East thousands of years ago.

It's about Jesus. And so the more you get to know your Old Testament, the more you will not just get to know Jesus, but fall in love with Jesus.

As you read your Old Testament, you will know the depth of your sin more, because it's painted for us in vivid colours. As you read your Old Testament, you will not just know that God is patient with his people, but you will actually see his patience in action.

You will be astonished at how God has orchestrated every single detail in his divine plan over many centuries so that we will grasp the magnitude of Jesus' sacrifice for us.

And that will give you confidence that God is also orchestrating your story for your good as well. And that's why over the last few years, I've tried to help us get in touch with God's big story as we've run God's big picture, as we preach through Exodus, Amos, Numbers, and Malachi.

[30 : 09] For those of you who are not part of our church, some of those series are available for listening on our website. And know the entire story through the Jesus lands.

A disciple is literally a learner of Jesus. And so learn to apply the Old Testament in light of him. Now, how can you do that?

Well, why not sign up the next time we have a Bible overview class? Why not read some good books? If you want some recommendations, some starting points, well, let me recommend God's Big Picture and the Drama of Scripture.

Both of them are in our library, and both of them are also easily purchased online. And if you want to dig deeper, just ask me for more recommendations. And every sermon I preach, I try to model, often not very well, I'm sure, how Jesus makes a difference to that passage.

So see if you can pick up something from how I try to do it. But don't just know the story. That is certainly not where Jesus stops. He's made the announcement and now we get his summons.

[31 : 28] What is it? Let Jesus bring you into his story and you are set for eternity. Let Jesus bring you into his story and you're set for eternity.

Verse 19 Therefore, anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

But whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. In context of what we've just said, the commands here refer not to the Old Testament law per se, but the commands as Jesus fulfills them and teaches them afresh.

It refers to the kingdom teaching which we'll hear about from Jesus' own lips in the next few weeks. And in a nutshell, what Jesus is going to do is this.

Now, I've already talked about reading the Bible through the Jesus lens. Now, what do lens do? The opticians will tell us it focuses light, it brings things into clarity.

[32 : 42] It helps us see that the Bible is ultimately about Jesus. But Jesus doesn't just bring a lens. He also brings a prism.

Now, what do prisms do? It refracts light. It brings out colors we don't normally see. It brings out the deeper layers.

And so, Jesus is going to take laws that we know from the Ten Commandments. And he's going to help us to see them through a prism so that we'll see its deeper layers.

But over the next few weeks, when we see and hear those deeper layers, what does Jesus want us to do and not do?

Look again at verse 19. What does he not want us to do? He doesn't want us to set them aside. More than that, he doesn't want us to teach others to set them aside.

[33 : 47] And then what does he want us to do? He wants us to practice them. And he wants us to teach them. Because remember, who is Jesus talking to? His disciples.

And at the end of Matthew, what does he want his disciples to do? To teach others what he has said. Teach others would be disciples his commands.

And then he says, if you practice this, you'll be the greatest in the kingdom. If you don't, you'll be the least. And if you didn't get the point, hear Jesus' words in verse 20.

for I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, he will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now, that's really difficult to understand at first glance. Is Jesus now teaching salvation by works? If we take this verse on its own, it sure sounds like it.

[34 : 51] And to get around this, some people might say that Jesus means what we really need to do is to keep trusting in the righteousness of Christ and not be like the Pharisees who only trusted in their own righteousness.

Now, once again, it certainly is true that we depend solely on the righteousness of Christ to be part of God's kingdom. But I think it's stretching it to say that this is what Jesus means here.

Rather, what Jesus is getting at here is not so much degrees of righteousness, but kinds of righteousness.

You see, what is the kind of righteousness the righteousness of the Pharisees are all about? Read the rest of Matthew, and you would know what the righteousness of the Pharisees is.

It's all about the externals. It's all about outward behaviour. It's all about being seen to do the right thing. But Jesus says, Jesus' culture goes deeper.

[36 : 02] The righteousness of Christians is not just about behaviour, but about the heart. It's about your inner life and your inner thoughts, not just what's on the outside.

God. And in this way, your righteousness should surpass the Pharisees. Because your righteousness is all about the heart.

It's a different kind of righteousness. So it isn't so much about beating the Pharisees at their own game. Who can keep more rules? It's about doing the will of God from the inner core of your being.

And so that at least tells you how seriously Jesus will take these commands. Christianity is never less than the forgiveness of Jesus.

But it is more than just about his forgiveness. It's also about following him because he has written the law on your hearts.

[37 : 07] If you're a Christian today, Jesus has summoned you not to become a self-righteous person, but certainly a kingdom righteous one.

And if there is zero evidence of following him, if there is zero evidence of the Holy Spirit transforming you, the question becomes whether you were ever part of the kingdom in the first place.

Were you given a new heart? And so hopefully the implication is obvious. we don't just know the story.

We participate in this story by following Jesus' commands. In a postmodern age, we can sometimes be suspicious when people try to suck us into following them.

We're suspicious when politicians tell us a story about how they will bring the nation to greater heights and bring you much prosperity. if you would just play an active part in propagating their story and supporting them and following them.

[38 : 16] And we don't like to be manipulated into following their version of the story. But the Bible's story is different.

Because the author doesn't try to manipulate the story from a position of power. rather, he places himself in this story.

Not as an earthly king who conquers by might, but as a humble slave who dies without a fight. The law and the prophets reveal the tragedy of the human race.

We are enslaved by sin. But Jesus places himself in this story and completes it by taking that tragedy upon himself as God dies on the cross.

And through that tragedy, he completes and fulfills this story by bringing about a great reversal. He redeems us. He fulfills the law and the prophets.

[39 : 24] And when we realize that this is the heart of the story, we will not be afraid to participate in this story. We would be afraid to follow its author, who now summons us to follow him and obey his commands.

Because we can see that he is kind and gracious. He has our best interests at heart. Our obedience is not legalism, but a true righteousness that arises out of our thankful hearts.

And if you participate in this story, you get to enjoy its ending. The kingdom of heaven. You'll be set for eternity.

Remember the kingdom of heaven? That place where those who mourn shall be comforted, the meek will inherit the earth, and the pure in heart will see God himself.

And do you know what they'll sing? When with the ransom in glory, his face I at last shall see, it will be my joy through the ages to sing of his love for me.

[40 : 46] How marvelous, how wonderful, and my song, or my story, shall ever be. How marvelous, how wonderful, is my Savior's love for me.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that you are the author of the greatest story in the universe.

We know that all our stories come from you and you alone. And we thank you that at the heart of this story, it's a story, yes, of a tragedy, but of a tragedy that becomes a victory.

We thank you for the Lord Jesus that although he was God himself, and yet he did not exploit that position, but rather he chose to come to earth to take the form not just of a human, but also to become a slave, to die on the cross for us, so that we might be liberated.

We thank you now that when we trust in you, this becomes our story, that we are people now whose hearts are renewed, whose hearts are now circumcised, who no longer have a heart of stone, but a heart of flesh.

[42 : 30] And so Father, we just pray, Lord, that you help us to hear your word and to heed your summons, help us to follow you. Father, we know that especially as we read the commands over the next few weeks, some of those commands are going to be very, very challenging.

We're not going to find it easy, but Father, please give us ears to hear and thankful hearts to respond so that we might now live the way of the kingdom, and in that way, we might indeed let your love overflow out of us so that we would do good deeds that adorn your gospel, and that will cause people to glorify you, our Father in heaven.

And so Father, help us to be both thankful today and renew our determination to keep following you. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen. don't ■ Jesus Christ, I'm happy to2