

Please join with me in prayer. Lord, we ask that you would bless this time as we look to your word and to these ancient people who studied your word. There's something here for us, Lord, and I pray that you might minister to us with it. We pray these things in the name of our Lord, Jesus, the Messiah. Amen.

This morning, I want to I think about why bother with Old Testament study? There's five reasons, and we'll get to them in just a moment. One of the things we need to get to first is a major obstacle that's come up in the past couple of generations here. There's a growing pushback, resistance, neglect, and turning away from the Old Testament. And there's some people here in this room, not you, but there's some other people here near you. They don't like the Old Testament. And many of us who gathered with the Lord's people yesterday to worship all across this region, some of us, at some of the places we gathered, heard people say, Yesterday. "Wow. The Old Testament is tough. It's God of Wrath. God of Israel hates people. Luckily, we have Jesus who's given us the New Testament, and we don't have to worry about the Old Testament anymore."

And that's becoming very, very frequent in our day more than ever. It's a lie. It's false teaching, and it's not true of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah. If we think about him, he never said, I have come to abolish the Torah and the prophets. I have not come to fulfill, but to abolish them. He never said that. Jesus owned his Bible, the very one that we neglect in some all of us don't like. And we'll come back to that at the end of our talk. But that's an underlying problem that's not just personal, it's part of our day.

Thanks to Andrew for reading this very difficult passage. I want to think about the context for a moment, and then we're going to work on that because there's five reasons in there why we should bother with studying the Old Testament. Now, these folks at that time, they had been back in the land of Judah, in Jerusalem, for a little over 90 years at this point. About a month earlier, they had just finished helping Nehemiah rebuild the walls to take away the shame of Jerusalem. And when they looked back, it was 90 years plus the exile.

So if you think back right now, about 150 years, that'd be about a little bit after the Civil War, during the reconstruction period, which was awful in the United States. That's how long ago it had been since their ancestors had lived under a Davidic king in Jerusalem. It was a long time ago. They had been back in the land. They'd returned from captivity, from exile, where they'd been taken by the Mesopotamian Empire. And probably it was their great grandparents who had come back to the land, to Jerusalem, who'd read the prophets and thought, let's go back and be on the ground floor of this work God's going to do. I've read Isaiah. It sounds great. What God's going to in Jerusalem to renew it. And it really wasn't like that. It was like the Great Depression of the United States. So in my grandparents day, just about 95 years ago. I don't know how to say the right word. Yeah, 95 years ago, we had the Great Depression in the United States. And really, the horrible part of it economically lasted for three years. It was awful. And maybe it was really until World War II that the economy was just so difficult.

And that very difficult part of the economy in the United States deeply affected that generation, and there's still lingering effects in our day from what had happened. But I remember how it affected my grandparents and even my parents because of all of this, and it affected us as well. When the people came back to the land and lived in Judah, it was way worse than the Great Depression, and it lasted for over 200 years. It was a wasteland. It was economically terrible. It was the worst thing that could have happened. And surprisingly, the people who lived in exile had it better than the people who returned to the land. It was a very disappointing reality.

Now, this is a few of the key places in the Persian Empire of this period. This is in the 400s BCE. Babylon, Sousa, Persepolis, and Pasargadae, those are the four capitals that the Royal Court of Persia moved between. And the Persian Empire was so huge. One of the provinces, the one that had Judah in it, which is where Jerusalem is on the left, That included Babylon. It's a massive province, and that was just one of 20 some provinces of the Persian Empire.

And so the people who lived in Judah were in this very insignificant, deeply economically depressed place in the Empire. They barely registered. Nehemiah, though, had a very powerful position in the

Empire as cup bearer to the king. And so he's the one that went back to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem to take away their shame.

I don't know if you've ever been to, you probably have. You've been to the shore on the East Coast? Yeah? There's really great places to shop along the shore, like an Ocean City, Maryland, and places like this. Well, if you've ever been in one of these souvenir shops, you might have seen this sometime, but they'll have maps of not the whole world, but this hemisphere. And front and center, there it is, really big and prominent Ocean City, Maryland, or some other shore place that no one's ever heard of. And then up above it to the right is New York City. Off to the left is LA. And then way off to the upper right is London and Paris. But front and center, the big part, Ocean City, Maryland. That's right. That's how these souvenir maps work. And that's the feeling that we get when we read the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah. There's the Persian Empire. It's a big deal. But everything that is important in the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah it happens in Jerusalem. There's inordinate attention to it. And the whole rest of the Persian Empire is just like these other places on the souvenir map.

So Over on the right here, you can see recently in the past generation, we've actually begun to discover some of the remnants of the people in exile. And only 20% ever came back from diaspora. The rest stayed in exile and all over the lands, even to our present day. And that's true even at the time of Jesus. At his time, just like at Israel's time, no more than 20% of the people ever returned to the land. Most of the people of Israel stayed in diaspora forever. And even today, some people have returned to the land, but many live still out in the lands. But Jerusalem, this was the more difficult place to live at this period of time. Here's a really simple outline of the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah. It includes in Ezra Chapter 1 through 6, the return of Zerubbabel and Joshua, and they rebuilt the temple.

There's a whole lot to do with that, but that's what they did. Ezra 7 through 10, we jump 60 years into the future. Ezra comes back with a Torah scroll, and he finds that the people who live in Judah and Jerusalem have turned away from the Lord, and they have to get right with God, and they do this by a mass divorce. I mean, whoever heard of doing something so personal in a mass way? But they did because they wanted to get right with God. And then Nehemiah 1:6. Nehemiah comes back about 13 years later after Ezra, and he helps rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in 52 days. It was a remarkable achievement. We had the wealthy and the poor people from all social classes working side by side on the wall. And just a few weeks after that is when they read Scripture at the Watergate. And this is a very remarkable thing here in Nehemiah 7 and following. Nehemiah 8, 9, 10. There's 11 days of Scripture study that the whole people participated in. Eleven days. What Andrew read for us, it's just day one. They did that 10 more times. There's some very remarkable achievements.

When we get to the end of chapter 8, if you ever look at that, they did some new initiatives for the Festival of Tabernacles. They put up huts right there in Jerusalem, and they remembered when the people of God had been brought out of Egypt back in ancient times. They lived in their huts for eight days, and they worshiped the Lord and read Scripture every single day of the festival, just like what we read. And then in chapter nine, you guessed it. They needed to have another mass divorce because many people had married unbelievers once again. They wanted to get right with God. They confessed their sins. And then chapter nine is filled with the longest retrospective prayer in all of Scripture. It goes back to creation, and they tell the whole story of what God had done right up to their present time. They placed themselves in the story that they had been studying for the past eleven days. And then they did one more thing. In chapter 10, they signed a vow. They signed a solemn oath that they were going to obey Torah.

But this is one of the... It's crazy. I've never heard of anything like this, up here. Torah says, Do this. Each thing that they listed in their solemn oath, they said, We're going to do that. Torah says, Do this. We're going to do that. They said, Again and again, we're going to obey even more than what God is asking for in Torah. We're going to do that. It's a very remarkable thing, and they signed it.

That would be the good news. If the Book of Esther and Nehemiah ended right there, that'd be great. Unfortunately, when you get to chapter 13, Nehemiah is back 12 years later, and they hadn't done anything. They disobeyed all of it. So it's just like the rest of the Hebrew Bible in that sense. It ends

with a disappointment, looking forward to what God will do next. The very next chapter of this story is when Jesus of Nazareth comes and God does something through him that he wasn't able to do, or I should say, he didn't get done through exile and judging his people.

Well, here we are in chapter 8. And this very first part, "When the seventh month arrived and the Israelites were in their towns, all of the people gathered as one person in the plaza before the Watergate. They told Ezra the Scribe to bring the scroll of the Torah of Moses, which Yahweh had commanded Israel." There's a bunch of remarkable things here, but I want to look at just one for this second. The Watergate, it's not not at the temple. It's in a public area. Going back, notice whose idea this is. This isn't Israel's idea. This isn't the priest's idea. This isn't the Levites' idea. This isn't Nehemiah's idea. This is the people telling Ezra, get the scroll, the one that Yahweh had commanded to Israel. And he brought it out to the Watergate so that he could read to the people.

All right, we got to look at our five things now. What are the five reasons? You can look at my translation. It's a little bit more specific than the one you might have in front of you. But how many times, you can look at your Bible if you want. How many times can you find in verses one through eight, all the people? Take a second. See how many you can find. Don't let the person next to you do better than you. How many people here have found at least five times that it says all the people?

At least five. Okay. How many people have found at least six? How many people have found at least seven? Oh, all right. Don't talk to those people afterwards. There's six. Six times this passage says, all the people. All right. In addition to that, how many times does it say, the people? You Got it? Three more. So we have all the people six times, the people nine times. Now, how many times does it say something to the effect of? Men, women, and all who can understand. You got it?

Now, this is from Deuteronomy Chapter 31, and this is maybe what influenced them, perhaps. "Then Moses commanded them, saying, At the end of seven years, in the time of the year for canceling debts, during the Feast of Booths, that's in the seventh month, when all Israel comes to appear before Yahweh, their God, at the place that he will choose, you shall read this Torah before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little children, and your residing foreigners that are in your towns, so that they may hear, and so that they may learn And they may revere Yahweh, your God, and shall diligently observe all the words of this Torah. And then their children, who have not known, they too may hear, and they may learn to revere Yahweh, their God in all the days that you live on the land that you are crossing the Jordan to get there to take possession of it." Deuteronomy 31: 10 and following.

Eleven times altogether between all the people, the people, and men, women, and we would just say children, but all those who could understand. Eleven times. That gives us a clue to our first reason to why bother with studying the Old Testament. Why bother? It's for God's people, all of us, that we're a part of. There's a collective focus here. Old Testament study is not merely personal. It's about our identity with God's people collectively. And that's as true for us today as it was for the people who gathered in Jerusalem on the first day of the seventh month, back in the 450s BCE. For them, the things that happened in Torah that they were reading were ancient. None of them had ever witnessed the Davidic Kingdom. Most of them had grown up in this wasteland of economic depression. For them, they only knew of the things in the Old Testament by reading them and studying them.

That's the same that's true for us, except most of us live in better times than the people of ancient Judah were living back then. When we study Scripture, it puts us as part of God's collective people. We do what they did. We look back to the times when Moses said, Read this together. And so it's about our collective identity, not just when we gather like we do for chapel or for church. That's part of it. But it's across time, too. We join with Jesus and his students. We join with the earliest churches when they study Scripture. We join together. The Old Testament is part of our story. That's the only Bible Jesus ever knew during his life here on Earth. And we need to join with him in studying it. It's part of our collective identity.

All right, All right. Another question. What parts of the people's body are mentioned? See how many you can find. Did you find three body parts? Four? Five? Yeah, that's pretty good. That's what I got.

Ears. "And the ears of all the people turned toward the Torah scroll. Ezra opened the scroll before the eyes of all the people. Then Ezra blessed Yahweh, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands. Then they bowed and worshiped with their faces to the ground."

All right, the second reason is because study of the Old Testament, it's about our whole person. There's a multisensory study that these folks do. Old Testament study is not merely informational. We need dynamic engagement of our whole selves. And I would encourage you to think about your own study of the Scriptures. Here I'm thinking, especially of the Old Testament. Many of us are very passive. This is something we do privately, and it's something that we're not overly active for. Not so with these ancient folk. They really got into it. It was part of... They recognized their whole lives depended on it. All right.

Who helps the people study Scripture? Well, the Levites explain it to them, and there's some listed in verse seven, Joshua 9 and so on. And the Levites explain Torah to the people while the people remained standing. So they read from the scroll of the Torah of God with interpretation. They gave the sense so that the people understood the reading. Now, this is a moment, you may not recognize it, but this is a moment of tremendous change in Old Testament history.

Before this time and right up to this time, God sent prophets who said, "Thus says the Lord." But the last few prophets recognize that God's people had stopped listening to what God had already said. And so if you read books like Haggai, and then especially Zechariah and Malachi, they say again and again, Here's what the former prophet prophets said. See, these last prophets, they don't say anything new. They say, you need to study what God has already said. And this is the transition or the turning point. God had already given his revelation through the prophets. Now God raises up teachers that people need to study God's will, not just listen to what the prophets are saying. They need to study what God had already said.

And I think that you and I both know, well, I hope that we both know, but maybe we don't, that even still today in our land, there's a lot of Christians who don't listen to what God said through Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve prophets. We don't need new revelation. We need to study with teachers, and This isn't just live teachers in classes. This would also include through books and other resources. But we need to study. And that's what these people are some of the first students of a time after the prophets, when scholarship now helped people to hear God's word, obey God's word, and we'll have to go further and see what else. But reason three, this is the day of the teachers. Old Testament study is not merely about personal effort. We need reliable instruction in the word. There's a lot of hard things in the Scriptures for the people back then, and certainly for people today.

All right, fourth question. How many times is the Torah scroll referred to, including pronouns? This is the last chance that you have to redeem yourself on one of these kinds of questions. How many times is Torah scroll mentioned here, or pronouns, or various other ways of referring to it? How many people think there's at least five, at least six? Hold it high. At least seven, eight, eight, "They tell, Ezra the scribe, Bring out the scroll of the Torah of Moses, which Yahweh had commanded Israel. Ezra the priest brought out the Torah. He read it, facing the plaza before the water gate, and the ears of all the people turned towards the Torah scroll. Ezra opened the scroll before the eyes of all the people. When he opened 'it, ' and then the Levites explained Torah to the people. So they read from the scroll of the Torah of God with interpretation."

Eight times. Reason four. We have such a privilege with the Old Testament. It is a word from God. It's the same for them as it is for us. There's no change in application here. The Old Testament is not merely descriptive of the past. It is Yahweh's authoritative word to every generation. We stand like they do, where many of these things are about ancient things, but it's about them. It's to them. Same thing for us. When we read biblical narratives which is more than half of all of the Scriptures, a lot more than half. We need to remember that narratives are never for who they're about. They're for every generation. They're about certain generations, but they're for every generation.

All right, one more. No counting here. How do the people respond to reading Scripture? Did you pick this up? They bow down and worship Yahweh with their faces to the ground. Here at Cairn, we need to

be a especially careful. We don't study Scripture so that we can win Old Testament Trivia Night at church and get a free, whatever they give out, pizza. We don't study for knowledge. There's nothing wrong with the knowledge, but never do we study for mere knowledge. We don't study for mere compliance in terms of obedience. There's nothing wrong with Bible knowledge with compliance and obedience. But we need to recognize this is part of our relationship with God. That's reason five. Study the Old Testament because it's about a relationship with God. Worship God. The Old Testament is not merely to be studied as an end in itself. It points us in every generation to worship and service of God who gave it. Think about when Jesus said to his folks in his day, again and again, the scholars of his day, Have you not read? Of course they've read it. But he's saying, If you think that's all it is, then you haven't read it. God's expecting you to respond to him in terms of your relationship to him. Those are five reasons, and they're as valid today as they were back then.

So I come back to, how's your relationship relationship with the Lord? Is it everything it should be? You're doing all you can to serve the Lord? If you're not, if there's room to grow, then there's a good chance that you and I need to study the Old Testament. That's what Jesus does. That's what his students do. That's what the authors of the New Testament do. They take a page out of these ancient folks who lived in impoverished Judah to study Scripture. These are about old and ancient things. But it's not to the people that it's about. It's for God's people in every generation.

And then there's just this one more thing that I brought up at the beginning. And it doesn't matter if you pretend. If you don't like the Old Testament, and I know that there's a lot of people that don't. It's a lot of people that are ashamed of the Old Testament. I'm working on a research project for this past two years now. I'll be working on it for another year and a half. I'm studying the verses in the Bible that Christians hate. Almost all of them are in Torah. There's a few elsewhere in the Old Testament. But people that don't like the Old Testament, and I'm here talking about Christians, Christians that we gather with to worship that don't like the Old Testament, it's especially because of these few verses.

And so if you're ashamed, and you can pretend you're not, but God knows your heart. If you're ashamed of the Old Testament, if you don't study it like you should, if you don't study the Bible of Jesus the way he did, then I do have an invitation for you. I ask you to join me in these next 18 months or so. I'm still going to be on this research project on the verses that people hate in Torah. And I've learned something so far in this project. We are badly mistaken. The verses that we hate, they actually show how God is love and God is fair. And that's not what I thought they said when I ignored them myself. I invite you to seriously consider your relationship with the Lord and how your study of the Old Testament fits with it. And I want you to realize that if you hate the Old Testament or if you're embarrassed by it, you should maybe take a serious new look at the passages that you hate.

Please join with me in prayer. Lord, we thank you for the folk of ancient Judah who gathered at the Watergate and told Ezra, Bring your Torah scroll and read to us. These folk that spent 11 days together standing and using their ears, using their eyes, studying Torah, showing us what we need to, even still today. Lord, help us to recognize what you've said across the generations and said to us. And Lord, for those of us that are ashamed of your word, ashamed of the Bible of Jesus, I pray that you would do a work in our lives. Help us not to turn from it and not to just be embarrassed because of what our day says about it. Help us to look at it and study it in context. And if we need help, Lord, I pray that you would help us to seek help from those that know better than we do. We need you, Lord, and we ask that you would revive your relationship in us this very day. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.