

THE PEOPLE AND THE LAND

**AN ADVENT JOURNEY
THROUGH THE EARLIER BOOKS
OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

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INTRODUCING THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament is not a single book, but a collection of writings that record the history and religion of the Jewish people over the centuries that preceded the Christian Era. Jesus Christ was a Jew, and so were his earliest followers. Their teachings, like his, were steeped in the thought world of the Old Testament, and until the Christian Scriptures were gathered together to constitute the New Testament, the Old Testament was the Church's only Bible. The first Christians found hints and foreshadowings of Jesus, the coming Messiah, in page after page of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the liturgies of the Early Church are permeated with words and images from the Old Testament. We neglect the Old Testament, therefore, to our great loss.

What we must always remember, however, is that the Old Testament is the record, not of a quasi-angelic community of spiritual and moral perfectionists, but of a nation among many nations that in the brutal milieu of the Ancient World could survive, often with much bloodshed, only at the expense of its neighbours. But in a world gone horribly wrong down through the centuries, God's saving purpose found its focus in the coming of Jesus, truly divine and truly human, born and raised as one of God's Ancient People.

Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended, was born into a single nation long-prepared to understand God and God's ways. The plan was that through him the whole world would find peace with God and eternal life. This journey from Genesis to the Song of Solomon will take us through the history of Israel from the era of Abraham and his descendants, through Moses and the delivery of God's people from slavery in Egypt, the return to the Promised Land under Joshua, the establishment of the Jewish monarchy, the destruction of the Land and the people's deportation to Babylon, and lastly to their return from exile and the rebuilding of their nation. These are no more than snapshots from the wider story of God's Chosen People.

Advent Sunday: Genesis 28

Jacob came to a certain place and, taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.'

God, God's Chosen People, the Land given to them by God – these are the pillars upon which the faith of Israel is founded. But why did God choose this people and give them this land? So that through them the whole earth would be blessed. Jesus, descended from Abraham, is the supreme offspring through whom the blessing of God is extended to all the earth, but countless millions still do not know him. Pray for the world-wide mission of Christ's people, and ask that you will see more clearly the work of mission for which God has chosen you. To whom can Jesus make himself real through you?

Monday 1: Exodus 3

The angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of a bush; the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses! I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Moses said to God, 'If they ask me, "What is your name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' This is my name for ever.

God's delivery of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt is seen by Christians as foreshadowing the salvation of the whole world through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Time and again in the Gospels Jesus weaves the words 'I AM' into his teaching, to remind us that in him the fullness of God is to be found. Pray that you may recognise that fullness more and more.

Tuesday 1: Leviticus 19

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.

God gave the land to his people, not for the selfish enjoyment of the few, but so that all could reap its benefits. The poor must not be neglected, and because of God's desire to reach out to the whole earth through his people, foreigners must never be condemned to starvation and destitution. Love of neighbour – anyone in need whom one is in a position to help – wasn't a new concept on the lips of Jesus, but he re-emphasised it and made it the founding principle of all true Christian living. Pray that you will recognise the 'poor' and 'alien' whom God is calling you to love as their neighbour.

Wednesday 1: Numbers 21

The people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.' And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

This is a strange story that challenges our understanding of God and of God's ways, yet the first Christians saw in the bronze serpent a picture of the crucified Jesus, through whom God brings healing and eternal life. "There is life for a look at the Crucified One," says an old gospel hymn, "There is life at this moment for thee; then look, sinner, look unto Him and be saved, Unto Him who was nailed to the tree." Pray that you may ever look to Jesus.

Thursday 1: Deuteronomy 18

The LORD said to Moses: 'I will raise up a prophet like you; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. You may say to yourself, 'How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?' If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.

Our world today is full of false prophets, some claiming to speak and act on behalf of God, some, denying the reality of God, proclaiming themselves as 'saviours' of humanity. Think of the terrible mess into which these false prophets have led us down through the centuries. Christians recognise in Jesus the prophet foretold through Moses. When we claim for ourselves the promises spoken through Jesus, we discover that in him is truth and life. Pray that God will help you to recognise what is true in our confusing world today.

Friday 1: Joshua 24

'Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.'

Under Joshua the Israelites, freed from slavery in Egypt, and after decades of wandering in the desert, are at last ready to re-claim the Promised Land. For them this must be a time of rededication in the service of the one and only true God, for many of them have turned aside to worship the false gods of the peoples around them. Our modern false gods can be money, material possessions, prestige, power, culture – things that aren't necessarily bad in themselves, but that become bad when the pursuit of them takes precedence over everything else, and when we neglect to allow God the central place in all our thinking and living. Pray that, like Joshua, you will let the service of God lie at the heart of your life and dictate your priorities.

Saturday 1: Judges 21

In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.

The Book of Judges is a difficult one, because it introduces us to some very unsavoury people who assumed leadership roles. But it also features heroic people through whom God preserved the national identity of the Chosen People. It was a time of anarchy, not dissimilar to our modern world, when people recognised no authority outside of themselves, and there existed no generally-accepted standards of right and wrong. This was an era of transition between the strong leadership of Moses and Joshua and the establishment of a centralised monarchy under David and Solomon. Pray that in our often-anarchic world, the civil authorities will exercise their God-given powers wisely and humanely, and that God will raise up leaders who will promote and encourage all that is good, and suppress all that is evil.

The Second Sunday of Advent: Ruth 4

Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you has borne him.' Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Ruth was a Moabitess – to Jews a foreigner – who had married into an Israelite family that had come to live in the land of Moab during a famine. Ruth's husband died, and so did her father-in-law. Her widowed mother-in-law Naomi decided to return to the land of Israel, and Ruth chose to go with her, marrying Boaz, a relative of her deceased husband. She adopted the Jewish faith, and her son Obed is listed in the Gospels as an ancestor of Jesus. Pray that this beautiful story that demonstrates the beauty of family life at its best may be an inspiration in our own humanly-fragmented times.

Monday 2: 1 Samuel 3

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD. Then the LORD called, 'Samuel! Samuel!' and he said, 'Here I am!' and ran to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call; lie down again.' So he went and lay down. Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, 'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening."' So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'

Personal experience of God's reality is normal and natural, not something either weird or for the very few. Pray that you may be conscious of God 'standing' beside you, and that you will respond as Samuel did.

Tuesday 2: 2 Samuel 24

David was stricken to the heart because he had numbered the people. He said to the LORD, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O LORD, I pray you, take away the guilt of your servant; for I have done very foolishly.' When David rose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, 'Go and say to David: Thus says the LORD: Three things I offer you; choose one of them, and I will do it to you.' So Gad came to David and told him; he asked him, 'Shall three years of famine come to you on your land? Or will you flee for three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' pestilence in your land? Now consider, and decide what answer I shall return to the one who sent me.' Then David said to Gad, 'I am in great distress; let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into human hands.'

This is a strange story to our modern ears. What could possibly have been wrong with King David counting how many his people were? But this could indicate his trust in human resources rather than in God and all that God had promised him, with dire consequences for the nation. Pray that the peoples of the world will learn to trust in God rather than in wealth or military might.

Wednesday 2: 1 Kings 18

The word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year of the drought, saying, 'Go, present yourself to Ahab; I will send rain on the earth.' So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab. When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, 'Is it you, you troubler of Israel?' He answered, 'I have not troubled Israel; but you have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD. Now therefore have all Israel assemble for me at Mount Carmel.' So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, 'How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.' The people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, 'I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets number four hundred and fifty. Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.' Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, 'Israel shall be your name'; with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. Elijah came near and said, 'O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.' Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.'

Elijah's story has been an inspiration to all who seek to remain faithful to God in the face of discouragement and persecution. Pray for all Christians who face trials today, that in and through them the power of God will be revealed.

Thursday 2: 2 Kings 5

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.' So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, 'Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.' When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.' But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, 'Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.' Elisha sent a messenger to Naaman, saying, 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.' But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, 'I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, 'Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, "Wash, and be clean"?' So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

The Old Testament prophets weren't only people with the ability sometimes to foretell the future. Just as important was their ability to analyse the present in the light of God's reality, and to act in a way that became God's activity in the world. Here we see Elisha fulfilling that kind of role. The followers of Jesus have a prophetic role in our world today – witnessing to the reality of God in word and deed. Pray that God will show you the ways in which you can be a prophetic presence in our community and our world.

Friday 2: 1 Chronicles 13

David and all Israel went up to Baalah to bring up from there the ark of God, the LORD. David and all Israel were dancing before God with all their might, with song and lyres and harps and tambourines and cymbals and trumpets. When they came to the threshing-floor of Chidon, Uzzah put out his hand to hold the ark, for the oxen shook it. The anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; he struck him down because he put out his hand to the ark; and he died there before God. David was afraid of God that day; he said, 'How can I bring the ark of God into my care?' So David did not take the ark into his care into the city of David; he took it instead to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. The ark of God remained with the household of Obed-edom in his house for three months, and the LORD blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that he had.

The Ark of the Covenant was a sacred box that contained the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. The Ark manifested the presence of God in the midst of the people. Uzzah's fate is inexplicable to our ears, but it was believed that in some way he had caused deep offence to God. More positively, Obed-edom and his household were blessed by God's presence in their house. Pray that you, a human 'Ark', will be equipped to become a vehicle of God's presence and a source of blessing to others.

Saturday 2: 2 Chronicles 36

Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he began to reign; he reigned for eleven years in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD his God. All the leading priests and the people also were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations; and they polluted the house of the LORD that he had consecrated in Jerusalem. The LORD sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling-place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD against his people became so great that there was no remedy. Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their youths with the

sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or young woman, the aged or the feeble. All the vessels of the house of God, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officials, all these he brought to Babylon. They burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him.

From the heady days of David and Solomon, with a few exceptions, the Old Testament story is a tale of evil rulers leading God's people into idolatry, rebellion, decline, national destruction and exile in a foreign land. When a nation turns its back on God, nothing good can ever result. Pray for all Christians in positions of power and responsibility, that they will be given the courage to remain faithful to God and to promote God's values in our world.

The Third Sunday of Advent: Ezra 3

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the LORD with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals; and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, 'For he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever towards Israel.' And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping.

After seventy years of exile, God's people were restored to their devastated land, and began the task of rebuilding their national life. But some were so nostalgic for the 'good old days' that they couldn't recognise the miracle of their restoration and the new thing that God was achieving in their midst. Pray that you will always keep the past in a proper perspective, and focus on what God is doing now, and on your own role in that work.

Monday 3: Nehemiah 8

Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen', lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. Also the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

It isn't only in our modern world that sometimes even the people of God are ignorant of the Bible, or find many of its teachings difficult to understand. The restoration of God's people after their years of exile was marked by a spiritual revival in which the religious leaders not only read out the Scriptures, but explained their meaning and what God was asking of his people in and through the written Word. Pray for all to whom is entrusted a preaching and teaching ministry today, that God will speak to his people through them, building up his people in knowledge, understanding and faith.

Tuesday 3: Esther 3

Haman said to King Ahasuerus, 'There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. Let a decree be issued for their destruction.' So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the enemy of the Jews. The king said to Haman, 'Do with them as it seems good to you.'

The Book of Esther tells of the persecution endured by Jewish exiles living in the land of Persia. Antisemitism is nothing new, but has reared its ugly head throughout recorded history. The miracle – evidence of God's Lordship over the whole of human history – is that of all the ancient peoples and nations, the Jews have uniquely survived, and in modern times have been restored to the land promised them by God from of old. God has a still-unfulfilled purpose for the Jewish people. Pray that those today who yearn for their destruction will recognise that it is God against whom they are fighting.

Wednesday 3: Job 38

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man. I will question you, and you shall declare to me. 'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

The problem of evil and suffering is one that has vexed believers in the God of Love from time immemorial. The Book of Job tells of a good man who suffered devastating personal loss, yet refused to curse God and die. It offers no slick answers to the mystery of why God allows terrible things to happen, but towards the end of the book Job is given a vision of God's majesty that enables him to see his own woes in a clearer light. Pray for all who find it hard to keep faith in the face of their own sufferings, or those of others.

Thursday 3: Psalm 34

I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be glad. O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together. I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed. This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD, and was saved from every trouble. The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him. O fear the LORD, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want. The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

The Psalms are the common heritage of Jews and Christians, and part of their enormous value is they give expression to our doubts and fears, as well as our joys. Make Psalm 34 your prayer today. Let it help you to count your blessings, and ask for these blessings to be enjoyed by others too.

Friday 3: Proverbs 3

My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you. Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them round your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favour and good repute in the sight of God and of people. Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.

The Book of Proverbs is a treasure house of spiritual wisdom and sound common sense. What is God asking of you in this short extract? Pray that God will increase in you and those around you these virtues of faith and life.

Saturday 3: Ecclesiastes 12

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them'; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain; on the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity.

Sound advice, not just for the young, but for the young in heart of any age! And yet this well-known passage ends on a note of caution that is sounded

elsewhere in this elusive book that often seems sub-Christian in outlook. For the author life is a riddle, and he struggles to find the key. He fails to find the meaning of life in knowledge, money, sensual pleasures, religion, or even in folly. Within and behind these things he finds only emptiness, and even God is inscrutable. The incompleteness of the Old Testament message is never more apparent than in this book. Only the Christian Gospel of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ can rescue us from the meaninglessness and despair that threaten to overwhelm our lives and the life of the world. Pray for all who wonder what it's all for, not least for yourself on days when the problems of life seem hopelessly overwhelming.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent: Song of Solomon 7

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned.

The Song of Solomon is a beautiful and explicitly sensuous celebration of human love. Embarrassed by its sometimes-erotic imagery, prudish Christian commentators have tended to turn the Song into an allegory of God's love. But this was never the original intention of the writer. The physical expression of human love is in itself a wholesome and enriching gift from God, and only when it is divorced from commitment and compassion does it become something exploitative, destructive and evil. The tender sensuality of the Song of Solomon is worlds removed from our self-gratifying culture of sleaze and pornography that turns love into lust and corrupts those who fall under its spell. *"The Word became flesh and lived among us."* There is nothing inherently evil in the human body. Pray for all who are ensnared or enslaved by the debasement of their bodies and minds, that God will send them deliverance and enable them to discover the beauty of human love at its highest and purest.

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