

Why Study Old and New Testament Characters?

Written by Bob Stone

An overview of why we should study Bible characters.

In this session, I want to offer an overview of why we should study Bible characters.

Some have asked, and I'm sure many have thought, "What does the life of someone who lived so long ago have to do with me today?" The cynic might even say, "The Old Testament has little to do with my life—who cares?"

This fall as Hillcrest's staff gathered for our annual retreat, we discussed this question, looking together at 1 Corinthians 10, which really begins in **chapter 9, verses 24-27**.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 26 Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. 27 No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

The context here is on the **race**, and the potential of being disqualified from receiving the prize.

Ray Stedman has said this passage: "...is built around the figure of an athletic contest—a race. This was a familiar thing to these believers in Corinth. Every three years the Isthmian Games (very much like the Olympic Games we are familiar with, which were also held in Greece), were held right outside the city. If you go to Corinth, you can still see the arenas where the races were run. The starting blocks where the athletes started out the races are still embedded in the stones. Paul is using this figure, because to him, life is a race like that.

These Corinthians knew that every athlete who participated in the races had to take an oath that they had been training for 10 months, and that they had given up certain delightful foods in their diet to enable them to endure the race. They had subjected themselves to rather rigorous discipline in order to win. Paul says all that they are winning

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is just a fading pine wreath, but, in the race we are running, the prize, the wreath, is an imperishable one.

He sees life this way. Its aim, as Paul understood it, is that we are here to run the race of life in order to be a useful and a pleasing instrument of God, to be used whenever and wherever he wants to use us. That is Paul's objective."

Ray Stedman, Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.

Why study characters in the Old and New Testaments?

We all need models. Therefore we study the Bible: to give us examples of those who were disqualified from receiving the prize, and to see those who finished well. Example: The power of a model (for my generation, "The catch" by Willie Mays; today, the home run swings of Sosa and McGwire beating Roger Maris' record). In fact, it can be helpful even to look for biblical characters with your spiritual giftings, and use their models in particular. When it comes to the spiritual race, we need models for several reasons, all of them found in this text.

10 For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. 2 They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. 3 They all ate the same spiritual food 4 and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. 5 Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. 6 Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. 7 Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry." 8 We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did; $\frac{1}{2}$ and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. 9 We should not test the Lord, as some of them did; $\frac{1}{2}$ and were killed by snakes. 10 And do not grumble, as some of them did; $\frac{1}{2}$ and were killed by the destroying angel. 11 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. 12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

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The first reason we need models is

To not be ignorant of the fact(s)

—v. 1. Many people are ignorant because they do not know the Scripture. I don't want our church to be ignorant. The Corinthians had gifts, but needed models too—I Cor. 1:4-7. They needed a better balance of Spirit and truth.

Let's look at the Old Testament. What can we learn from the model? What did our spiritual forefathers have in common? (vv. 1-3)

they were **all** under the cloud
they **all** passed through the sea
they were **all** baptized into Moses (identified with Moses, who represented the people to God, and vice versa)
they **all** ate the same spiritual food and spiritual drink

Did commonality help them to please God? **No!** (v. 5) Shared spiritual experiences or miracles do not guarantee a growing relationship with God (maybe only short-term praise, e.g., the Red Sea). Likewise, shared experiences in the church, youth group, small group, or family don't guarantee continual growth, (e.g., two children in the same family/church).

Are there in verses 1-5 clues as to what would have prevented their failure/our failure?

Note the word "spiritual."

Spiritual guidance (cloud)—v. 1
Spiritual deliverance (sea)—v. 1b
Spiritual leadership (baptized/identified into Moses)—v. 2
Spiritual food (manna)—v. 3
Spiritual drink (Rock that accompanied them, the spiritual presence of Christ)—v. 4

Note the coaching in 9:24-27.

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Running the race to win—9:24 Running to get the prize, not running aimlessly—9:24,26
Strict training, being in shape—9:25,27.

What, then, is needed for balance and spiritual success? Both **dependence** on the Word and the Spirit, and **discipline**.

Pleasing God should be our goal:

Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert (1 Cor. 10:5). (Note: there were 600,000 men plus women and children—about two million. How many made it into the promised land? Two men: Caleb and Joshua; all the rest were disqualified. Sobering!)

Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more (1 Thess. 4:1-18).

Another reason we study characters in the Scripture is: **To see the characters as examples, types, pictures**
—vv. 6,11

Israel's Old Testament experiences are more than mere stories; they represent types/lessons to us. Think of the characters as you read about them as targets of Satan, people he wanted to thwart.

A third reason we need to know the stories of the Bible well is **To keep us from setting our hearts on evil**

—v. 6b Setting your heart on evil has to do with lusting, desiring, or craving it. The evils in this passage included idolatry, sexual immorality, testing the Lord, and *grumbling* (yes, grumbling is in the same list; it's a big deal to God!). Resulting from their sin was pagan revelry; the death of 23,000 in a day; death by snakebite [Numbers 21]; and death by the hand of the destroying angel (vv. 7-11).

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So, how can we keep ourselves from setting our hearts on evil as they did? Simply put, we can do the opposite of what Israel did—set our hearts on good.

not **idolatry**, but **worship** (v. 7)—worship with believers
not **impurity**, but **purity** (v. 8)—sexual purity
not **testing**, but **trusting** (v. 9)—trusting in God's promises
not **grumbling**, but **thankfulness** (v. 10)—for life/experiences

In short, we are called to set our hearts on things above (Matt. 6:19-21); if we do, we will see an endless supply of good things in our lives. Colossians 3 exhorts us to set our hearts on things above, and lists some of the results. Contrast these with the "evil things" listed above.

12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Very close to the third reason for meditation and study of the Word (esp. biblical characters) is the fourth: **To learn from the warnings (found in the Scripture)—vv. 6 & 11.**

If we fail to learn from Israel's example, we'll pay a price, too; we'll be disqualified for the prize. If we set our hearts on evil ("earthly things"—Col. 3:2), we will receive the logical consequences—1 Cor. 10:5-10.

Sometimes we need a warning to stop the direction we're going. Sometimes we need one so that when we receive consequences, we will be unable to blame anyone else, and we'll be quicker to repent. (Many of us love to blame others for the results of our lives, and certainly we will at times get caught in the effects of someone else's sin. Real spiritual

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health, however, comes when we admit our contribution to our problems and repent to the Lord!

On the other hand, if we heed the warnings (see v. 11b), there is great fulfillment; rewards for the righteous, the faithful. All of Biblical history will culminate with us!

The fifth and final reason for doing biblical character studies applies to those of you who haven't fallen in any significant way. Yes, you are a sinner like everyone else, but you haven't had to deal with the ache of regret, guilt and shame. You need to study:

To be careful that you don't fall into temptation

—vv. 12-13.

Here's the word to the one standing: You might fall, too! No matter your track record, you can fall into temptation.

12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

I can hear some bristle at the suggestion of potential failure.

Falling: "I'm not going to fall like others I have known!"

Idolatry: "I will never worship anyone but God. I just enjoy a little partying from time to time. But listen, nothing is more important to me than my family, my wife, and my children, or a good time. I can keep things in perspective."

Sexual immorality: "I am strong enough. I will maintain sexual purity no matter what. I can handle going out with a non-Christian. I'll be stronger than any sexual temptation we might face on our camping trip. Hey, I'll even invite him/her to church!"

Testing the Lord: "I want you to know I can handle the situation I'm in now. I know there's a little risk involved, but even if I make a mistake, I can trust God to bail me out or to forgive me if I really sin."

Grumbling: "Not me. I'm the most positive person I know. What really bugs me is when others are not as positive as I am. I really wish people in our church would get it together and be as thankful as I am. I really hate to be around people who are having

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problems. Life is too short for that!"

We're up against a ruthless enemy. He'll trip or trap the believer if he can! The number one reason people fall is because they are not being careful! The strong word here is: all of us need to be careful; no one is above/beyond falling; and we will all be tempted.

All temptations are common—we are not unique! Many people in history have been tempted in the same way; some have yielded, while others have continued to stand. We can take comfort in that, because God is not taken by surprise; He's seen these temptations many times before.

We study how biblical characters got into their temptation (noting the signs of it coming on). We see how God gave them a way out and the strength to stand. We note those who succeeded and those who failed. Importantly, we are made aware we are not the first to be tempted.

Example: Sexual temptation

Joseph resisted	Samson failed
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Example: Idolatry

Elijah fought against it and won	Ahaz failed
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Example: Grumbling

Caleb resisted	Israel failed in the desert
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Example: Testing the Lord

Jesus resisted in the wilderness	Israel failed in the desert
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The good news is that **God's character translates** into promises for us:

He is faithful, and we can rely upon Him.
He will not let us be tempted beyond what we can bear. (In other words, God will monitor our temptations.)
When we are tempted, He will also provide a way out.
He will help us to stand up under any temptation.

The next two reasons to study biblical characters come from a brief passage in Romans 15:

2 Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." 4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

To prepare us so we might please and build up our neighbor for his good.

Christ did not please Himself (Romans 15:3). **To teach us—through endurance**

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Conclusion:

Let's look back over all the passages and see how they will help us.

1 Cor. 10:1-13

We must not be ignorant of the fact/the Word(s).
We are helped by seeing the characters of Scripture as examples, or types.
We need to keep guard on our hearts by setting them on things above and not on evil.
We must be wise enough to learn from the warnings found in the Scripture.
We must be careful or we might fall into temptation.

1 Cor. 9:24-27: We need to stay in shape spiritually.
We must not run aimlessly.
We must run to win the prize.
We must run to get the crown that will last forever.

We need to monitor our heart's condition.

Any of us could potentially be disqualified from the race—or not run the race we have the potential of running.

A very simple, but profound application of this sermon is to pick a character from Scripture who you think you are like in gifts, temperament, and goals, or one you aspire to be like.

- Why do you aspire to be like them? Or why are you like them?
- What are their weaknesses? What are their strengths?

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- How were they strong or weak in temptation?
- What are the lessons for your life? Your family and friends?

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Application

Take a quick tour through the wilderness of your heart.

In the dry, desolate desert of your heart, is:

- a piece of your character lying parched in a pit?
- a prickly attitude sprouting the spines of sin?
- a patch blooming with idolatry, immorality, or mistrust?
- a gritty, grumbling spirit that rubs God wrong?

Just remember God's responses to the Hebrews' wilderness sins—they were severe and unalterable. But don't let this keep your heart wandering fearfully. Let it drive you to Jesus, the oasis, where you can find the water of forgiveness and rest (see John 4:14, Matt. 11:28)—Charles Swindoll, *Practical Helps for a Hurting Church*, Insight for Living.

1988.

John 4:14

—"....

whoever

drinks the water I give

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