

# **MAKING FRIENDS WITH THE BIBLE #1**

By David Carlson

Christians from other denominations can sometimes intimidate us with their ability to quote from Holy Scripture. When a neighbor or co-worker rattles off verses of Scripture from memory or asks if we have ever studied St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, we as Orthodox Christians may feel at a disadvantage. Some Orthodox Christians have even been accused of "not knowing the Bible."

It is fairer to say that Orthodox Christians experience the Bible in a different way than do some Christian communities. Of course, the Divine Liturgy that we celebrate every Sunday contains specific readings from both the letters in the New Testament as well as a reading from one of the Holy Gospels. But the extent of the Bible in Orthodox worship goes far beyond that. A high percentage of the Liturgy itself, from the first words to the last part, is made up of language from the Bible. In a sense, Orthodox Christians are surrounded by the Bible in every Divine Service.

Nevertheless, many Orthodox Christians lament that they do not know as well or read the Bible as much as they wish they did. As Orthodox Christians, we certainly sense that our Scriptures are a divine treasure and our desire to "make friends" with the Bible is an honorable one. Yet, the history of Christianity since the 16th century offers an important caution. The constant fragmentation of Protestant denominations shows the danger of individuals believing that they do not need the guidance of the Church to interpret the Scriptures. The Bible in the wrong hands or in the hands of someone with the wrong spirit can damage the Church. So we have with the Bible a powerful treasure that we need to approach with humility and with a willingness to be guided by the Church.

This occasional series intends to introduce Orthodox Christians to the major themes of the Bible, both from the Old Testament and the New Testament. This occasional series will provide an overview of what God has revealed through Scripture and how the people of God (Israel in the Old Testament, the Christian Church in the New Testament) have come to understand God.

## **FIRST OBSERVATIONS**

1. Try this experiment. Pick up a Bible and open it to the halfway point. You should notice something important and interesting. The halfway point is still very much in the Old Testament portion of the Bible. The Old Testament has 47 "books" in the Orthodox/Catholic Bible and 39 in the Protestant Bible. The New Testament is made up of only 27 "books." In terms of size, the New Testament makes up less than 30% of the entire Bible.

2. Consider the starting and ending points of the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament begins with the creation of the universe and ends with material stemming from the 3rd or even 2nd century B.C. The scope of the Old Testament is therefore vast and we shouldn't be surprised that the Old Testament was written over more than 1000 years.

In contrast, the New Testament begins with the Birth of Jesus and ends with the persecution of Christians by Rome at the end of the first century A.D. The last text, the Apocalypse or the book of Revelation, also addresses God's purposes for the end of human history. In contrast to the Old Testament, the entire New Testament was written in less than 100 years, an amazing literary response to the life and ministry of Jesus. The following chart describes how the Old and the New Testament are very different in terms of content.

**Old Testament:**

Creation

Patriarchs (Noah to Joseph)

Moses and the Exodus from Egypt

The giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai

The wilderness wanderings of the Israelites

Joshua and the entry into the land

The judges of Israel

The kings of Israel (Saul, David, Solomon)

The "pre-exilic" prophets

The "exilic" prophets

The "post-exilic" prophets

**New Testament:**

Life, ministry, death, and Resurrection of Jesus

The growth of the early Church

The contrast of the Old and New Testaments is quite striking. And perhaps this chart will explain why many people find the New Testament easier to read than the Old Testament. In fact, many people, from early Christian times to the present, have wondered why the Old Testament is in the Christian Bible. After all, they say, isn't Jesus the main point of the Christian faith? The Church in her wisdom has always maintained that to understand how Jesus fulfills God's promises, we need to read the Old Testament as well as the New. Reading the Old Testament as well as the New Testament gives us a fuller picture of what God has done from the beginning to the early Church.